



Harvest – Herald – Hero: Stephen’s Burial and the Church’s Early Hermeneutics of Martyrdom

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Summary: The Church must have somewhat struggled to give meaning to the momentous happening of the death of her proto-martyr. The significance of Stephen’s burial, Acts of the Apostles 8:2, can be assessed in the light of Old Testament precedents, which in turn shed a new light on the early Church’s hermeneutics of his martyrdom. He appears to be interpreted through the lense of a joyous harvest festival, as a prophetic messenger of the Church’s universality, as well as a hero of truly biblical proportions.

Key words: Burial, Hermeneutics, Martyrdom.

Resumen: La iglesia debe haber luchado algo para dar sentido a un acontecimiento tan notable que la muerte de su protomártir. La importancia del entierro de San Esteban, Hechos de los Apóstoles 8:2, puede ser evaluada a la luz de precedentes del Antiguo Testamento, que a su vez arrojan una nueva luz sobre la hermenéutica de la Iglesia primitiva de su martirio. Parece interpretarse a través de la lente de una alegre fiesta de la vendimia, de un mensajero profético de la universalidad de la Iglesia, así como de un héroe de proporciones verdaderamente bíblicas.

Palabras clave: Entierro, Hermenéutica, Martirio.

INTRODUCTION

Stephen (στέφανος, crown) was a Hellenist, one of the Greek-speaking Jews of the diaspora, many of whom came to visit or dwell in Palestine. From Acts 6:5 we learn that he was the first of seven deacons of the church in Jerusalem. From Acts 7 we know that he became the very first person to shed his blood in witness for Christ. In the tradition of the Church he received the honorary title *Protomartyr*.¹

A number of commentators since patristic times have recognized that Luke, the author of both the Gospel and of the Acts of the Apostles, appears to model the circumstances of Stephen's martyrdom on the death of Christ as depicted in the Passion narratives, the two deaths occurring, again according to tradition, only a year apart from each other.² And yet, not so much attention has been paid to the significance of the deacon's burial as described in Acts 8:2. The present essay attempts to help fill this *lacuna* in the reflections surrounding the person of this great saint.

Twofold is the purpose that animates this study: *first*, we will enlarge the parallelism beyond Jesus' *Passio* to include other biblical predecessors. The significance of Stephen's martyrdom will be assessed in the light of their lives, deaths and burials. This should enable us to draw further conclusions regarding his own reputation in the early Church. *Second*, since this is the first violent passing of a Christian after Christ's own crucifixion, a most significant threshold has been crossed in the lives of the faithful. The Church must have somewhat struggled to give meaning to such a momentous happening. Luke's choice of language grants us a glimpse into the very heart of the Church as she grappled with this apparent tragedy at the dawn of her journey through time. We will try to expose the *new hermeneutics* that she applies to a new reality, that of Christian martyrdom. Without further ado, let us plunge into our research, starting out with the indispensable groundwork of examining some of the pertinent biblical and historical context of the first deacon's burial.

I. STEPHEN'S BURIAL IN ITS BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The only first-hand source of information on the life and death of Stephen is the Acts of the Apostles, specifically 6:1-8:2. After his own conversion to

1 Cf. AA.VV., eds., *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 13, Thomson-Gale: Washington D.C. 2003, 509.

2 Cf. IRENAEUS, *adv. Haer.* III, 12f; TERTULLIAN, *Patient.* 13f.

Christianity, Paul makes reference to witnessing the deacon's martyrdom in his writings: "And while the blood of your witness Stephen was shed, I myself was standing by, approving and keeping the coats of those who killed him" (Acts 22:20). In order to better understand the subsequent burial, however, we will first have to analyze the textual and historical underpinnings of it.

1.1. Acts 8:1-3 as contextual signpost

Acts 8:1b-3 constitutes a Lukan transitional passage that in v. 2 sums up the foregoing narrative, and in vv. 1 and 3 prepares for what is to follow. "The verse [8:2] interrupts the connection between vv. 1 and 3."³ The reason for this structuring rather than having v. 2 first seems to be that the author wishes to emphasize that it is the stoning and death of Stephen which imitates the persecutions scattering the Jerusalem church, except for the apostles.⁴

Thus, sandwiched between account summaries of Saul's frightful persecution of Hellenist Jewish believers (Acts 8:1b.3) are two comments that move the reader forward in Acts. First, the church is "scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria" (8:1b). Will they advance the Gospel beyond Jerusalem as prophesied by the Lord (1:8)? Second, "devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him" (8:2).⁵

We might say that 8:1 marks the *second* stage in the expansion of the Church; the *first* is described in 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth"; the *third* will begin with the foundation of the Church in Antioch, 11:20. Apparently, the persecution affected only the Hellenists (cf. 6:1.5); ironically, this group, dispersed by the persecution, will offer the Church her first missionaries, 8:4; 11:19-20.⁶

These verses (Acts 8:1-3), therefore, conclude Luke's account of the persecution in Jerusalem, which began with his narrative of what followed from the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate: the hearing before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:1-22), the imprisonment and arraignment before the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:17-33) and finally, the death of Stephen.

3 BARRETT, C.K., *The International Critical Commentary*, vol. 1, T&T Clark: Edinburgh 1994, 391f.

4 Cf. WITHERINGTON, B., *The Acts of the Apostles, A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 1998, 227; see also R.T. TANNEHILL, *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. 2, Fortress: Minneapolis 1990, 100f.

