

CHAPTER 6

INTRODUCTION TO ACTS 6

Ver. 1. *And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied*, etc.] From an hundred and twenty to three thousand more, from thence to five thousand more, and after that a multitude of men and women were added, and still they were increasing; (see ^{<4015>}Acts 1:15) (^{<4124>}Acts 2:41 4:4 5:14). This increase of the disciples agrees with what Maimonides says ^{f239}, before observed, that

“in the days of Gamaliel, *μυνυμ wbr*, “the heretics were multiplied in Israel”.”

The word “disciples” was a common name to all Christians, to all that believed in Christ, and was the name they went by, before they were called Christians, (^{<4126>}Acts 11:26)

there arose a murmuring of the Grecians, or Hellenists, against the Hebrews; by the Hebrews are meant the Jews that dwelt in Judea, and were the inhabitants of that country, and chiefly of Jerusalem, who spoke the Hebrew, or rather the Syriac language; and by the Grecians, or Hellenists, are meant, not the Greeks that were proselyted to the Jewish religion, though there might be some few among them; but Jews who were born, and had dwelt, in some parts of Greece, and spoke the Greek language, and used the Septuagint version of the Bible; between these two a murmuring arose, a complaint was made by one against the other: so that, as it appears from the instance of Ananias and Sapphira, that this first and pure Gospel church was not free from hypocrites; it is also manifest, that though they were at first so united and harmonious in their affections and judgments, yet they were not always clear of feuds, animosities, and contentions; Satan bestirred himself, and got footing among them, as he commonly does where the Gospel is preached, and there is an increase of it: the reason of this uneasiness was,

because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration; that is, they had not that distributed which was necessary for them, nor so much as the

Hebrew widows; they complained of partiality, as if because the Hebrew widows were the natives of the country, and might be nearly related to many of the community, that therefore they were more regarded and better supplied every day, than their widows were, whose husbands had dwelt in foreign lands, and were not so well known, and had fewer acquaintance and relations; for it seems the ministration or distribution was made every day: and such a practice obtained among the Jews in common, who used to collect every day for the poor, and give it daily to them. Maimonides^{f240} speaks of it in this manner;

“they appoint collectors, who receive “every day”, from every court, a piece of bread, or any sort of food, or fruit, or money, from whomsoever that offers freely for the time; and they divide that which is collected, “in the evening”, among the poor, and they give to every poor person of it “his daily sustenance”; and this is called *ywj mt*, “Tamchui”, or “the alms dish”.”

And from hence the apostles might take up this custom, and follow it. The Ethiopic version renders it, “because they saw their widows minister”, or “employed daily”; as if the complaint was, that their widows were too much made use of, and obliged to more frequent and to harder service in taking care of the poor, the sick, and helpless, than the other widows were, who had not their share of labour with them, but lived more at ease. Though others rather think the murmur was, because the Grecian widows were not taken into the number, and employed in taking care of the poor, as the Hebrew widows were; but the sense first given, of not having so good a share in the distribution, seems to be the best.

Ver. 2. *Then the twelve*, etc.] The twelve apostles, as the Syriac version reads; for their number was now complete, Matthias being chosen in the room of Judas: these being informed of the murmur there was between the two sorts of believers, the Hebrew and the Hellenistic Jews,

called the multitude of the disciples unto them; either the hundred and twenty, the original members of the church, which first formed it, and on whom the Holy Ghost descended on the day of Pentecost; or rather the whole body of the church: for what the apostles had to say concerned them all; and they all had an equal right to chose their officers, that should minister unto them; and when they were convened together, they addressed them after this manner:

and said, it is not reason; or “it is not pleasing”, neither to God, nor to us; so the Arabic version reads, “this does not please us”; nor could it be pleasing to the church itself:

