

The Book Of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

Acts 7:57-60

As we return to the story of Stephen's martyrdom, we note the chaos and frenzy which broke out in the Sanhedrin's "Hall of Hewn Stones". Luke uses dynamic verbs to relate the account. Look at the five phrases he uses. He tells us that the members of the Sanhedrin...

- "Covered their ears."
- "Yelled at the top of their voices"
- "Rushed at him"
- "Dragged him out of the city"
- "Began to stone him"

Luke's readers are meant to pick up on the fact that these normally conservative members of the high council are acting like a mob rather than a deliberating body of theologians and experts in the Jewish Law.

This brings me back to an issue that I have raised a couple of times. Was Stephen's execution legal? Several historians have offered their opinions on this question.

E.F. Harrison suggests that the council went beyond their legal jurisdiction by not consulting the Roman authorities. Williams has postulated that Judea was in an interregnum period, where no replacement for Pontius Pilate had been named. Pilate was removed from office by order of the emperor in 36 or 37 A.D.

However, Roman historians seem to confirm that Lucius Vitellius, the Roman legate of Syria made sure there was no interregnum because of fears of more Jewish uprisings.

There is one other view. Once scholar wrote:

“Stephen’s death is a true execution after a Jewish trial. As a rule, the death penalty could be carried out only with the approval of the Roman governor, but ... the Jews had a special dispensation when it came to violations concerning the temple. They could execute a death sentence without prior Roman permission.” He bases this view on information found in Josephus’ Jewish Wars.

Having said all that, there is another two-part question that should be raised here. Were there any definite rules covering the legality of executing fellow Jews and, were there procedures outlined for this?

As it turns out, the Jewish laws concerning the execution of Jewish persons was well formulated. By the second century, the Mishnah had codified the laws for such executions. Let me read you the portion of the Mishnah that deals with this:

“When the trial is finished, the man convicted is brought out to be stoned.... When ten cubits from the place of stoning they say to him, ‘Confess; for it is the custom of all about to be put to death to make confession, and everyone who confesses has a share in the age to come.’

... Four cubits from the place of stoning the criminal is stripped. ... The drop from the place of stoning was twice

the height of a man. One of the witnesses pushes the criminal from behind, so that he falls face downward. He is then turned over on his back. If he dies from this fall, that is sufficient.

If not, the second witness takes the stone and drops it on his heart. If this causes death, that is sufficient; if not, he is stoned by all the congregation of Israel.”

Now you can see how an authorized stoning was supposed to take place. In the Mishnah, it is clear that executions were treated as unusual events that should be avoided, as one scholar put it, “if the slightest legal loophole can be found.”

Luke’s description of Stephen’s death hardly fits the rules of the Mishnah. It does, however, remind us of an early occurrence of a Jewish mob attempting to execute a preacher. We find the account in chapter four of Luke’s Gospel. As Jesus is preaching, here is what he told his hometown synagogue:

“Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ And you will tell me, ‘Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’”

“Truly I tell you,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land.

Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet

not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”

Let me give you the thrust of Jesus' message. He is telling the Jewish audience that, for all their notions of exclusive relationship to God, the historical evidence suggests something else. The miracles that took place during Elijah and Elisha's era weren't given to the Jews, but Gentiles. He's telling them to stop believing that their ancestry alone makes them right with God.

Look at their response, starting at verse 28: “All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.” – Luke 4:23-30

There are some definite parallels to Luke's story about Jesus' Nazareth experience and Stephen's execution. In both stories, the Jewish Laws were ignored, even flaunted, as Jesus' and Stephen's listeners drove them out of a building, intent on executing them.

Let's come back to Stephen's situation. Here's what we read in verse 58: “Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.”

This is the only place in Luke's account where at least some small part of the Jewish execution laws were carried out. According to the Mishnah, the first person to stone the condemned person must be one of the witnesses, meaning their accusers.

Under normal circumstances, this would make a witness think carefully about accusing someone of a capital

offense. After all, they would have to be the first person involved in the defendant's execution.