5 AAVV., *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. X, Abingdon Press: Nashville 2002, 132.

6 Cf. footnote to Acts 8:1 in the *Jerusalem Bible*.

Providence is clearly at work in that persecution which becomes the seedbed of the Gospel.⁷ Even the death of the first deacon did not quench the adversaries' rage, but rather increased it. It dispersed the teachers, so that the discipleship became greater. There was cause for great gladness, although there had been considerable hardship. Note again the good: the malady lasted long enough, but it was this man who brought Christians deliverance.⁸

One more preliminary consideration needs to be squared away before we can dedicate ourselves to the exegesis of Acts 8:2, and that is to briefly allude to the historicity of the actual burial site of this proto-martyr of the Church.⁹

1.2. Stephen's tomb

We understand that the bodies of men stoned to death were to be buried in a place appointed by the Sanhedrin. Whether in this instance it insisted on its right cannot be confirmed; at any rate, "devout men" – whether Christians or Jews, we are not told – "took order for Stephen's funeral, and made great mourning over him" (8:2). No indication of the place of burial is given. However, for centuries the location of St. Stephen's tomb was lost sight of. Nevertheless, EUSEBIUS shows the frequency with which Stephen's prayer for his persecutors was imitated.¹⁰ Veneration of his continued and became universal after the priest Lucian discovered at *Kefr Gamla*, at some distance to the north of Jerusalem, in 415 A.D. Stephen's remains along with those of Gamaliel, Nicodemus and Abíbas.¹¹

In 439 A.D. most of the protomartyr's remains were brought to the church of Zion in Jerusalem and were thence transferred to the church of the Stoning of Stephen north of that city. The latter was replaced by the basilica that the empress Eudoxia built in 460 A.D., outside the Damascus Gate, on the spot

7 Cf. CHRYSOSTOM, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles* 18.

8 Cf. MARTIN, F., ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scriptures*, NT vol. V, InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove 2006, 89.

9 Cf. HAHN, S., ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, Doubleday: New York – London – Toronto – Sydney – Auckland 2009, 875.

10 Cf. *Eccl. Hist.* 2.28; 5.2; *De Martyribus Palest.* 3.

11 Cf. *Epist. Luciani ad omnem Ecclesiam de revelatione corporis Stephani martyris primi et aliorum* in J.P. MIGNÉ, ed., *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 41, Paris 1855, 807-18; see also the former feast indicated in the *Roman Martyrology* "The Finding [*Inventio*] of St. Stephen" commemorated on August 3rd: H. THURSTON, ed., *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, vol. III, Christian Classics: Allen 1996, 250.

where according to tradition the stoning had actually taken place.¹² In the Byzantine era this church was the center of the cult of this particular saint, yet it was later destroyed. After its ruins were rediscovered in 1882, the present Basilica of *Saint-Étienne* of the *École Biblique et Archéologique Française* was erected on the ancient foundations.¹³

With this succinct outline of the history of Stephen's tomb, let us now advance a little deeper into our topic taking a closer look at the first of three hermeneutic keys that the Church appears to have applied to her protomartyr's burial: the image of a new harvest.

II. STEPHEN'S MARTYRDOM AS A NEW HARVEST FESTIVAL

It is always necessary to first investigate the actual phraseology of a text and to exegete it before drawing any theological inferences from it. With this imperative in mind, let us examine the scriptural evidence, the *sensus literalis*, as it were.

II.1. Biblical etymology

Our point of departure is the scenario presented in the Acts of the Apostles 8:2, συνεκόμισαν δὲ τὸν Στέφανον ἄνδρες εὐλαβεῖς καὶ ἐποίησαν κοπετὸν μέγαν ἐπ' αὐτῷ; *NVg* "Sepelierunt [*Vg* curaverunt] autem Stephanum viri timorati et fecerunt planctum magnum super illum"; *KJV* "And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him."; *RSV* "Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him"; *NRS* "Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him."

Generally speaking, one is struck by the obvious change in language when it comes to biblical descriptions of burials, in themselves markedly distinct from those of the ancient orient¹⁴. In the Old Testament, the conventional expression used to be: "he lay with his fathers" (e.g.: 1 Kgs 14:31; 2 Chr

12 As an aside, the opinion that the scene of the deacon's martyrdom was east of Jerusalem, near the gate called since St. Stephen's Gate, is unheard of until the twelfth century A.D.

13 Cf. AA.VV., eds., *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 509-511.

14 Prolific extra-biblical literature is extant to this day illustrating burial ceremonies "intended to assist the deceased in accomplishing the journey and achieving admission into the Underworld", CANCIK, H. – SCHNEIDER, H., eds., *Brill's Encyclopedia of the Ancient World*, vol. 5, New Pauly Brill: Leiden – Boston 2004, "Funerary literature" 607-609; see also I. SINGER, ed., *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. III, New York – London 1916, "Burial" 432-437; vol. V, "Funeral Rites" 529.

12:16), or also: “he was gathered to his people” (e.g.: Gen 25:8; Dt 32:50). Similar stereotypical phrases appear in the context of describing the burials of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Deborah, Rachel, Miriam, Aaron, Moses, Joshua, the Judges and Israel’s monarchs.¹⁵

Quite dissimilar is the choice of vocabulary illustrating Stephen’s burial in Acts 8:2a, namely the verb συγκομίζειν. It is one of those *hápax legómena*, occurring only once in the Old and New Testaments respectively.¹⁶ The *Vulgate* rendition of it is the rather generic “curare” (“to take care of”), becoming then more specific in the *NeoVulgate*’s “sepelierunt” (“to bury”).