that we should leave the word of God the study of the word, meditation upon it, and preaching it: not that they did relinquish either of these; but they were sometimes obliged to omit them, or not so frequently attend them; the care of the poor taking up more of their time, than the work of the ministry, or preaching of the Gospel would admit of; and therefore thought it not so right and proper, or so acceptable a thing to God and man, that they should in the least neglect a work of so great importance to the souls of men, and cause it to give way to that which only regarded their bodies:

and serve tables; the tables of the poor, collect for them, inspect into their several cases, and circumstances, and distribute accordingly to them; which required a good deal of time, care, thought, and circumspection, especially in such a church, where the numbers were so large. From hence we learn what is the business of deacons, who were afterwards appointed to take this part of the apostles’ work off of their hands, and attend to it; which is to serve tables: the table of the Lord, by providing the bread and wine for it; receiving both from the minister, when blessed, and distributing them to the members; and collecting from them for the poor, and the defraying the charge; and observing what members are missing at the ordinance, whom they are to admonish; and if their admonitions are not regarded, to report it to the church: and they are likewise to serve the minister’s table, by taking care that he has a sufficient competency for his support; and it belongs to them to stir up the members of the church to their duty in communicating to him; and what they receive of them, they are to apply to his use: and also, they are to serve the poor’s table; to whom they are to distribute of the church’s stock, with all impartiality, simplicity, cheerfulness, and sympathy.

Ver. 3. *Wherefore brethren look ye out among you*, etc.] Or “choose out among you”, as the Syriac version adds, and as the Arabic and Ethiopic versions render it; which shows that this sort of officers, deacons, must be members of the church, and of the same church to which they are ordained deacons; and that they must be chosen to that office by the whole community, or by the common suffrages and votes of the people. So the ^{f241}
Jews

“did not appoint *snrp*, (which may be rendered) “an overseer of the poor”, in a congregation, without consulting the congregation;”

which officer seems pretty much to answer to a deacon.

Seven men, of honest report; why the number seven is fixed upon, perhaps no other solid reason is to be given, but that that number was judged sufficient for the care of the poor in that church, and at that time; nor is it obligatory on other churches to have just so many, neither more nor fewer; for such officers are to be chosen as the church requires: perhaps some regard might be had to *ry[h ybwj h[bc*, “the seven good men of the ^{f242} city” among the Jews, who had great authority in their synagogues, and who had power to sell them, when old and useless; and who seem, according to Maimonides ^{f243}, to be the elders of the people. It is necessary that this sort of officers in the church should be men “of honest report”; that have a good testimony both from within the church and without, of their honesty and fidelity; since they are intrusted with the church’s stock, and have the care of many devolved upon them: so the collectors of alms among the Jews were to be men *μynmanw μy[wdy*, “known and faithful” ^{f244}; men of known probity and integrity: and, besides this good and honest report they were to have from others, they were also to be men

full of the Holy Ghost, of wisdom; they were to be men, not only that had the Spirit of God in them, but who were eminent for their rich experiences of grace; and who had superior gifts of the Spirit, whereby they were capable both of defending the truth against opposers, and of speaking a word of exhortation to duty, or of comfort under distress, or of reproof to members, as circumstances required; and it may be at this time when the church consisted of some of all nations, as seems from (~~411~~) Acts 2:9-11) it might be necessary that they should have the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, especially that of speaking with divers tongues, that they might be able to converse with persons of different languages: and “wisdom” is highly requisite in them, that they may be good economists of the church’s stock, and dispose of it in the most prudent manner: and conduct themselves agreeably to the different tempers and spirits of men they have to do with, and especially in composing differences among members.

Whom we may appoint over this business; assign or make over that part of their office to them, which hitherto they had exercised, and install them into it, and invest them with it.

