

Stephen

from Encyclopedia Britannica (excerpts)

Stephen [Gk Stephanos] was one of the seven men elected to attend to the social welfare of the Hellenistic Jewish Christian widows (Acts 6:5), who made his mark through his understanding of the newness of Christianity over against Judaism. Because of his convictions he became the early Church's first martyr. His name means "crown." In some churches, a saint's day is celebrated for him on December 26, and some Christians regard him as the patron saint of stonemasons.

Stephen and Early Hellenistic Jewish Christianity

It is virtually certain that Stephen was a Hellenistic Jew, despite attempts to describe him as a Gentile (Blackman), an Essene (or Essene-influenced, M. Simon), a Samaritan (Spiro), a proto-Ebionite (Schoeps), a Hebrew-speaking Jew (Munck), etc. The dispute between "the Hellenist" and "the Hebrews" referred to in Acts 6:1 was not between Gentiles and Jews, but between Greek-speaking Jews (thus *Helleenistai* is used rather than *Hellenes*, "Greeks") and Aramaic (Hebrew)-speaking Jews. The latter were mainly native Palestinians who took a strong, patriotic stand against the hellenization that had been forced upon them following the conquest of Alexander the Great. The former, on the other hand, were mainly Diaspora Jews, highly influenced by Hellenism, who had immigrated to Israel for religious reasons and hoped to finish their lives and be buried in the Holy Land. Thus, while both groups had very strong religious convictions, significant cultural differences separated them, and it is not surprising that there were certain tensions between them.

The Hellenistic Jews were more familiar with and accommodating to the gentile world, and more universal in their outlook. They were less narrow culturally than the native Palestinian Jews, and some at least were probably less rigid in their interpretation of the Law. With this kind of background, Stephen and his colleague Philip were able to break through cultural and religious barriers more easily than any of the twelve

apostles would have been able to do (contra Munck).

Stephen had much in common with the Diaspora Jews who worshiped at the Jerusalem synagogue(s) mentioned in Acts 6:9, and he himself may have worshiped there regularly. How he had become a Christian is not known, although he may have been one of the 120 of Acts 1:15 or among the three thousand converts on the day of Pentecost. He is described not only as "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (6:5; cf. 7:55), but as "full of grace and power" and as having performed "great wonders and signs among the people" (6:8). Stephen was almost certainly a leader among the Hellenistic Jewish Christians of Jerusalem before his ordination as one of the Seven. It was probably precisely because he was a Hellenistic Jew that the stir he created could not be overlooked by the Hellenistic Jews who did not share his views. Thus some of them challenged his teaching (presumably about Jesus and the implications of what He had accomplished), but none could "withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke" (6:10).

His View of the Law and the Temple

Luke reported in Acts neither the content of Stephen's teaching nor the exact nature of his debate with the Hellenistic Jews. These must be inferred from the charges made by Stephen's accusers and from the speech that he gave in his defense. The general accusation that Stephen spoke "blasphemous words against Moses and God" (6:11) involved two specific charges: (1) that he spoke against the temple, saying that Jesus would destroy it; and (2) that he spoke against the Law, claiming that Jesus would "change the customs which Moses delivered to us" (vv 13f).

It is sometimes argued that these accusations cannot be taken as accurate, since the men who made them were "secretly instigated" to do so and are explicitly described as "false witnesses" (6:11, 13). Without question, there is a sense in which from Luke's perspective Stephen, like Jesus, was disloyal to neither the temple nor the Law. Because Jesus had fulfilled what both the temple and the Law pointed to, there was no truth to the charge that Stephen's views on the obsolescence of the temple and the possibility of fundamental

changes in the Law amounted to blasphemy against Moses and God.