From the Greek Lexicon we discover the rather plentiful connotations. Since Luke’s word is a compound verb, let us begin by examining the meaning of the non-compound stem κομίζω, which in its own right carries a copious overtone regarding the deacon’s funeral: (a.) “to take care of, provide for, to attend to”; (b.) “to carry away so as to preserve, carry home, carry safe away, to rescue, to save, carry out to burial, carry away as a booty or prize, to bring to a place, bring in, gather, to escort, conduct, recover, return, rescue from oblivion”. It takes little imagination to paint a colorful picture of how Stephen’s body must have been carefully recovered from the violent theater of his martyrdom, how it is prepared for burial and then peacefully escorted to its final resting place in order not to be consigned to oblivion.

Turning then to the original compound verb συγκομίζω one notices how its meaning is even more enhanced: (a.) “crowd gathering, gather around someone, concentrate, heaped together, carry or bring together, collect, bring together to oneself, collect round one, store up, concentrate, heaped together, gather in harvest, carrying the harvest”; (b.) “help in burying or cremating”.¹⁷ As an initial impression, in application to the text under scrutiny, the richness of the term might indicate a rather more elaborate funerary scenario, not excluding a solemn procession to the place of interment, involving many participants. The general sense of συνεκόμισαν is clear, therefore, but not the precise meaning: the body of Stephen was clearly treated with proper respect. While κομίζειν seems to mean not actually “to bury” but “to carry out for burial”, in the compound

15 Cf. FREEDMAN, D., ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, “Biblical Burials”, 785-794.

16 Cf. HATCH, C. – REDPATH, H., *A Concordance to the Septuagint*, vol. 2-3, Baker Book House: Grand Rapids 1991, 1300; SCHMOLLER, A., *Pocket Concordance to the Greek New Testament*, German Bible Society: Münster 1990, 466.

17 LIDDELL, H. – SCOTT, R., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Clarendon Press: Oxford 1990, 1666.

verb συγκομίζειν the force of the prefixed συν* may be (a.) perfective, that is, indicating that the burial (or cremation) is completed, or (b.) suggestive of the collecting of more than one corpse, or else (c.) referring to those who jointly carry out the task.¹⁸

Moreover, to be taken into account to round out the overall linguistic subtext are also some cognate expressions in the New Testament: (a.) εκκομίζω in Luke 7:12 (“As he drew near to the gate of the city, behold, a man who had died *was being carried out*, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and a large crowd from the city was with her”); (b.) συστέλλω in Acts 5:6 (“The young men rose and *wrapped him up* and carried him out and buried him.”); (c.) ἐκφέρω and θάπτω in Acts 5:6.10 (“carry out and bury”); (d.) as well as Joseph of Arimathaea performing a like service for Jesus. (Lk 23:50-54).¹⁹

Having secured at least the general etymological contours of this verse we can now set about identifying the fact that Stephen is being compared to one of the greatest personages of the Old Covenant. We begin by discussing the one and only occurrence of the verb συγκομίζειν in the Old Testament.

II.2. Stephen as a new Job

There is an eloquent and unique intertextual connection between Acts 8:2 and the *Septuagint* rendition of Job 5:26, which carries the Old Testament *hápax legómenon* of συγκομίζειν” $\text{Q}\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\epsilon\acute{\upsilon}\sigma\eta\ \delta\acute{\epsilon}\ \acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \tau\acute{\alpha}\phi\omega\ \acute{\omega}\sigma\pi\epsilon\rho\ \sigma\acute{\iota}\tau\omicron\varsigma\ \acute{\omega}\rho\iota\mu\omicron\varsigma\ \kappa\alpha\tau\grave{\alpha}\ \kappa\alpha\iota\rho\acute{\omicron}\nu\ \theta\epsilon\rho\iota\zeta\acute{\omicron}\mu\epsilon\nu\omicron\varsigma\ \grave{\eta}\ \acute{\omega}\sigma\pi\epsilon\rho\ \theta\iota\mu\omega\nu\iota\acute{\alpha}\ \acute{\alpha}\lambda\omega\nu\omicron\varsigma\ \kappa\alpha\theta'\ \acute{\omega}\rho\alpha\nu\ \sigma\upsilon\gamma\kappa\omicron\mu\iota\sigma\theta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\ \sigma\alpha$, translating the *Masoretic Text*:

תָּבוֹא בְּכֶלֶח אֱלֵי-קֶבֶר כַּעֲלוֹת גְּדִישׁ בְּעֵתוֹ:

As a point of comparison, here is the *NeoVulgate* version, “ingredieris in abundantia sepulchrum sicut infertur acervus tritici in tempore suo”, whereas the *NRS* reads: “You shall come to your grave in ripe old age, as a shock of grain comes up to the threshing floor in its season.”

In the upcoming chapter, II.3., we will attempt to analyze the actual motif described in this verse. Right now, let us simply emphasize the link that appears to be established between the figures of Stephen and his counterpart. The wider context is the statement of one of Job’s friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, during the first cycle of discourses in the book of Job, chapters 3-14. In the mind of

18 Cf. BARRETT, C.K., *The International Critical Commentary* 391f.

19 Cf. BRUCE, F., *The Acts of the Apostles*, Tyndale Press: London 1970, 181f.

the author of Acts, Stephen's cruel death must be understood in the light of Job's own righteousness. The latter repeatedly affirms his moral innocence and wrestles with the mystery of suffering. Even his family and friends abandon him to his fate of seemingly incomprehensible distress. Eventually, God intervenes in dramatic fashion and makes him experience a remarkable reversal of fortune, bordering on the miraculous. Job receives an abundance of blessings and is able to again praise God for His goodness. Having tasted extraordinary sorrows, he is now restored to even greater affluence before God and man.