Ver. 4. *But we will give ourselves continually to prayer*, etc.] Both in private for themselves, and the church; and in the houses and families of the saints, with the sick and distressed; and in public, in the temple, or in whatsoever place they met for public worship:

and to the ministry of the word; the preaching of the Gospel, to which prayer is absolutely prerequisite, and with which it is always to be joined. These two, prayer and preaching, are the principal employment of a Gospel minister, and are what he ought to be concerned in, not only now and then, but what he should give himself up unto wholly, that his profiting might appear; and what he should be continually exercised and employed in: and if parting with that branch of the ministerial function, the care of the secular affairs of the church, and of the poor of it, was necessary in the apostles, that they might be more at leisure to attend to the more important and useful duties of prayer and preaching; it therefore seems necessary that those who are called to labour in the word and doctrine, if possible, should be exempt from all worldly business and employment; that of the ministry being sufficient to engross all a man's time and thoughts.

Ver. 5. *And the saying pleased the whole multitude*, etc.] The speech the apostles made took with them; all things they proposed were universally approved of; the whole body of the church came into it at once unanimously; they all judged it highly reasonable, that the apostles should be eased of the burden in taking care of the poor, and that it should be transferred to some other persons, and they fixed on the following:

and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith, and of the Holy Ghost; he was a man eminent for his faith in Christ, and his faithfulness to him, and in everything he was concerned, and for his courage and boldness in the cause of Christ and for other gifts and graces of the Spirit, with which he was filled; he was, it is very likely, the most eminent person of all the seven, and is therefore named first; he is afterwards taken notice of, and was the first that suffered martyrdom for Christ, with which he was crowned, answerable to his name, which signifies a crown:

and Philip; who was also an evangelist, and had four daughters that prophesied; and perhaps is the same that went down to Samaria, and preached Christ there with great success, and after that baptized the Ethiopian eunuch;

and Prochorus; of this and the rest, no other mention is made in the sacred writings. He is said by some to be a nephew of Stephen's, and first bishop of Nicomedia; but these are things not certain; and as for the life of the Apostle John, said to be written by him, it is a spurious and fabulous piece.

And Nicanor; of this man we have no other certain account; for that he suffered martyrdom with "Stephen" is not to be depended on. It is a Grecian name; there is one of this name who was a general in Demetrius's army, who was sent by him against the Jews,

"Then the king sent Nicanor, one of his honourable princes, a man that bare deadly hate unto Israel, with commandment to destroy the people." (1Mac 7:26)

and there was a gate of the temple, which was called the gate, of Nicanor:

and Timon; he is said to be afterwards bishop of Bersea; though others make him bishop, of Bostra; but with what truth cannot be asserted:

and Parmenus; of him no other account is given, than in the Roman martyrology, which is not to be depended upon, that he suffered martyrdom under Trajan:

and Nicolas, a proselyte of Antioch; who was first a Greek or Gentile, and then became a Jew, a proselyte of righteousness, and then a Christian, and now made a deacon. Some think, that from this man sprung the sect of the Nicolaitanes, spoken of in the Revelations; though others think, that that wicked set of men only covered themselves with his name, or that they abused some words of his, and perverted the right meaning of them; though was it certain he did turn out a wicked man, it is not to be wondered at, that since there was a devil among the twelve apostles, there should be a hypocrite and a vicious man among the first seven deacons. It is observable, that the names of all these deacons are Greek names; from whence, it seems, that they were of the Grecian or Hellenistic Jews; so that the church thought fit to chose men out of that part of them which made the complaint, in order to make them easy; which is an instance of prudence and condescension, and shows of what excellent spirits they were of.

Ver. 6. *Whom they set before the apostles*, etc.] They did not barely nominate and propose them to them, but they brought them into their

presence, and placed them before them, as the persons whom they had chosen, in order to be ordained by them.

