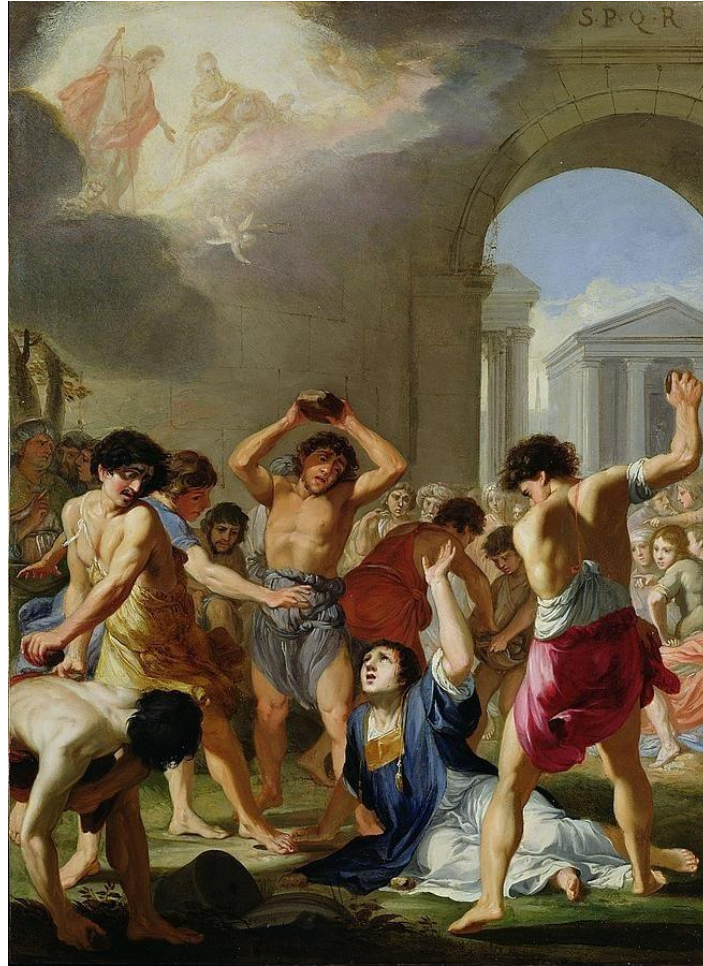


## St. Stephen



Acts 7:55 "Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' But (the Sanhedrin) covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down

and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'" (And) When he had said this, he died."

Right before his martyrdom, according to the Acts of the Apostles, St. Stephen made a strongly accusatory speech to the Sanhedrin that takes up almost an entire chapter of Acts. Of the numerous speeches in Acts, Stephen's speech to is by far the longest, and some scholars suggest that it seems unlikely that such a long speech could have been reproduced later by Luke, the Hellenist physician, exactly as it had been delivered years before. So, the speech may represent more the words of Luke rather than Stephen himself. Moreover, there are at least five places where Stephen's supposed retelling of the stories of Israelite history diverges from the Scriptures where those stories originated; for example, Stephen says that Jacob's tomb was in Shechem, but Genesis (50:13) says Jacob's body was carried and buried in a cave in Machpelah at Hebron.

Moreover, there are suspicious parallels between the accounts of the death of Stephen in Acts and the death of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. Jesus was also sentenced to death by the Sanhedrin on the charge of blasphemy, because Jesus had affirmed on oath in Mark's Gospel, saying: "I am the Son of the living God, and hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of God" (14.22). Note that Jesus' answer in

Luke's and Matthew's Gospel to Pilate when asked the same question is less affirmative. Similarly, Stephen was stoned on the assumption that he was a blasphemer, because he professed his belief in the Divinity of Jesus, and said: "I see heaven open, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God". Both Jesus and Stephen were then treated as outcasts, and put to death outside the ancient city walls of Jerusalem. Both, when dying, prayed for their enemies: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" in the Gospel (Lk. 23.34) and "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" in Acts (Acts 7.60). Both, before dying, commended their souls to God: "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit" (Lk. 23.46) and "Lord Jesus, receive my soul!" (Acts 7.59). These parallels have led to some suspicions that the author of Acts emphasized or invented some (or all) of the story as a way of demonstrating to the audience that Stephen was a holy example of someone who followed in the footsteps of Jesus.

The criticism of traditional Jewish belief and practice in Stephen's speech includes the statement that God does not live in a dwelling "made by human hands", which suggests to some that the speech might have been prompted by the later destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. and thus written by Luke to reassure his audience that the Temple was not crucial anymore for followers in the way of Jesus, just as modern rabbinic Judaism replaced

the need of the Temple with a different style of Jewish living, focused instead on the study of the Torah.

Nonetheless, St. Stephen is universally recognized as the first martyr of the Christian Church. But unfortunately, all that we really know of St. Stephen comes from the Book of Acts. There Stephen appears to be one of the Greek-speaking Hellenistic Jews selected to administer the daily charitable distribution of food to the Greek-speaking widows, as we heard in last week's reading from Acts, where we are told that "All who believed were together and (they) had all things in common; (and) they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (2.44). "(For) during those days," we are told, "when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists (apparently, meaning here Greek-speaking Jews) complained against the Hebrews (that is, Aramaic-speaking Jews) because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve (Apostles) called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, brothers and sisters, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we (Apostles), for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.' What they said pleased the whole community, and they

chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and (then) laid their hands on them" (6.1-6).

So, St. Stephen was one of the original seven deacons of the church, where it is recorded, "Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Then they secretly instigated some men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the (Jewish) council (of the Sanhedrin). They set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this (Temple) and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us' (6.8-14).

In the aftermath of Stephen's death, the remaining disciples except for the apostles fled the city of Jerusalem, we are told, and many escaped to the city of Antioch on the Orontes

River in Roman Syria. "Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists (apparently meaning, non-Jewish Greeks) also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus . . . and it was (there) in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians.'" (Acts 11.19-20,26). Antioch has since been called "the cradle of Christianity" as a result of the pivotal role that it played in the emergence of the early Church from then, right through the time of the Crusades.

After Stephen's death, Acts 8:2 records that "devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him," but the location of where he was buried is not mentioned in the Scriptures. Later it was believed to be the Jewish village of Caphargamala in the Judean Mountains, where inside a cave in that area was the tomb. The relics of St. Stephen were later recovered there and taken in a grand procession to the Church of Hagia Sion in Jerusalem on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December in the year 415 of the Common Era, making that the date forever of the feast of Saint Stephen on the Church's calendar, a feast that is still celebrated widely today among Christians everywhere. Sometime between 439 and 460 C.E., the Empress Aelia Eudocia

constructed a magnificent basilica north of the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem, and the relics were moved there from Hagia Sion to be housed in this new shrine, built upon the very sight just outside the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem that was believed to be the where Stephen was martyred. Sadly, that original Basilica was destroyed by the Persians in 614 C.E. The current Basilica of St. Stephen, run by the Dominicans, was rebuilt on the site and consecrated in 1900, and is home to the famous French Bible and Archaeology School. So let us pause now for a moment, and remember and give thanks to God for the life and witness of St. Stephen, the Christian Church's first martyr. Amen.