In a like manner, the first deacon, characterized as a righteous and innocent man ("full of faith and the Holy Spirit", Acts 6:5; "speaking with irresistible wisdom and Spirit", Acts 6:10), undergoes a painful fate, and yet the faith of the nascent Church sees in his martyrdom a reflection of Job's virtuousness and victory: "sanguis martyrum semen christianorum!"²⁰ In fact, the life and death of Stephen almost functions as a classic *dénouement* and fulfillment of the paradigmatic trials of his archetypical predecessor. And conversely, Job becomes an archetype of the Church's protomartyr: the mysterious moral tests of sorrowfulness and extreme adversity receive a novel meaning. Luke in some ways becomes the voice of the Church, applying an innovative ecclesial hermeneutics to the new reality of martyrdom by choosing to copy Job's συγκομίζειν.

At the end of this initial contemplation of the parallel between those two protagonists, let us now explore a further aspect of this new perspective. The following analogy holds a place of centrality in this essay.

II.3. Martyrdom as a harvest festival

In epic style Job's friends are introduced unto the imaginary stage of the narrative plot: "Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that had come upon him, they came each from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They made an appointment together to come to condole with him and comfort him. And when they saw him from afar, they did not recognize him; and they raised their voices and wept; and they rent their robes and sprinkled dust upon their heads toward heaven. And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great." (Job 2:11-13)

²⁰ TERTULLIAN, *Apol.* 1.

Chapters four and five then contain the first speech of Eliphaz; he underscores God's universal goodness, and reminds the despondent patriarch of the harsh fact that suffering is the result of sin. He is presumably the oldest of the three friends of Job and therefore the wisest; he is certainly the most courteous and the most eloquent, showing genuine esteem for Job and is deeply sorry for him. His advice is the wisdom that lays down what he must do to receive relief from his travails, intending to help Job examine his conscience, to repent of his sins, and so to regain God's favor.²¹

In concluding his intervention, Eliphaz lists calamities (5:20f) and seven blessings God will bestow (5:23-26): six of these each occupy a stich, and the seventh occupies v. 26 with its picturesque simile to be discussed shortly.²² Verses 17-27 portray the happy effects of loyal submission to God's visitation: Job shall not die till his life reaches its natural term, when the full tale of his years is completed, just as it is only in the proper season that the shocks of corn are taken up to the threshing floor.²³

Now, in spite of considering Job guilty, and attributing the reason for his misfortune to his sins (CHRYSOSTOM),²⁴ Eliphaz paints "an idyllic and engaging picture of the happiness awaiting Job if he will receive God's chastisement aright; divine chastisement leads to ultimate blessings."²⁵ But what is this idyllic and engaging simile all about? Well, Eliphaz likens Job's death and burial to a harvest ceremony of bringing in the sheaves with grain and depositing them in the barns. Let us scrutinize the language up close.

We had already recognized that the *aorist* συγκεκόμισαν literally means "to bring together, collect a harvest", a verb used by Luke as a euphemism meaning "to carry out arrangements for burial".²⁶ This choice obviously echoes Job 5:26 as ascertained above. In order to further illustrate the semantic breadth of the expression we call to mind the radically related noun (a.) συσκομιστής, "harvester, gatherer", and (b.) συσκομιδή, "gathering in the harvest, ingathering".

21 Cf. BROWN, R. – FITZMYER, J. – MURPHY, R., eds., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Englewood Cliffs 1968, 516.

22 Cf. BROWN, R. – FITZMYER, J. – MURPHY, R., eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Englewood Cliffs 1990, 472.

23 Cf. ORCHARD, B., ed., *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, Thomas Nelson & Sons: Toronto – New York – Edinburgh 1953, 424.

24 Cf. SIMONETTI, M. – CONTI, M., eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scriptures*, OT vol. 6, InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove 2006, 31-32.

25 FULLER, R. – JOHNSTON, L. – KEARNS, C., eds., *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scriptures*, Nelson: Toronto – New York – Edinburgh 1975, 425.

26 Cf. PARSONS, M. – CULY, M., *Acts: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, Baylor University Press: Waco 2003, 148f.

The passive voice used in the Old Testament verse, συγκομίζεσθαι, translates the Hebrew original עלה.²⁷ Interestingly, its grammatical *Qal* stem includes the idea of “to go up, ascend, spring up, shoot forth, rise, excel”.²⁸

Stepping back for just a second and contemplating the entire picture of verse 5:26 “You shall come to your grave in ripe old age, as a shock of grain comes up to the threshing floor in its season”, we realize that Stephen’s martyrdom and subsequent burial is comparable to a harvest festival. Death becomes the solemn ingathering and ascent of sheaves of grain that are being processed. Coming from the fields in the proper season they are being brought up to the threshing floors in order to be purified and readied for deposition in the barns of the eternal Father.

To even further buttress this concept, though, we might take into account another etymological association: SYMMACHUS, the author of one of the Greek versions of the Old Testament, whose rendition was incorporated into the Origenian *Hexapla* and *Tetrapla*, chooses the above cited noun συγκομιδή to render the Hebrew חֲסִידָה (cf. *LXX* συντελείας) in Exo 23:16:²⁹

וְחַג הַקְצִיר בַּבֹּרֵי מַעֲשֵׂיךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּזְרַע בַּשָּׂדֶה וְחַג הָאֲסִף בְּצֵאת הַשָּׂדֶה בְּאֲסֹפְךָ אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂיךָ מִן־הַשָּׂדֶה:

Καὶ ἑορτὴν θερισμοῦ πρωτογεννημάτων ποιήσεις τῶν ἔργων σου ὧν ἔαν σπείρης ἐν τῷ ἀγρῷ σου καὶ ἑορτὴν συντελείας ἐπ’ ἐξόδου τοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ ἐν τῇ συναγωγῇ τῶν ἔργων σου τῶν ἐκ τοῦ ἀγροῦ σου (*LXX*);

“Et sollemnitatem Messis primitivorum operis tui, quaecumque seminaveris in agro; sollemnitatem quoque *Collectae* in exitu anni, quando congregaveris omnes fruges tuas de agro.” (*NVg*);

“You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall observe the festival of *ingathering* at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor” (*NRS*).