At the same time, however, Stephen had clearly begun to see the discontinuity implied by Christ's work. There must have been some substance to the charges, distorted though they were, brought by the false witnesses (cf. the charges brought against Jesus at His trial). It seems certain that Stephen came to his convictions through the stimulus of some of Jesus' sayings, known to him through oral tradition. Regarding the temple and its destruction (6:13f), therefore, Stephen probably had in mind Jesus' saying recorded in Mk. 13:2 (par Mt. 24:2; Lk. 21:6; cf. also Jn. 2:19; Mt. 12:6). Jesus' anticipation of the imminent demise of the temple opened the door to rethinking its significance, especially in the light of His atoning death. Similarly, Stephen must have been aware of Jesus' words and deeds that taught a new freedom concerning the Law (e.g., Mk. 2:27; 7:15; cf. 10:4f; Mt. 8:22). While it is improbable that Stephen went as far in articulating this newness as Paul was later to do, he probably had begun to explore (in a more radical way than M. Simon allows) the implications of what Jesus had said and done.

His Trial and Speech

Stephen was brought to a formal trial before the Sanhedrin ("council"), which included "the elders and the scribes" (6:12) as well as the high priest (7:1), although all seventy-one members may not have been present. Acts 6:12-7:58 gives a very abbreviated account of the proceedings, but the testimony of witnesses and the opportunity for defense indicate a legal process.

Stephen's speech (Acts 7:2-53) is a strange kind of defense, however, since it is designed not so much to defend himself as to instruct and even to indict his hearers. The considerable space given to this long speech, much of which has only an indirect relevance to the charges brought against Stephen, has often been noticed. The speech near the end does address the issue of the temple (vv 44-50), but not that of the Law. Instead it is a general defense of Christianity against those who have not believed. The genre of the speech is similar to the later anti-Judaistic polemic of the early Church, which may to some extent have been modeled on this speech.

Stephen's speech, taking the well-known form of a review of the history of Israel, begins with the call of Abraham in Mesopotamia, thereby implying that God's presence is by no means limited to Palestine or the temple (7:2-8). In a similar way, God was with Joseph in Egypt (vv 9-16). Here a further, increasingly prominent motif is introduced: God's people have habitually rejected the leaders He has sent to them. Thus Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers (v 9), but he was responsible for their survival. Moses (vv 17-43) was also rejected by the Israelites, but "this Moses whom they refused ... God sent as both ruler and deliverer" (v 35). In v 37 the Moses-Jesus typology is made even more explicit by the quotation of Dt. 18:15.

The speech next turns to the wilderness tent of witness and to Solomon's temple, drawing the conclusion that "the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands" (Acts 7:48) and sealing that point in vv 49f with the forceful quotation of Isa. 66:1f. The speech reaches its climax in the crushing indictment of vv 51-53. Although it does not say so explicitly, the speech clearly implies that the pattern of failure exemplified in Israel's history finds its climax in the Jewish leaders' rejection of the truth brought by Jesus (cf. v. 52). The Law is mentioned only briefly at the very end of the speech, where Stephen says that although the Jews honored the Law, they "did not keep it" (v 53).

Stephen may well have said more than what is recorded in Acts, but it is also probable that he was cut short by the crowd's hostile reaction. Thus the speech as it stands seems to lack a suitable conclusion. Even so, it is clear that the key to Stephen's unorthodox teaching about the temple and the Law lies in the truth brought by "the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered" (7:52). The vision of the Son of man (vv 55f), with its high Christology, confirms this point. Although Stephen does not articulate it in these terms, the reader of Luke-Acts will know that a new era in the history of salvation has been inaugurated.

His Martyrdom

Acts 7:54 notes the rage of the crowd at what Stephen was saying, and that "they ground their teeth against him." At this point Stephen received

the vision of “the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (v 55), which, when he articulated it to the Sanhedrin, was what finally sealed his fate.

The members of the Sanhedrin could not tolerate this statement about one whom they themselves had recently condemned to death. In this unique reference to the Son of man title outside the Gospels (the only time in the NT that this is spoken by someone other than Jesus Himself), Stephen, alluding to Dnl. 7:13f, clearly understands Jesus to be on the same level as God, ruling with God as His vicegerent. It is evident that Stephen and the Hellenistic Jewish Christians held to a high Christology.