And when they had prayed; for these seven men set before them, that they might appear to be richly qualified for this office, and might honourably and faithfully discharge it, to the peace of themselves, the advantage of the church, and the glory of God:

they laid their hands on them; that is, they ordained them, they installed them into their office, and invested them with it, using the rite or ceremony of laying on of hands, which was used by the apostles for the conferring of gifts, and in benedictions, and at the ordination of officers; and seems to be borrowed from the Jews, who used, it at the creation of doctors among them, and at the promotion of them to that dignity; and which they call **hkym**s, or ordination by imposition of hands; though that rite was not looked upon to be essentially necessary: for so they say ^{f245},

“ordination or promotion to doctorship is not necessarily done, **dyb**, “by the hand”, as Moses did to Joshua, but even **rwbydb**, “by word” only; it was enough to say, I ordain thee, or be thou ordained or promoted.”

Ver. 7. *And the word of God increased*, etc.] This stratagem of Satan did not succeed to divide the church, but issued in the better decorum and discipline of it, and in the spread and success of the Gospel; God thus making all things to work together for good;

and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; where Christ was crucified, the apostles were scourged, and treated with the utmost contempt, the sanhedrim and rulers of the Jews dwelt, who used all their power and craft to crush the Gospel, and hinder the progress of it, but in vain, there the word increased; which it may be said to do, when saints are edified by it, and sinners are converted under it; and in this last sense it is chiefly to be understood here: the instances of conversion were very numerous; how large must this church now be!

and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith; that is, to the Gospel, which contains things to be believed, articles of faith; proposes Christ the great object of faith; and is the means of producing faith, and which is of no profit, unless it is mixed with faith: and to obey this is cordially to embrace the doctrines of the Gospel, and cheerfully to submit

to the ordinances of it. And that the priests, and a large number of them, should do this, is very marvellous; since they were the most inveterate enemies of the Gospel, and persecutors of the saints; but what is it that efficacious grace cannot do? the Syriac version instead of “priests” reads “Jews”, but unsupported by any copy.

Ver. 8. *And Stephen, full of faith and power*, etc.] The historian proceeds to give a narrative of Stephen particularly, the first of the seven deacons; of his faith and miracles, of his elocution and wisdom, of his courage and intrepidity, of his constancy, and of his suffering martyrdom. He is said to be full of faith, as before, (~~405~~ Acts 6:5) the Alexandrian copy, and four of Beza’s copies read, “full of grace”; and so do the Vulgate Latin and Syriac versions; the Ethiopic version reads, “full of the grace of God”: he had an uncommon share of it; it was exceeding abundant in him; he had a sufficiency of it for the service and sufferings he was called to: and he was full of power to preach the Gospel, and teach it the people, which he did with authority; to defend it, and oppose the adversaries of it; to bear reproach and indignities for it, and even death itself; and to do miraculous works for the confirmation of it, as follows:

did great wonders and miracles among the people; openly before them, such as speaking with divers tongues, healing diseases, casting out devils, etc.

Ver. 9. *Then there arose certain of the synagogue*, etc.] Being filled with indignation at the doctrine of Stephen, and with envy at his miracles, they rose up in great wrath, and warmly opposed him: and they be longed to that synagogue

which is called the synagogue of the libertines; or free men: it is a Roman name, and signifies the sons of free men; and these were either the sons of such Jews, who of servants, or slaves, had been made μυρρη ωσμ, “free men”; or rather such Jews whose parents were born free, or had obtained their freedom at Rome, or in some free city under the Roman government, as Paul at Tarsus; since it is not so easy to account for it, that there should be a peculiar synagogue for the former, whereas there might be for the latter, seeing they could not speak the language of the native Jews. The Arabic version reads, “of the Corinthians”, as if they were the Jews from Corinth: and some have thought the word “Libertines” to be the name of a

nation or people, as well as the names that follow; and some think it designs the Lybians or Lybistines in Africa; but neither of these is likely:

and Cyrenians: natives of the city or country of Cyrene, from whence were many Jews; (see ^{<4120>}Acts 2:10 11:20) such as Simon the Cyrenian, the father of Alexander, and Rufus, who carried the cross of Christ after him, (^{<4152>}Mark 15:21) these, with those that follow, either belonged to the same synagogue with the Libertines, or rather they severally had distinct synagogues: and this will not seem strange, when it is said ^{f246}, that there were in Jerusalem four hundred and eighty synagogues; though it is elsewhere said ^{f247} four hundred and sixty:

and Alexandrians; for that there were a peculiar synagogue of these at Jerusalem is certain; for there is express mention made of it in Jewish writings ^{f248}.