Exo 23:16 forms part of the *Code of the Covenant*, Exo 20:22-23:33, within which 23:14-19 designate the annual feasts in Israel; verse 16 then specifies the harvest festival, likening it to the “first fruits” of Israel’s labor. Thus, the

27 Cf. HATCH, C. – REDPATH, H., *Concordance* 1300.

28 BROWN, F., ed., *The New Brown Driver Briggs Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Hendrickson Publishers: Peabody 1979, 748f.

29 Cf. HATCH, C. – REDPATH, H., *Concordance* 1300.

image of ingathering is enhanced and enriched by the biblical notion of *first fruits*:³⁰ the protomartyr's death and funeral becomes the first fruits in the life of the early Church. How can we not think of this ripe harvest being inclusive of the first fruits of Saul's conversion: the deacon's blood transforms him into the *Doctor gentium*.³¹

Since Job 5:26 is the only terminological parallel between both Testaments, the conclusion seems inescapable that the writer of the Acts of the Apostles strove to deeper explain the highly disconcerting reality of Christian martyrdom. Stephen was the first blood witness after Christ's own paschal mystery whose public death called for a convincing and novel hermeneutics. Luke felt that he owed the Church an explanation, or better, the Holy Spirit inspired him to be her interpreting mouthpiece: his amazing approach to the evil of murder is to see Stephen's burial rite through the prism of this harvest imagery: little did all the people present at his lapidation and burial realize that the blood they shed and the body they interred was the first seed of a harvest that was to cover the world.

So far we have been exclusively concerned with the very first word of the first hemistich of Acts 8:2, discovering the intertextual and biblico-theological repercussions of the verb *συνεκόμισαν*. To round out the picture of Stephen's burial let us now turn our attention to the remaining words of v. 2a, trying to disclose the second of three hermeneutic keys that Luke offers to explain the violent and tragic death of the first deacon of the Church.

III. STEPHEN AS A HERALD OF THE CHURCH'S UNIVERSALITY

As already mentioned, Luke speaks about the actual agents of Stephen's burial as *ἄνδρες ἐύλαβεῖς*, v. 2a, "devout men" (*NVg* "viri timorati"). This vague description has led some to think that they are not believers but are pious Jews interested in maintaining Torah purity, or perhaps Jewish sympathizers who shared the deacon's opposition to the temple hierarchy. The word seems to be one that the sacred author employs for "good" Jews who if not already Christians are willing to be persuaded.³² JOHNSON³³ is undoubtedly correct that

30 Finding its paradigmatic origin in Gen 4:4: "Abel for his part brought of the *firstlings* of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering".

31 One of the titles given Saint Paul in the liturgy of the Church.

32 Cf. BARRETT, C.K., *The International Critical Commentary* 391f.

33 Cf. JOHNSON, L., *Acts of the Apostles*, *Sacra Pagina* vol. 5, The Liturgical Press: Collegeville 1992, 141.

this comment echoes the Gospel's tradition about Joseph of Arimathaea (Lk 23:50 ἀνὴρ ἀγαθὸς καὶ δίκαιος, “vir bonus et iustus”; see also Jn 19:38-42); he also proposes that a good and righteous remnant still remains outside repentant Israel.³⁴

Yet, an even more intimate etymological bond exists with those international Jewish inhabitants of Jerusalem who witness Peter's discourse on occasion of Pentecost (Acts 2:5 Ἦσαν δὲ εἰς Ἱερουσαλὴμ κατοικοῦντες Ἰουδαῖοι, ἄνδρες εὐλαβεῖς ἀπὸ παντὸς ἔθνους τῶν ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανόν; “Erant autem in Ierusalem habitantes Iudaei, viri religiosi ex omni natione, quae sub caelo est”; “Now there were *devout men* living in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven”). Also identical with the Lukan expression in Acts 8:2a is the reference to Simeon in Lk 2:25a (Καὶ ἰδοὺ ἄνθρωπος ἦν ἐν Ἱερουσαλὴμ ᾧ ὄνομα Συμεὼν καὶ ὁ ἄνθρωπος οὗτος δίκαιος καὶ εὐλαβῆς; “Et ecce homo erat in Ierusalem, cui nomen Simeon, et *homo iste iustus et timoratus*”; “Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this *man* was righteous and *devout*”), as well as to Ananias in Acts 22:12 (Ἀνανίας δέ τις, ἀνὴρ εὐλαβῆς κατὰ τὸν νόμον, μαρτυρούμενος ὑπὸ πάντων τῶν κατοικούντων Ἰουδαίων; “Ananias autem quidam *vir religiosus* secundum legem, testimonium habens ab omnibus habitantibus Iudaeis”; “A certain Ananias, who was a *devout man* according to the law and well-spoken of by all the Jews living there”). Manifestly, all of the above persons are non-Christians, which is of great relevance when reflecting on those men performing the funerary rites for Stephen.³⁵

Returning to Acts 8:2a, we opine that while it is not impossible that some of these were believers, the previous use of the word “devout” for those who had listened to Peter's Pentecost sermon and were therefore not at that time believers, supports that these men did not belong to the Church, as exemplified quite unequivocally by the ethnic Jews Simeon and Ananias.³⁶

Although the narrator does not identify these “devout men”, we can infer from the context that if not converts they are amenable to the Christian position. If they are indeed viewed as non-Christians then 2 Macc 4:49 is a relevant parallel (“Therefore even the Tyrians, showing their hatred of the crime, provided magnificently for their funeral”). Contrariwise, if we assume they were believers, then we would have to worry about how they could have conducted these obsequies in the midst of a terrible persecution.³⁷

34 Cf. AAVV., *The New Interpreter's Bible* 132.

35 See also Hebrews 5:7; 11:7; 12:28.

36 Cf. HARRISON, E., *Acts: The Expanding Church*, Moody Press: Chicago 1975, 130.

37 Cf. PERVO, R., *Acts, A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*, Hermeneia, Fortress Press: Minneapolis 2009, 200f.