It is no coincidence that it was also a reference to the Son of man that finally led to Jesus’ death (cf. Lk. 22:69). In presenting the story of Stephen’s martyrdom, Luke went out of his way to portray Stephen as an archetypal witness who followed exactly in Jesus’ steps. Just as there are similarities in the charges brought against Jesus and Stephen (see II above) and in the references to the Son of Man, so too there are striking similarities in the two martyrdoms. Like Jesus, Stephen prayed for the forgiveness of his persecutors (Acts 7:60; cf. Lk. 23:34) and committed his spirit to divine safekeeping (Acts 7:59; cf. Lk. 23:46). The striking difference, however, is that whereas Jesus began His prayers with “Father,” Stephen began his with “Lord Jesus” (Acts 7:59f). This further indicates the exalted – indeed, divine – status of Jesus in Stephen’s Christology.

The narrative of Acts (esp 7:57) gives the impression that Stephen’s death resulted from spontaneous and uncontrollable hostility rather than from due legal process. This would accord with the fact that the Romans did not allow the Sanhedrin to exact the death penalty. On the other hand, there was at least a semblance of legal process in the testimony of witnesses before the Sanhedrin and in the manner of the execution: Stephen was stoned (the penalty for blasphemy) outside the city by (at least to begin with) the witnesses against him (7:58; Lev. 24:14; Dt. 17:5–7).

His Significance

Stephen is a pivotal figure in the book of Acts and in the history of the early Church. Stephen and the

other Hellenistic Christians provide the first indication of the variety that existed in the early Church. But most important, Stephen’s new understanding of the temple and the Law in the light of the new situation inaugurated by Jesus’ recently accomplished work made it impossible for Christianity to remain a sect within Judaism. The new freedom that Stephen articulated with respect to the temple and the Law not only facilitated the spread of the gospel among Hellenistic Jews both within and outside of Palestine, but also implied a universalism that ultimately made the mission to the Gentiles a reality.

It would be going too far to conclude that Stephen’s views concerning the temple were as developed as those of the author of Hebrews, or that his view of the Law was the same as that held by Paul, or that he ever contemplated the gentile mission that Paul was to fulfil. But that was a pioneer who helped to make possible these developments, is beyond question. It is no coincidence that the mission to Samaritans and Gentiles quickly follows Stephen’s death in the narrative of Acts (cf. 8:4). Stephen may indeed be viewed as a forerunner of Paul, as Acts seems to hint by the note about Saul’s presence at Stephen’s execution (8:1). Stephen’s courage in contending for the truth in the face of the hostility of his Jewish brethren and at the cost of his life was later to be mirrored in Paul’s own experience.

From Conybeare and Howson

St. Stephen the Forerunner of St. Paul

The council assembled in solemn and formal state to try the blasphemer. There was great and general excitement in Jerusalem. “The people, the scribes, and the elders” had been “stirred up” by the members of the Hellenistic Synagogues (Acts 6:12). It is evident from that vivid expression which is quoted from the accusers’ mouths, “this place” – “this holy place” – that the meeting of the Sanhedrin took place in the close neighborhood of the Temple. Their ancient and solemn room of assembly was the hall Gazith, or the “Stone Chamber” partly within the Temple court and partly without it. The president sat in the less sacred portion, and around him, in a semicircle, were the rest of the seventy judges.

Before these judges Stephen was made to stand, confronted by his accusers. The eyes of all were fixed upon his countenance, which grew bright as they gazed upon it, with a supernatural radiance and serenity. In the beautiful Jewish expression of the Scriptures, "They saw his face as it had been that of an angel." The judges, when they saw his glorified countenance, might have remembered the shining on the face of Moses, and trembled lest Stephen's voice should be about to speak the will of Jehovah, like that of the great lawgiver. Instead of being occupied with the faded glories of the Second Temple, they might have recognized in the spectacle before them the Shekinah of the Christian soul, which is the living sanctuary of God.