“It happened to R. Eleazar bar Tzadok, that he bought **tsnkh tyb pyrdnski a l ç** “the synagogue of the Alexandrians”, which was at Jerusalem, and he did with it whatever he pleased.”

And that they should have a synagogue at Jerusalem need not be wondered at, when there was such an intercourse and correspondence between Jerusalem and Alexandria: it is said ^{f249},

“the house of Garmu were expert in making of the shewbread, and they would not teach it; the wise men sent and fetched workmen from Alexandria in Egypt, and they knew how to bake as well as they. — — The house or family of Abtines were expert in the business of the incense, and they would not teach it; the wise men sent and fetched workmen from Alexandria in Egypt, and they knew how to mix the spices as well as they.”

Again it is said ^{f250},

“there was a brass cymbal in the sanctuary, and it was cracked, and the wise men sent and brought workmen from Alexandria in Egypt, and they mended it — -and there was a mortar in which they beat spices, and it was cracked, and the wise men sent and fetched workmen from Alexandria, and they mended it.”

Hence many of them doubtless settled here, and had a synagogue of their own:

and of them of Cilicia; the metropolis of which country was Tarsus, (^{<4213>}Acts 21:39 22:3). I make no doubt of it, that Saul of Tarsus was among them, or belonged to this synagogue, and was one of the fierce disputants with Stephen; at least violently opposed him, since he afterwards held the clothes of those that stoned him; we read ^{f251} of **μυςρj l ç tsnkh tyb**, which I should be tempted to render, the “synagogue of the Tarsians”, the same with the Cilicians here; but that it is elsewhere said ^{f252}, that

“it happened to the synagogue of the Tursians, which was at Jerusalem, that they sold it to R. Eliezer, and he did all his business in it.”

Where the gloss explains the word “Tursians” by “brass founders”; and it seems to design the same synagogue with that of the Alexandrians, who may be so called, because many of them wrought in brass, as appears from a citation above. There was a synagogue of these Tarsians at Lud, or Lydda ^{f253}: it is added, and of Asia; that is, the less; which joined to Cilicia, and in which were great numbers of Jews; (see ^{<4217>}Acts 21:27) this clause is left out in the Alexandrian copy: at Jerusalem, there were synagogues for the Jews of different nations; as here in London, are places of worship for protestants of several countries; as French, Dutch, Germans, Danes, Swedes, etc. Now several persons out of these synagogues, met together in a body,

disputing with Stephen; about the doctrine he preached, and the miracles he wrought, and by what authority he did these things.

Ver. 10. *And they were not able to resist the wisdom*, etc.] In Beza’s most ancient copy, and in another manuscript it is added, “which was in him”; that divine wisdom, which the Spirit of wisdom gave him; they were not a match for him with respect to the knowledge of divine things; they could not answer the wise arguments he made use of, fetched out of the Scriptures of truth, in which he was well versed, and had a large knowledge of:

and the Spirit by which he spake; that is, the Holy Spirit, as the above exemplars of Beza, and the Ethiopic version read; the meaning is, they could not resist the Holy Spirit, by which Stephen spake, so as to overcome him, or put Stephen to silence, or confute him; otherwise they did resist him, or oppose themselves to him, but in vain, and without

success; for they always resisted the Holy Ghost in Christ and in his apostles, as their fathers before them resisted him in the prophets, as Stephen observes to them, (~~4076~~ Acts 7:51) hereby was fulfilled what our Lord promised to his disciples, (~~4009~~ Matthew 10:19,20) (~~4215~~ Luke 21:15).