In Stephen's case we cannot be sure if these witnesses were the false witnesses that had been hired by the Sanhedrin or if they were the members of the council. Whichever it was, Luke tells us that they laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Once again, Luke is telegraphing what is to come later in his book. He names Saul as a way of introducing the man whose biography is about to dominate the rest of the Book of Acts.

At the time of Stephen's execution, Saul could have been anywhere from 24-48 years old. This fits well with Stephen's execution and Saul's involvement in the subsequent persecution of the Christians.

Luke notes that Saul held the outer robes of the witnesses as they stoned Stephen. He uses his Jewish name – Saul – although he is better known in secular historical sources by his Roman name, Paullus.

In that vein, Paul's Jewish name was undoubtedly reflective of one of the most famous persons in the tribal history of his fellow Benjamites – Saul, Israel's first king.

As we look at verse 59, we find a second tie between Stephen's execution and that of Jesus. As he knelt on the ground – as the stones struck him – he said, "Lord, receive my spirit." These words, of course, remind us of Jesus' own words, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

Various commentators have pointed out a striking difference between Jesus' and Stephen's statements. Jesus committed his spirit to his Father, whereas Stephen committed his spirit to Jesus. This change indicates the Early Church's growing sense of Jesus' divinity.

As we come to the last verse in this chapter, we find yet a third statement that Stephen makes that has ties to Jesus' own passion. Verse 60 tells us, "Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep."

I'm sure that you are immediately relating Stephen's last living statement to what Jesus said as he died. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not understand what they are doing." Similarly, Stephen pleads with Jesus to "not hold this sin against them."

Let me suggest that this is quite remarkable. If you or I were being illegally executed for something we had not done, would we ask Jesus to not hold them responsible? I greatly doubt it! Perhaps this is just one more example of Stephen's strong relationship to Christ, as well as the Holy Spirit.

As I researched this passage, I found it interesting that one commentator made this statement:

"Whether it was Stephen who deliberately imitated his Master, or whether it was Luke who observed and highlighted the fact, there are several parallels between the death of Jesus and the death of Stephen.

In both cases false witnesses were produced and the charge was one of blasphemy. In both cases too, the execution was accompanied by two prayers, as each

prayed for the forgiveness of his executioners and for the reception of his spirit as he died.

Thus did the disciple—whether consciously or unconsciously—reflect his Master.

Luke, of course, ends this story with a rather dramatic contrast between two men: Stephen and Saul, later Paul.

Stephen is dying with both grace and forgiveness in his heart and in his statements. Saul, by contrast, was holding the robes of the false witnesses – making it clear that he approved of Stephen's execution for blasphemy.

What's interesting is that Stephen will have the last word. As we will see later in Acts, Stephen's death will have a great influence on what happens to Saul. The apostle will never forget the contrast between his hatred for the Followers of the Way, and the supernatural tranquility that Stephen modeled as he died.

As we finish this section, let me note a couple of things that come out of Luke's narrative of Stephen's martyrdom.

While the students of Acts often put great emphasis on Stephen and the Church's first martyr, Luke is more interested in his role as an early evangelist – especially to the non-Jews. This will be further evident in Paul's own biography.

F.F. Bruce points out another insight about Stephen's story. At the end of his defense before the Sanhedrin, he makes a remarkable statement. Under the Old Testament Tabernacle and Temple system, the Jews

adopted a view that God was tied to buildings. It was really a heathen concept, but they held to it.

Stephen's defense explodes that philosophy. He demonstrates that God stood outside that system – that he always was greater than any Tabernacle or Temple. And now, Christ was ready to accompany his people wherever they went, by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

Just as Yahweh had gone with Abraham, Joseph, and Moses, Jesus would now go with Paul and Barnabas as the Spirit sent them on their first missionary journey.

Lastly, while Stephen's martyrdom was a shock to the early Church, it deeply impressed even unbelievers like Saul of Tarsus. The Jewish and Roman opposition that followed Stephen's death and Saul's conversion would play a great part in sending the gospel where Jesus had predicted it would go: to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.