Besides, inserting the account as he does after the report of the Church being scattered by persecution³⁸, Luke appears to suggest that he did not expect his readers to identify them as Christians. We might of course ask, and this is a vexing question doomed to remain largely unanswered, why not the apostles (8:1b, “that day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and *all except the apostles* were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria”)? Here again it is hard to avoid the impression that Stephen had been left to stew in his own juice, and that none of the faithful so respected by the people felt able to stand with him at the last.³⁹ This tragic context evokes again the fate of the suffering patriarch Job.

Nevertheless, if we take literally the record that the Church was scattered and only the apostles remained in Jerusalem, these “godly men” are likely to have been non-Christian Jews⁴⁰. This would mean that the opponents of Stephen do not represent the views of all the Jews in Jerusalem: some sympathy for him and his cause is understood. Indeed, if the Mishnah rule (*m. Sanh. 6.6.*), which forbade lamentation for one who had been executed, was recognized at that time, their action is quite noteworthy. It represented either a conviction that Stephen was not rightfully executed or a pointblank public remonstrance against the Sanhedrin’s action.⁴¹ Hence, they may have been protesting his execution by mourning, in violation of law and custom. Since we are not told they are Christians, one suspects Luke is indicating that despite the mob reaction some Jews at least had respect for Stephen and his views and saw him as a noble and righteous man.⁴²

Pondering yet more intensely the linguistic parallel between the “devout men” celebrating the proto-martyr’s burial (Acts 8:2a) and the pentecostal multitude described as “*devout men* living in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5), we might conclude that these non-Christians in some way adumbrate the insertion of all gentiles into the Church (see also Rom 9-11). Their grieving presence in a state of bewildering bereavement, consequently,

38 “Folge der Steinigung ist die Vertreibung der Hellenisten aus Jerusalem.” KASPER, W., ed., *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 9, Herder: Freiburg – Basel – Rom – Wien 2000, 958.

39 Cf. DUNN, J., *The Acts of the Apostles*, Epworth Commentaries, Epworth Press: London 1996, 106.

40 MARSHALL, T.R., invokes the history of Christian art and the *Roman Martyrology* to prove that Gamaliel and Nicodemus were actually those who performed Stephen’s burial, cf. *The Catholic Perspective on Paul*, Saint John Press: 2010, pp. 21-23.

41 Cf. PETERSON, D., *The Acts of the Apostles*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 2009, 276.

42 Cf. WITHERINGTON, B., *The Acts of the Apostles, A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 1998, 227.

signals yet another facet of Stephen's "harvest festival", namely, that he is shown as a promoter of the Church's apostolicity, universality and inclusive nature. In other words, the first deacon's funeral reveals him as the prodigious herald of the Church's catholicity. Consequently, even Saul's frenzy (Acts 8:1.3) is used to an unexpected end: it disperses the teachers so that the discipleship becomes greater (Acts 8:4). In the absence of Christians in Jerusalem, non-believers assume the task of burying Stephen, thereby unwittingly presaging the worldwide expansion of the community of the faithful in Christ (see Mt 10:23).

Having thus expounded on that vibrant correspondence between Stephen's burial and Job's harvest motif based on the very first word of Acts 8:2 (chapter II), and after having sounded the deeper significance of those "devout men", v. 2a (chapter III), let us now study the second hemistich of verse 8:2 of the Acts of the Apostles, pondering that "great lamentation". In the course of this research we will verify the third of hermeneutic keys that the sacred author proposes to give meaning to the cruel departure of the Church's first martyr.

IV. STEPHEN AS A HERO OF BIBLICAL PROPORTIONS

Just as in chapter II, let us subdivide the upcoming reflection into several smaller segments in order to better honor the complexity of the biblical notion of "mourning". We commence by giving some profile to its etymology and usage in the Old Testament.

IV.1. "Lamentation" in its biblical context

Luke uses another New Testament *hápax legómenon* to describe the ensuing grieving process in the church of Jerusalem after Stephen's death: *κοπετός*, which is translated as "planctus" by the *NVg*. LIDDELL-SCOTT explains it as "noise, especially of lamentation (cf. *κομμός*)";⁴³ hence in Attic drama, "weeping, dirge, lament, sung alternately by one or more of the chief characters and the chorus". Such lamentation routinely entailed striking the hand and beating the breast (*κόπτειν*), tearing one's garment and loud ululation. These acts of mourning proclaimed the evil of the deed performed by the Jerusalemites in putting Stephen to death.⁴⁴

An unspecified number of pious men take care of Stephen's burial and make a great lament over him. They are giving him homage, as *m. Sanh.* 6.5-6 permits

43 Cf. *Lexicon* 978.

44 Cf. MALINA, B. – PILCH, J., *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Acts*, Fortress: Minneapolis 2008, 62.

burial of one who was stoned but no lamentation. Their act is both defiant and a statement of their perception that Stephen was righteous.⁴⁵ Of note is the prepositional phrase ἐπ’ αὐτῶν which could be viewed as an idiomatic causal phrase: “because of him”⁴⁶. In fact, the Torah itself defined the duty of burying executed criminals (Deut 21:22f), but again according to the Mishnah there was no open, i.e. ceremonial, lamentation for them.⁴⁷ Now, if indeed κοπετός denotes public lamentation⁴⁸, and especially adding μέγας, “loud, great, protracted”, it must be regarded almost as a protest against the Jewish authorities by Stephen’s friends.

