

# STEPHEN, THE PROTO-MARTYR

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Sacred history gives us no particular account of the country or kindred of this holy man. That he was a Jew is unquestionable, since he himself acknowledges, in his apology, his relation to the people; but whether originally descended of the stock of Abraham, or if proselyted parents, whether born at Jerusalem, or among the dispersed in the Gentile provinces, it is impossible to determine. He was probably one of the seventy disciples chosen by our Lord as companions to the Apostles in the ministry of the Gospel. His admirable acquaintance with the Christian doctrine, and his singular ability to defend the cause of Christ's Messiahship against its most acute opposers, plainly declare him to have been some considerable time under our Saviour's immediate instructions. Certain it is, that he was a man of great zeal and piety, endowed with extraordinary communications of that divine Spirit which had been lately poured out upon the church, and eminently gifted with miraculous powers, which peculiarly qualified him for a place of honour and usefulness in the Christian Society.

As the church increased daily by a vast number of converts,

the cares and labours of the Apostles were necessarily augmented; in consequence of which, it appears that they omitted to make a proper distribution of goods to relieve the necessities of the poor. Hence “*arose a murmuring of the Grecians, against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations.*” Deacons were then appointed, who were specially intrusted with the treasures of the church, and whose business it was to distribute to all according to their need.

That this office might be duly managed the Apostles directed the church to nominate wise and prudent men, of approved reputation, and furnished with the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Ghost. The number of these were seven, probably for no other reason than that the Apostles thought them sufficient for the business. The Christian religion consequently prospered, and many of the priests themselves and the most violent opposers, became obedient to the faith. The chief among these newly elected officers was Stephen. He is not only placed first in the catalogue, but particularly recommended as “a man full of faith and the Holy Ghost.” He advocated the cause of Christianity with a firm, undaunted mind, and that nothing might be wanting to render it effectual, he confirmed his doctrine by many public and unquestionable miracles. The zeal and diligence of his ministry, and the uncommon success which attended it, quickly awakened the malice of the Jews, and there were not wanting those who were ready to oppose and contradict him.

Besides the temple, where the sacrifices and the more solemn parts of the Jewish religion were performed, there were at Jerusalem 480 synagogues for prayer and expounding the law. Of these, five combined for the purpose of sending their societies to encounter Stephen. The first of them were those of the “synagogue of the libertines;” the next were

those of the synagogue of the Cyrenians; the third, of the synagogue of the Alexandrians; the fourth were them of Cilicia, among whom was probably Saul of Tarsus; and the last were those of the synagogue of Asia. These were the several parties appointed for the controversy, men of different countries, and skilled in the subtleties of their religion, who, all at once rose up to dispute with Stephen. We have no record of the subject of disputation; but whatever it was the holy man contended with zeal, and such strength of reasoning, and such freedom and majesty of elocution, that his antagonists could not say a word against him; “they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.” Ashamed that they were silenced thus openly by a single adversary, the enemies of Stephen betook themselves to vile expedients, hoping in this way to accomplish what they had failed to do by force of argument. They accordingly engaged men of the profligate principles to bring against him false accusations. “They suborned men which said, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.’” Stephen being brought before the council, the false witnesses said, “This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.” While the judges earnestly beheld him, they discovered an extraordinary brightness in his countenance. The high priest having asked Stephen if he were guilty of the charges alleged against him, the accused made that admirable defense which is contained in the seventh chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. The holy man was proceeding in the applications of his discourse, when the patience of his auditors began to fail; and feeling themselves condemned by the truths which he delivered, they expressed all the signs of rage. But he, regardless of

what was passing around him, had his eyes and thoughts directed to a nobler object, and looking up, saw the heavens opened, and some bright and sensible manifestations of the divine Majesty. The soul of the good man was inspired with fresh zeal and courage, and earnestly desiring to arrive at his heavenly rest, he could not but communicate his happiness; fearless of the consequences, he informed his adversaries of what he witnessed; “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.”

The vision had very different effects; it encouraged Stephen, but enraged the Jews; who now considering him, by his own confession, as a blasphemer, resolved upon his death without any further process. They did not wait for a warrant from the Roman governor, without whose permission they could not put any man to death, nor even for the judicial sentence of the Sanhedrin; but raising a great clamour, and stopping their ears that they might hear neither any more blasphemies, nor any cries for mercy, they unanimously rushed upon him. They would not execute him within the walls, lest they should pollute the holy city with his blood, but hurried him “without the city,” and then fell upon him with a shower of stones. The witnesses putting off their garments laid them at the feet of Saul, whose fiery zeal was no doubt conspicuous in this, as well as in the following persecution.

During the whole tragedy, the holy man was upon his knees, commending his own soul to God, and praying for his murderers; “Lord lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.” What storms or tempests soever follow the righteous man while he lives, his setting sun is calm and serene; “mark the perfect and behold the upright, for the end of that man is peace.”

Thus died Stephen, the first martyr to the Christian faith,

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obtaining a reward truly answering to his name; a crown. He was a man in whom the virtues of a divine life very illustriously shone; “a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost.” “And devout men carried Stephen to his burial and made great lamentation over him.”

GEORGE C. SEDWICK was a native of Virginia, from whence he moved to Zanesville, Ohio. Here he conducted a religious Periodical, styled the *Baptist Miscellany* as early as 1829. Where, or at what time, he was set apart to the gospel ministry is not known. After preaching some years in Ohio he moved to Frankfort, Kentucky in 1837. He represented the Frankfort Church in the convention that formed the General Association at Louisville in October of the same year, and was an active member of that body during his stay in the State. In 1840 he took charge of the Baptist church at Paris in Bourbon county. In 1843 he moved to Georgetown, where he remained a brief period and then moved back to Zanesville, Ohio. Here he spent the remainder of his days. He was a good preacher, and was active in the benevolent enterprises of the denomination. His son, W. S. Sedwick, was a well known Sunday school missionary, in Kentucky about the close of the late civil war.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: This biographical excerpt is from J. H. Spencer's *A History Of Kentucky Baptists From 1769 to 1885*, vol II, p 36-37. (Printed for the author in 1886).