But the trial proceeded. The judicial question, to which the accused was required to plead, was put by the president, "Are these things so?" And then Stephen answered, and his clear voice was heard in the silent council hall as he went through the history of the chosen people, proving his own deep faith in the sacredness of the Jewish economy, but suggesting, here and there, that spiritual interpretation of it which had always been the true one, and the truth of which was now to be made manifest to all.

He began, with a wise discretion, from the call of Abraham, and traveled historically in his argument through all the great stages of their national existence - from Abraham to Joseph - from Joseph to Moses - from Moses to David and Solomon. And as he went on he selected and glanced at those points which made for his own cause. He showed that God's blessing rested on the faith of Abraham, though he had "not so much as to set his foot on" in the land of promise, on the piety of Joseph, though he was an exile in Egypt, and on the holiness of the burning bush, though in the desert of Sinai. He dwelt in detail on the Lawgiver, in such a way as to show his own unquestionable orthodoxy; but he quoted the promise concerning "the prophet like unto Moses and reminded his hearers that the Law, in which they trusted, had not kept their forefathers from idolatry.

And so he passed on to the Temple, which had so prominent a reference to the charge against himself, and of the prophet Isaiah, who denied

that any temple made with hands could be the place of God's highest worship. And thus far they listened to him. It was the story of the chosen people, to which every Jew listened with interest and pride.

It is remarkable, as we have said before, how completely St. Stephen is the forerunner of St. Paul, both in the form and the matter of this defense. His securing the attention of the Jews by adopting the historical method is exactly what the Apostle did in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia. (Acts 13:16-22) His assertion of his attachment to the true principles of the Mosaic religion is exactly what was said to Agrippa; "I continue unto this day witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come." (Acts 26:22) It is deeply interesting to think of Saul as listening to the martyr's voice, as he anticipated those very arguments which he himself was destined to reiterate in synagogues and before kings.

There is no reason to doubt that he was present, although he may not have been qualified to vote in the Sanhedrin. And it is evident, from the thoughts which occurred to him in his subsequent vision within the precincts of the Temple, how deep an impression St. Stephen's death had left on his memory. And there are even verbal coincidences which may be traced between this address and St. Paul's speeches or writings. The words used by Stephen of the Temple call to mind those which were used at Athens (Acts 17:24). When he speaks of the Law as received "by the disposition of angels," he anticipates a phrase in the Epistle to the Galatians (3:19).

His exclamation at the end, "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart ... who have received the law ... and have not kept it," is only and indignant condensation of the argument in the Epistle to the Romans; "Behold, thou callest thyself a Jew, and restest in the law, and makest thy boast of God, and knowest His will ... Thou, therefore, that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonorest thou God?" ... He is not a Jew which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the

letter, whose praise is not of man but of God." (Rom. 2:17-29)

The rebuke which Stephen, full of the Divine Spirit, suddenly broke away from the course of his narrative to pronounce, was the signal for a general outburst of furious rage on the part of his judges. They "gnashed on him with their teeth" in the same spirit in which they had said, not long before, to the blind man who was healed, "Thou wast altogether born in sins, and dost thou teach us?" (John 9:34) But, in contrast with the malignant hatred which had blinded their eyes, Stephen's serene faith was supernaturally exalted into a direct vision of the blessedness of the Redeemed. He, whose face had been like that of an angel on earth, was made like one of those angels themselves, "who do always behold the face of our Father which is in Heaven." (Matt. 18:10). "He being full of the Holy Spirit, looked up steadfastly into Heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God."

The scene before his eyes was no longer the council hall at Jerusalem and the circle of his infuriated judges; but he gazed up into the endless courts of the celestial Jerusalem, with its "innumerable company of angels," and saw Jesus, in whose righteous cause he was about to die. In other places, where our Savior is spoken of in His glorified state, He is said to be not standing but seated, at the right hand of the Father. Here alone He is said to be standing. It is as if (according to Chrysostom's beautiful thought) He had risen from His throne to succor His persecuted servant and to receive him to Himself. And when Stephen saw his Lord, perhaps with the memories of what he had seen on earth crowding into his mind, he suddenly exclaimed, in the ecstasy of his vision, "Behold! I see the Heavens opened and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God!"

