

OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

ST. STEPHEN THE MARTYR.

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"And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep."—Acts vii. 59, 60.

These words convey to us an account of the closing scene of the life of the martyr Stephen, the proto-martyr of the Christian Church. His name (Stephanus, a crown) and other circumstances would seem to indicate that he was not a Palestinian, but an Hellenic Jew; that is, a Jew who was born and reared forth of the Holy Land. His address to the Sanhedrim, recorded in this chapter, is singularly free from every trace of Jewish prejudice, and, while indicating such familiarity with Jewish history and tradition as might be expected from a Jew, is yet free from all such arrogant claims and pretensions as Jews were accustomed to put forth on all occasions, but specially, in their own councils and assemblies. Hellenic culture and civilization had manifestly had the effect upon him of rendering him, if not less of a Jew, less Jewish, and because less Jewish, more Christian. Nowhere in the long roll of the Church's martyrs is there an instance of a confession more Christ-like in its meekness and liberality and enlightenment than that of the first on the roll. In strength and grasp of conviction, and in fearlessness of statement too, he is unsurpassed, reminding us of Luther at the Diet of Worms. He takes his position as a Christian apologist with an assurance and steadfastness which cannot be shaken, assailing Judaism in its strongest hold, so courageously, and with arguments so trenchant and powerful, as to incite his audience to have recourse in their hostility to that sure resort of weakness, violence. Unable either to contradict the statements which had been made, or to reply to the arguments founded on them, and deeply feeling the sharp censure with which the address concluded, they gave vent to their chagrin in transports of rage, gnashing on him with their teeth. Finally, on his declaring, with his eyes directed towards heaven, that he there saw the Son of man standing on the right hand of God, they so completely lost control of themselves, that, forgetting the dignity and decorum which should always characterize the proceedings of a court of justice, they resolved themselves into a riotous mob, and furiously crying out against him, and madly stopping their ears lest they should hear him, they flung themselves upon him with one accord, savagely tore him out of the building, dragged him along the streets to one of the gates, and there, outside the gate, stoned him to death. The modern city of Jerusalem is surrounded by a wall, pierced at convenient intervals by gates, giving ingress and egress. One of these gates bears the name of St. Stephen, and is supposed to be that in front of which the first Christian martyr gave his soul to God.

This cruel murder had consequences which were neither foreseen nor intended by the murderers. It was, for several reasons, a most memorable event. A young man was, as we know, present, whose name was Saul, a member of the tribe of Benjamin, and also of the sect of the Pharisees, who highly approved of what was done, and kept the clothes of those who did it; and that man became afterwards, on his conversion, the great Apostle of the Gentiles. It was memorable also, and chiefly, as the first of a series of such acts as the initial act of a persecution which there and then arose against the Church; the result of which was, that so far from suppressing and extinguishing the Christian faith, it was the main cause of its rapid growth and extension. The disciples had been, ever since the resurrection and ascension of their Master, almost without exception resident within the city of Jerusalem. In fact the Church at Jerusalem, previous to this martyrdom, was the Church of Christ—embraced within its pale all the professed followers of Christ. But now that violent hands had been laid upon them, and not only threatenings but slaughter dogged their steps, these followers of Christ were constrained to seek homes elsewhere, and to propagate their doctrines and opinions wherever they could do so without fear or hindrance. They were scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, carrying with them and disseminating wherever they went the all-important truths with which their Master

had charged them, and which He had commanded them to proclaim to all nations, and peoples, and tribes, and tongues. Thus early did martyr-blood become the seed of the Church. Instead of one, there were now many Christian communities scattered over a wide area extending even to Damascus and the Syrian Antioch—as well places remote and outlandish as great and illustrious cities now heard the Gospel—places to which disciples, except under fear of death, would not have thought of betaking themselves, and which, therefore, could not otherwise have been evangelized for many years to come. Historians of that period, both within and without the pale of the Church, have expressed wonder at the unprecedentedly rapid progress of Christianity in that age; but the wonder ceases when the circumstances are known. In this, as in so many other cases, the wrath of man was clearly made to redound to the praise and glory of God, the enemies of truth contributing, by their very enmity, to its secure establishment and extensive propagation. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church; and the hand of the persecutor, carefully and diligently and furiously uprooting and tearing asunder, merely serves to scatter broadcast germs and principles of life which will surely and rapidly quicken and grow.