Biblically speaking, the most severe “mourning” usually lasted seven days as seen in Gen 50:10; 1 Sam 31:13; 1 Chr 10:12; Job 16:24. For Moses and Aaron, mourning lasted thirty days, Num 20:29; Dt 34:8; and for Jacob seventy days, perhaps according to the Egyptian custom, Gen 50:3. Although the New Testament does not describe funerary rites in any detail, we do find references to lamentation at someone’s death that fit familiar Jewish practices: Mk 5:38f; Lk 7:12f; 8:52f; Jn 11:31.33.35; Acts 9:39; see also Mt 2:18; Lk 7:32 || Mt 11:17.⁴⁹

Before we analyze the intertextual nexus between Stephen’s burial rites and those of some foregoing biblical heroes, let us simply put forward a small selection of the rather copious Old Testament recurrences of κοπετός.⁵⁰ All of these passages already shed some important light on the deeper meaning of the grief surrounding Stephen’s burial (emphases added).

Firstly, we find the concept of “lamentation” in the book of Esther, reacting to the decree issued by the Persian king Ahasuerus ordering the extermination of Jews: “When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai rent his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry; he went up to the entrance of the king’s gate, for no one might enter the king’s gate clothed with sackcloth. And in every province, wherever the king’s command and his decree came, there was *great mourning* among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.” (4:1-3).

45 Cf. BOCK, D., *Acts, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 2007, 319.

46 Cf. PARSONS, M. – CULY, M., *Acts: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, Baylor University Press: Waco 2003, 148f.

47 Cf. BRUCE, F., *The Acts of the Apostles* 181f.

48 Notice the *Aramaism* and *Septuagintalism* of “make lamentation”.

49 Cf. AAVV., eds., *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, Abingdon Press: Nashville 2006, “Burial” 509f.

50 Cf. HATCH, C. – REDPATH, H., *Concordance* 778.

Furthermore, Psa 30:11 underscores God's power to transform grief into joy: "You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and girded me with gladness". Jesus Sirach, on his part, exhorts us not to give in to excessive mourning: "My son, let your tears fall for the dead, and as one who is suffering grievously begin the lament. Lay out his body with the honor due him, and do not neglect his burial. Let your weeping be bitter and your wailing fervent; observe the *mourning* according to his merit, for one day, or two, to avoid criticism; then be comforted for your sorrow. For sorrow results in death, and sorrow of heart saps one's strength. In calamity sorrow continues, and the life of the poor man weighs down his heart. Do not give your heart to sorrow; drive it away, remembering the end of life." (38:16-20). Eccles 6:3 and 2 Macc 13:7; 5:10, on the other hand, illustrate the curse of a denied burial.

Additionally, the minor prophet Amos pronounces words of warning against the impending Day of the Lord: "Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of hosts: 'In all the squares there shall be wailing; and in all the streets they shall say, Alas! alas! They shall call the farmers to *mourning* and to wailing those who are skilled in lamentation, and in all vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through the midst of you', says the Lord. Woe to you who desire the Day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness, and not light." (5:16-18).

Another of the Old Testament prophets, Joel, emphasizes the need for mournful conversion: "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with *mourning*; and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil." (2:12-13).

Mystically announcing the eschatological return of the Messiah, Zechariah asserts: "And on that day, I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one *mourns* for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a first-born." (12:9-10).⁵¹

51 See also the striking commemoration of this verse in John 19:37 and Rev 1:7: St. John sees it fulfilled in the Passion and Parousia of Christ.

Ezekiel describes the lament over the fall of the ungodly city of Tyre: “They make themselves bald for you, and gird themselves with sackcloth, and they weep over you in bitterness of soul, with bitter mourning. In their wailing, they raise a *lamentation* for you, and lament over you: Who was ever destroyed like Tyre in the midst of the sea?” (27:31-32).⁵²

In addition to the numerous Old Testament occurrences, it is also useful to recall the presence of the verb κόπτω “to mourn”, in New Testament texts such as Mt 11:17 (Jesus judges His generation), Mt 24:30 (the sign of the Son of Man), Lk 8:52 (the daughter of Jairus), Lk 23:27-48 (the women of Jerusalem)⁵³, and of course Lk 23:39-45 (Christ’s own burial; cf. Mt 26:12 || Mk 14:8; Jn 19:38-42; Jn 10 [Lazarus]; 12:7 [anointing in Bethany]).⁵⁴ Deserving of mention at this juncture is also Paul’s theology of our mystical burial with Christ in Baptism (Rom 6:4; Col 2:12).

After having examined a handful of Scripture passages that illuminate and frame the “great lamentation” over Stephen’s death, let us now demonstrate a certain chronological succession of ancient biblical heroes whose κοπετός points towards that of the first deacon.