This was too much for the Jews to bear. The blasphemy of Jesus had been repeated. The follower of Jesus was hurried to destruction. "They cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord." It is evident that it was a savage and disorderly condemnation. They dragged him out of the council hall and, making a sudden rush and tumult through the streets, hurried him to one of the gates of the city, and somewhere about the

rocky edges of the ravine of Jehoshaphat, where the Mount of Olives looks down upon Gethsemane and Siloam, or on the open ground to the north, which travelers cross when they go towards Samaria or Damascus, with stones that law without the walls of the Holy City, this heavenly minded martyr was murdered.

The exact place of his death is not known. There are two traditions, an ancient one, which places it on the north, beyond the Damascus gate, and a modern one, which leads travelers through what is now called the gate of St. Stephen, to a spot near the brook Kedron, over against the garden of Gethsemane. But those who look upon Jerusalem from an elevated point on the northeast have both these positions in view; and anyone who stood there on that day might have seen the crowd rush forth from the gate, and the witnesses (who according to the law were required to throw the first stones cast off their outer garments and lay them down at the feet of Saul.

The contrast is striking between the indignant zeal which the martyr had just expressed against the sin of his judges, and the forgiving love which he showed to themselves when they became his murderers. He first uttered a prayer for himself in the words of Jesus Christ, which he knew were spoken from the cross, and which he may himself have heard from those holy lips. And then, deliberately kneeling down, in that posture of humility in which the body most naturally expresses the supplication of the mind, and which has been consecrated as the attitude of Christian devotion by Stephen and by Paul himself (at Miletus, Acts 20:36, and at Tyre, Acts 21:5), he gave the last few moments of his consciousness to a prayer for the forgiveness of his enemies; and the words were scarcely spoken when death seized upon him, or rather, in the words of Scripture, he fell asleep.

"And Saul was consenting to his death." A Spanish painter, in a picture of Stephen conducted to the place of execution, has represented Saul as walking by the martyr's side with melancholy calmness. He consents to his death from a sincere, though mistaken conviction of duty; and the expression of his countenance is strongly contrasted with the rage of the baffled Jewish doctors and the ferocity of the crowd who

flock to the scene of bloodshed. Literally considered, such a representation is scarcely consistent either with Saul's conduct immediately afterward, or which his own expressions concerning himself at the later periods of his life (Acts 22:4; 26:10; Phil. 3:6; 1 Tim. 1:13). But the picture, though historically incorrect, is poetically true. The painter has worked according to the true idea of his art in throwing upon the persecutor's countenance the shadow of his coming repentance. We cannot dissociate the martyrdom of Stephen from the conversion of Paul. The spectacle of so much constancy, so much faith, so much love, could not be lost. It is hardly too much to say with Augustine, that the "church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen." *Si Stephanus non orasset, ecclesia Paulum non haberet.*

Funeral of St. Stephen

The death of St. Stephen is a bright passage in the earliest history of the church. Where in the annals of the world can we find so perfect an image of a pure and blessed saint as that which is drawn in the concluding verses of the seventh chapter of the Acts of the Apostles? And the brightness which invests the scene of the martyr's last moments is the more impressive from its contrast with all that has preceded it since the crucifixion of Christ. The first apostle who died was a traitor. The first disciples of the Christian apostles whose deaths are recorded were liars and hypocrites. The kingdom of the Son of Man was founded in darkness and gloom. But a heavenly light reappeared with the martyrdom of St. Stephen. The revelation of such a character at the moment of death was the strongest of all evidences, and the highest of all encouragements. Nothing could more confidently assert the divine power of the new religion; nothing could prophesy more surely the certainty of its final victory.