We have not much information regarding St. Stephen, but what we have is sufficient. He was one of seven who were elected to the office of deacon—an office which was created in order to meet the necessity which had arisen for the care and supervision of the purely secular affairs of the Christian brotherhood. In the narration, he is singled out from among his brethren as being a man of very superior gifts and endowments. He is first described as "full of faith and of the Holy Ghost;" and again as "full of faith and power, and as a worker of wonders and miracles among the people." A man of this description would be sure to become a marked man, conspicuous alike to friends and foes. He would be seen from afar; and while his friends would greet him with hearty approval and applause, he would certainly be made the butt of all the sharpshooters in the ranks of his foes. He would be doomed to death by them. His eminence and courage would invite attack, and so place him in peril. This we find to have been actually the state of the case. The enemies of Christianity, specified as "certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of those of Cilicia and of Asia," challenged him to a public discussion, which resulted in their complete discomfiture. This deacon was evidently both a doughty and well-appointed champion—such a champion as it was not at all safe to meet in controversy—a foeman whose skill and prowess were greatly to be dreaded. He was a true man, and he both spoke and testified of the truth; therefore he was more than a match for any number of opponents who professed to believe and undertook to defend what was false. Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians and the rest, "were not able," we are told, "to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spoke;" and when men were compelled to acknowledge themselves beaten in argument, they very generally appeal to authority and then try to overcome their adversary by force—not to convince, but to silence him. The Jewish Sanhedrim, a judicial body whose hostility to the new doctrine was well known and might be entirely depended upon, was invited to charge Stephen with blasphemy against Moses and against God, which charge, on his being arraigned, elicited that powerful and striking defence which, as already stated, so provoked the council, that, bursting into uncontrollable fury, it ceased to be a Council, and became a wild and bloodthirsty mob, which did not scruple to commit the crime of murder.

This man, we are told, was full of faith; and it seems to me that every man who has either done or attempted anything memorable, must also have been full of faith. The centurion was a most faithful man. But his faith was of a different kind from that of Stephen. The faith of the centurion was a faith in the personal power of Jesus to heal a certain disease by which his servant was grievously tormented. Either from experience of his own, or from testimony of others, he had become convinced that Jesus possessed miraculous gifts; and his earnest appeal to Him on the occasion referred to was an equally earnest profession of his faith. The probability is that he accepted Him as his spiritual Lord and Master, his divine Teacher and Guide. But the certainty only is, that

in as far as His power and the manifestation of it were concerned, he believed Him to be of God, and God incarnate. The probability is that he was not, like King Agrippa, almost but altogether persuaded to be a Christian; but the certainty only is that he acknowledged the power of Christ to be divine. He was placed in peculiar circumstances. He was a Jewish proselyte, and, as such, might not have been so instructed in the law and the prophets as to clearly discern the Messianic position and attributes of Jesus. He had been born and educated in heathendom, and had arrived at full manhood before he had been brought to a knowledge of such truth as still survived in Judaism; and it cannot therefore be considered as very marvellous, but, on the contrary, as a most reasonable conjecture, that he might not have been so enlightened as to the scope and purpose of the religion which he had embraced, as to discern that without Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, it was not only incomplete, but vain and unsatisfactory. In the presence of Jesus, and with the evidences around him of the power of Jesus, he was faithful—steadfastly, splendidly faithful; but in the absence of Jesus, and with only memories and reminiscences of Him to prove to him that Jesus had ever been, he might not have felt so grand and placid and comfortable an assurance. His faith, magnificent though it was, and well worthy of the praise bestowed upon it, might have been lacking in intelligence, and also in breadth and comprehensiveness. It might have been as the faith of a catechumen, child-like—a faith which could not, perhaps, become stronger, but which might attain to a keener vision and a larger outlook. Queen Mary once stated, at an interview with John Knox, that her conscience would not permit her to abjure the superstition in which she had been reared; whereupon he replied that conscience required light, adding that the light must be that of God's word. The faith of the centurion might have been improved, rendered clearer and more definite, firmer in body and less vague of outline, by a little more of what the conscience of the Scottish Queen lacked—light.

The faith of St. Stephen the Martyr was like our own—like such faith of ours as is best. He had all the advantages which we possess in knowledge of the Scriptures, and of the plan of salvation as revealed therein. He knew the prophecies, from first to last, which bore upon the advent of the Messiah; the prophecy which told of the seed of the woman which should bruise the head of the serpent; of the Shiloh which would come, when the sceptre was about to depart from Judah, and the lawgiver from between his feet; of the King who would rule the world from the towers of Salome; of the warrior who, by the might of his solitary arm, would break His enemies in pieces, and subdue all nations unto Himself; of the Sufferer who would be wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities; of the Flower, beautiful and fragrant, which would suddenly spring up in the desert; of the wonderful Babe, son of a virgin, which in the fulness of time would be born at Bethlehem—Ephratah, least among the thousands of Israel; of the Ancient of Days, frequently revealed in the form of an angel, but now at least in the form of a man; of the possessed of a true body and a reasonable soul; of the Counsellor, who would be wiser than all counsellors; of the Man of men; of the God-man; of Immanuel; of the Prince of Peace. All this he knew with as clear a perception of the Person indicated, of the mission which that Person was to fulfil, and of the office which he was to assume, as we have. He could trace, as we can, the stream of prophecy from its source to its termination—from the fall of man to his restoration. He could, like us, mark with precision the special providences whereby God brought these prophecies to pass, these good purposes of his will towards man; how, by carefully disposing and arranging events and their consequences, times and seasons, futures of individuals and of nations, he prepared the way for the advent, tests for the recognition, and a sphere for the activity and energy of the Saviour of the world. Of the scheme of salvation as a whole, as well as of its component parts and consecutive stages, he had, as his address before his judges proves, a most perfect knowledge and understanding. Therefore, his faith, founded upon sufficient knowledge, must have been as intelligent as it was strong. He was able to give a satisfactory reason for it—to maintain and defend it against all assailants. Faith, like Queen Mary's conscience, requires light; and the more light, the better the quality of the faith. Ignorance is not the mother