Ver. 11. *Then they suborned men*, etc.] Hired false witnesses, which seems to have been commonly done by the Jews; so they did in the case of Christ:

which said, we have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God; that is, against the law of Moses, and so against God, who gave the law to Moses, as appears from (~~4063~~ Acts 6:13) the blasphemous words seem to be, with respect to the ceremonial law, and the abrogation of it, which Stephen might insist upon, and they charged with blasphemy; (see ~~4084~~ Acts 6:14).

Ver. 12. *And they stirred up the people*, etc.] The common people, who were easily wrought upon, and soon incensed and provoked, when at any time it was suggested to them that the rituals and ceremonies of the law of Moses were treated with any neglect or contempt; (see ~~4027~~ Acts 21:27,28).

And the elders and the Scribes; who belonged to the sanhedrim, to whom they reported these things, as persons, under whose cognizance they properly came:

and came upon him; at an unawares, and in an hostile way:

and caught him; seized him with violence:

and brought him to the council; the great sanhedrim, then sitting at Jerusalem, to whom it belonged to judge of blasphemy.

Ver. 13. *And set up false witnesses*, etc.] Having hired them, they brought them and set them before the sanhedrim, to bear witness against Stephen:

which said, this man; meaning Stephen, who was now before the council, at whom they pointed, and whose name, through contempt, they would not mention:

ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place; either the city of Jerusalem, which is sometimes called the holy city, and which was foretold by the angel to Daniel, and by Christ, that it should be destroyed, and which Stephen might speak of; or rather the temple, so the Ethiopic

version; in a part of which, or in a place contiguous to it, the sanhedrim might now be sitting:

and the law; the ceremonial law: the sense is, that Stephen was continually telling the people, that in a little time their temple would be destroyed, and an end be put to temple worship, and to all the rituals and ceremonies of the law of Moses; the Vulgate Latin and Syriac versions leave out the word “blasphemous”; and so do the Alexandrian copy, and Beza’s most ancient one; but as Beza observes, it is certain, or at least it is most likely, that it was not omitted by the false witnesses; though speaking against the temple and the law was sufficient to make good a charge of blasphemy.

Ver. 14. *For we have heard him say*, etc.] The Ethiopic version adds, “besides”; but rather these words are a reason, giving evidence to, and supporting the general charge:

that this Jesus of Nazareth; Stephen spoke of, and whom they so called by way of contempt:

shall destroy this place; meaning the temple, as the Ethiopic version renders it; and is the same charge, the false witnesses at Christ’s examination brought against him:

and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us; that is, the rites, ceremonies, institutions, and appointments of the Mosaic dispensation; and yet this is no other, than what the Jews themselves say will be done, in the times of the Messiah; for they assert^{f254}, that

“*awbl dyt* [I], “in time to come” (i.e. in the days of the Messiah) all sacrifices shall cease, but the sacrifice of thanksgiving.”

Ver. 15. *And all that sat in the council*, etc.] The whole sanhedrim,

looking steadfastly on him; to observe whether his countenance altered, his tongue stammered, or he trembled in any part of his body, neither of which appeared; but on the contrary, they

saw his face, as if it had been the face of an angel. The Ethiopic version adds, “of God”; there was such a calmness and serenity in it, which showed his innocence and unconsciousness of guilt; and such a beauty and glory upon it, that he looked as lovely and amiable as the angels of God, who when they appeared to men, it was in very glorious and splendid forms: his face might shine as Moses’s did, when he came down from the mount; or

in some degree as Christ's did at his transfiguration; and this might, as it ought to have been, taken as an acquittance of him by God, from the charge of blasphemy, either against God or Moses: the Jews ^{f255} say of Phinehas, that when the Holy Ghost was upon him, his face burned or shone like lamps, and Stephen was now full of the Holy Ghost, (~~406~~ Acts 6:5,8).