To us who have the experience of many centuries of Christian history, and who can look back through a long series of martyrdoms to this which was the beginning and example of the rest, these thoughts are easy and obvious; but to the friends and associates of the murdered saint, such feelings of cheerful and confident assurance were perhaps more difficult. Though Christ was indeed risen from the dead, His disciples could hardly yet be able to realize the full triumph of the Cross over

death. Even many years afterwards Paul the Apostle wrote to the Thessalonians concerning those who had "fallen asleep" (1 Thess. 4:13) more peaceably than Stephen, that they ought not to sorrow for them as those without hope; and now, at the very beginning of the Gospel, the grief of the Christians must have been great indeed, when the corpse of their champion and their brother lay at the feet of Saul the murderer. Yet, amidst the consternation of some and the fury of others, friends of the martyr were found, who gave him all the melancholy honors of a Jewish funeral, and carefully buried him, as Joseph buried his father, "with great and sore lamentation." (Gen. 1:10)

After the death and burial of Stephen the persecution still raged in Jerusalem. That temporary protection which had been extended to the rising sect by such men as Gamaliel was now at an end. Pharisees and Sadducees, priests and people, alike indulged the most violent and ungovernable fury. It does not seem that any check was laid upon them by the Roman authorities. Either the procurator was absent from the city or he was unwilling to connive at what seemed to him an ordinary religious quarrel.

The eminent and active agent in this persecution was Saul. There are strong grounds for believing that if he was not a member of the Sanhedrin at the time of St. Stephen's death, he was elected into that powerful senate soon after, possibly as a reward for the zeal he had shown against the heretic. He himself says that in Jerusalem he not only exercised the power of imprisonment by commission from the High Priests, but also, when the Christians were put to death, gave his vote against them. From this expression it is natural to infer that he was a member of that supreme court of judicature.

However this might be, his zeal in conducting the persecution was unbounded. We cannot help observing how frequently strong expressions concerning his share in the injustice and cruelty now perpetrated are multiplied in the Scriptures. In St. Luke's narrative, in St. Paul's own speeches, in his earlier and later epistles, the subject recurs again and again. He "made havoc of the Church," "entering into every house;" (Acts 8:3: see 9:2) and those whom he thus tore from their homes he

“committed to prison;” or, in his own words at a later period, when he had recognized as God’s people those whom he now imagined to be His enemies, “thinking that he ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ... in Jerusalem ... he shut up many of the saints in prison. (Acts 26:9,10; cf. 22:3)

And not only did men thus suffer at his hands, but women also, a fact three times repeated as a great aggravation of his cruelty (Acts 8:3; 9:2; 22:4). These persecuted people were scourged “in many synagogues.” (Acts 26:10) Nor was Stephen the only one who suffered death, as we may infer from the apostle’s own confession. And what was worse than scourging or than death itself, he used every effort to make them blaspheme that holy name whereby they were called. His fame as an inquisitor was notorious far and wide. Even at Damascus Ananias had heard (Acts 9:13) “how much evil he had done to Christ’s saints at Jerusalem.” He was known there (Acts 9:21) as “he that destroyed them which called on this Name in Jerusalem.” It was not without reason that in the deep repentance of his later years, he remembered how he had “persecuted the Church of God and wasted it,” (Gal. 1:13; cf Phil. 3:6) how he had been a “blasphemer, a persecutor, and injurious,” (1 Tim. 1:13), and that he felt he was “not meet to be called an Apostle,” because he “had persecuted the Church of God.”

From such cruelty, and such efforts to make them deny that Name which they honored about all names, the disciples naturally fled. In consequence of “the persecution against the Church at Jerusalem, they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.” The Apostles only remained (Acts 8:1). But this

dispersion led to great results. The moment of lower depression was the very time of the church’s first missionary triumph. “They that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word.” (Acts 8:4; 11:19-21) First the Samaritans and then the Gentiles received that Gospel which the Jews attempted to destroy. Thus did the providence of God begin to accomplish, by unconscious instruments, the prophecy and command which had been given, “Ye shall be witnesses unto Me, both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

Sources:

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