

THE STONING OF ST. STEPHEN.

THE episode of the stoning of St. Stephen is narrated in Acts vii. 58-60 as follows: "And they cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they stoned Stephen, calling upon (the Lord), 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. And Saul was consenting unto his death."

What is the meaning of the words: *the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul?* οἱ μάρτυρες ἀπέθεντο τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτῶν παρὰ τοὺς πόδας νεανίου καλουμένου Σαύλου. Theophylactus explains the action of the witnesses as prompted by a desire to be more agile in their task, as athletes strip for a foot race or other gymnastic contest, and writes: ὥστε εἶναι κούφοι καὶ ἀπαραπόδιστοι εἰς τὸ λιθοβολεῖν.

This seems a somewhat trivial act for the writer to have recorded with such evident care. During a football match the combatants no doubt may commit their overcoats to the care of a small boy, but what the author of Acts desired to record in this passage was surely part of what one may call the rite of stoning a blasphemer to death. He implies that Saul or Paul discharged an official rôle on this occasion. I venture to suggest that it was Stephen's garments which were ceremonially laid at the feet of Paul, and that the true reading in ver. 58 is *αὐτοῦ*, and not *αὐτῶν*. This correction is suggested by the account of this form of punishment given in the Talmudic Codex Sanhedrin as edited by Joannes Coch of Bremen, and printed at Amsterdam in 1629. From this forgotten scholar's rendering of the

Gemarist I cite those portions of the text which illustrate the martyrdom of Stephen. John Lightfoot afterwards used the same tract in his *Horæ Hebraicæ*, and the substantial agreement of his independent translation of it with that of Coch is proof of the accuracy of the latter's Hebrew scholarship :

Caput vi. § 1. Confecto iudicio damnatum educunt v. g. ut lapidibus obruatur. Locus lapidationis extra locum iudicii fuit. Nam dicitur: Educ blasphemum. Unus officialium stat ad ostium curiae, tenens manu sudarium: unus item, equo insidens, tantum inter ipsum et se intervalli relinquit, ut commodé videre eum possit. Tum si quis se offerat, qui, damnatum insontem esse, doceat; iste sudarium quatit: eques, concitato cursu, damnatum retrahit. Quinetiam si ipse quid pro sua innocentia ostendenda se habere asserat, quater quinquiesvè reducitur: dummodò in verbis eius sit solidi quippiam. Si hoc modo innocentia eius comprobetur, liberum dimittunt: Sin minùs, prodit lapidandus, antecedente praecone atque in haec verba conclamante: *Vir iste N.N. filius N.N. prodit lapidandus, ob culpam hanc.* (Nam illa quoque exprimitur) *suntque eius facti testes N.N. et N.N. Quicumque ipsum insontem docere potest, accedens rationes suas exponat.*

§ 2. Quando decem cubita abest a loco lapidationis, iubetur confiteri. Nam in omnibus, qui neci dantur, observatur, ut confiteantur. Quisquis enim confitetur, illi in futuro seculo sors erit. . . .

Si sciat, se testium mendacio gravatum, sic dicet: *Sit mors mea expiationi pro omnibus peccatis meis, hoc uno excepto crimine.* At enim id si admittatur, quilibet, ut se purget, similiter faciat.

§ 3. Quando a loco lapidationis abest quatuor cubita, vestes ei detrahuntur. Maris anteriora velantur; mulieris et posteriora. . . .

§ 4. Locus lapidationis altus erat geminam hominis

longitudinem. Testium alter inde reum detrudebat, ut in lumbos caderet. Si conversus in pectus foret, in lumbos convertebatur. Hoc casu mortuus si esset, satisfactum legi: sin; alter lapidem sublatum in pectus immittebat. Si hoc ictu moreretur, satisfactum: sin; a toto Israële lapidibus cædebatur. Q.D. (Deut. xvii. 7) *Manus testium primo in illum sit, et manus totius populi deinceps.*

Lapidati omnes suspenduntur. . . . Quomodo sit suspendium? Trabs in terram depangitur, ex qua lignum exstet: dein revinctis manibus suspenditur. . . . Si pernoctet, interdicti violatio est. Q.D. (Deut. xxi. 23). *Ne sinas pernoctare cadaver eius in ligno, sed omnino sepelias eum eodem die. Nam execratio Dei est suspensus, etc.*

§ 5. Lapidatus non sepelitur in sepulcris maiorum suorum. Duo autem sepulcreta a senatu constituta fuerunt; unum lapidatis et ustis: alterum gladio et laqueo interemptis.

§ 6. Quando absumta caro est, ossa conservata in privata sepulcra inferuntur. . . .

These extracts assist us to picture vividly the tragedy of Stephen's death, for we are able, as John Lightfoot remarks in his commentary, to compare it with the pattern and regular procedure (ut conferat lector praesentem actionem cum hac norma et more usitato). Stephen is tried before the Sanhedrin where the high priest presides and cross-questions him. The witnesses against him before the council accompany him to the place of stoning outside the city, there they strip him and lay his clothes at the feet of Saul, who seems to have discharged the office of Herald or *praeco*, and the words: ἦν συνευδοκῶν τῇ ἀναίρεσει αὐτοῦ, rendered "was consenting unto his death," but indicating an act of formal approval, refer to his recital in that capacity of the Council's sentence: "This man (Stephanus), son of N.N. cometh forth to be stoned, for the following offence, and these men here present have borne witness against

him." Later on in Acts xxvi. 10 Paul is represented as avowing before Agrippa that he had given his vote against the saints when they were being put to death (*ἀναιρουμένων τε αὐτῶν κατήνεγκα ψῆφον*). He was not a member of the Sanhedrin, and therefore cannot have given his vote for the executions; but the phrase might quite well refer to his recital of the sentences against the already condemned saints at the place of execution. The words *θεῖς δὲ τὰ γόνατα* no doubt denote the attitude normally assumed in prayer, but it was at the same time very nearly the attitude that the victim was by the witnesses forced to assume.

In Lightfoot's translation of the Hebrew the rôle of the witnesses stripping the victim is made more apparent than in Coch's, for he renders: *Cum iam intra quatuor cubitos à loco lapidationis perventum est, detrahunt vestes ejus, atque eum denudant, "As soon as they are within four cubits of the place of stoning, they (the witnesses) take off his clothes and strip him."* A loin cloth alone was left.

Erwin Preuschen in his commentary on Acts (Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1912) remarks that "the graphic touch of the garments being laid down on the ground is only introduced in order to bring in Saul as one indirectly concerned in the execution."<sup>1</sup>

On the contrary, the narrator seems to indicate that Saul took a very direct part, was a prime agent in the tragedy. He is not introduced by accident, nor can this touch have been added to the narrative merely to bring him in. Nor can I agree with Lightfoot's view that Stephen was snatched off and massacred by the tumultuous violence of the crowd, and not condemned by a formal verdict of the Sanhedrin.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Der veranschaulichende Zug von Ablegen der Kleider is wohl nur beigelegt, um Saul einzuführen als mittelbar an der Hinrichtung betheilig.

<sup>2</sup> Quæri etiam potest, an formali aliqua sententia Synhedrii damnatus sit . . . an tumultuariâ turbæ violentiâ abreptus et trucidatus? Quod videtur.

There is no reason for taking this view. The members of the Sanhedrim themselves burst out into a riot, lashed to fury by Stephen's words, and hurried him out of the city to execution. *Die Tumultuirenden*, writes Preuschen, *die Mitglieder des Synedriums selbst sind*, "The rioters were the members of the Sanhedrim itself." But that does not, as he supposes, exclude the idea that they had conducted the trial in due form according to the scheme laid down in the Sanhedrim tract of the Talmud. They probably passed sentence on Stephen in an access of far from judicial fury, and then flocked out of the city along with the condemned man to witness his execution. If Stephen survived the first attentions of the witnesses transformed into executioners, then the elders must have intervened "as all Israel," and have finished their victim off; and perhaps that is what the author of Acts wishes us to gather from his highly compressed and terse narrative.

It is likely that  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\hat{\omega}\nu$  is the correction of a scribe who failed to grasp the fact that the victim was formally denuded of his clothes by the witnesses on these occasions. The author himself seems to have been more familiar with the sort of scene he is describing than to have made the mistake of attributing to the witnesses garments that were really the victim's. Moreover the change of  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\hat{o}\upsilon$  into  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\hat{\omega}\nu$  is very slight, and in the early MSS. of Acts the two terminations  $-o\upsilon$   $-\hat{\omega}\nu$  were very likely written in compendia which readily lent themselves to confusion.

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