IV.2. Stephen and the patriarch Jacob

Featuring conspicuously among the many historical protagonists whose funerary mourning is narrated are Sarah (Gen 23), Joseph (Heb 11:22), Tobit (Tob 1:17f; 2:4; 4:3f; 12:12f; 14:10f), David (Acts 2:29), and Judith (Jdth 16:23). Yet, the most striking association can be established with what is said about Jacob, Israel’s ancestral father, and his obsequies in the lengthy narrative of Gen 49:29-50:14. Suffice it to quote the crucial verse 50:10 according to the *Masoretic Text*, the *Septuagint*, the *NeoVulgate*, and the *NRS*:

וַיָּבֵאוּ עַד-נֶגֶן הָאֲטָד אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן וַיִּסְפְּדוּ-שָׁם מִסְפֵּד נְדוּל וְכִבְד מְאֹד וַיַּעַשׂ לְאָבִיו אֲבֵל שִׁבְעַת יָמִים:

Καὶ παρεγένοντο ἐφ’ ἄλωνα Αταδ ὃ ἐστὶν πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου καὶ ἐκόψαντο αὐτὸν κοπετὸν μέγαν καὶ ἰσχυρὸν σφόδρα καὶ ἐποίησεν τὸ πένθος τῷ πατρὶ αὐτοῦ ἑπτὰ ἡμέρας;

52 Resonating in Babylon’s fall as depicted in Rev 18:18f.

53 Cf. JOHNSON, L., *The Acts of the Apostles* 141.

54 Cf. PERVO, R., *Acts, A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* 200f.

“Veneruntque ad Gorenatad (id est Aream rhamni), quae sita est trans Iordanem; ubi celebrantes exequias planctu magno atque vehementi impleverunt septem dies”; “When they came to the threshing floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, they held there a very great and sorrowful lamentation; and he observed a time of mourning for his father seven days.”

Quite remarkable seems the Egyptian response to Jacob’s departure by mourning over him for no less than seventy days (Gen 50:3), ten times longer than that of the Israelites themselves. Obvious is the parallelism of *κοπετὸν μέγαν* between Acts and Genesis, which permits us to speculate about an extended period of lamentation over Stephen as well. How long, we don’t know, but even seventy days cannot be excluded. What should not be overlooked, however, is the supplementary *καὶ ἰσχυρὸν σφόδρα* in Gen 50:10, that further qualifies the lamentation over Jacob as “exceedingly or extremely serious, severe, strong”, something that is patently lacking from the portrayal of Stephen’s mourning. All in all, there appears to have been a slightly lesser degree of grieving after the latter’s death.

Not to be discounted is the telling presence of the harvest motif – “threshing floor” – also in Gen 50:10, foreshadowing the identical connotation in the protomartyr’s burial. Thus, due to the clear textual bond between Acts 8:2 and Gen 50:10, it seems perfectly licit to juxtapose and compare these two personalities, Jacob and Stephen: what an enormous esteem the first martyr must have enjoyed in the early Church, exalted to the status of a true champion and patriarch in God’s economy of salvation. The heroism of his diaconal ministry and testimony could not have failed to strengthen the persecuted Christians.

Having identified the biblical liaison between the patriarch Jacob and the first deacon of the Church, let us now meditate on an additional connection that can be detected in the Maccabean historiography.

IV.3. Stephen and the Maccabean heroes, Mattathias and his son

Here is what 1 Macc 2:70 observes concerning the funerary rites of Mattathias, the Jewish priest who exercised a central role in the revolt against the Seleucid Greeks, resulting eventually in Jewish independence: “He died in the one hundred forty-sixth year and was buried in the tomb of his ancestors at Modein. And all Israel mourned for him with *great lamentation*”. A look at the *Septuagint* original confirms the cogent analogy with regards to Acts 8:2b: *καὶ ἀπέθανεν ἐν τῷ ἑκτῷ καὶ τεσσαρακοστῷ καὶ ἑκατοστῷ ἔτει καὶ ἐτάφη ἐν τάφοις πατέρων αὐτοῦ ἐν*

Μωδεῖν καὶ ἐκόψαντο αὐτὸν πᾶς Ἰσραηλ κοπετὸν μέγαν; “Et defunctus est anno centesimo et quadragesimo sexto; et sepultus est in sepulcris patrum suorum in Modin, et planxerunt eum omnis Israel *planctu magno*.”

Clearly, given the expression κοπετὸν μέγαν also in this context⁵⁵, we argue that Stephen’s martyrdom should be interpreted through the lense of this great hero, as well. Luke intimates that the deacon’s death would be instrumental in corroborating the foundations of the Church, and that he should be considered a hero of ecclesial freedom in the Spirit throughout the world. His spiritual sons and daughters will carry on the eschatological combat for Christ to the very boundary of history.

Similarly, the funeral of Mattathias’ son, Judas Macabbeus, is described in those selfsame terms: καὶ ἦρεν Ἰωναθαν καὶ Σιμων Ἰουδαν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτῶν καὶ ἔθαψαν αὐτὸν ἐν τῷ τάφῳ τῶν πατέρων αὐτοῦ ἐν Μωδεῖν καὶ ἔκλαυσαν αὐτὸν καὶ ἐκόψαντο αὐτὸν πᾶς Ἰσραηλ κοπετὸν μέγαν καὶ ἐπένθου ἡμέρας πολλὰς; “Et Ionathas et Simon tulerunt Iudam fratrem suum et sepelierunt eum in sepulcro patrum suorum in Modin. Et fleverunt eum et planxerunt omnis populus Israel *planctu magno* et lugebant dies multos”; “Then Jonathan and Simon took their brother Judas and buried him in the tomb of their ancestors at Modein, and wept for him. All Israel made *great lamentation* for him; they mourned many days” (1 Macc 9:19f).

Judas Maccabeus had led the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid Empire (167–160 B.C.) and is acclaimed as one of the greatest warriors in Jewish history alongside Joshua, Gideon and David. Applying his prominence to the person of the first martyr, we realize yet again how much admiration the early Church felt for his own intrepid life and death, his example of wisdom and courage. Stephen’s martyrdom is thus not defeat but victory, not abasement but exaltation for the new Israel, the Church of the Lord Jesus, and this transitions us into a meditation on a last biblical association.

IV.4. Stephen as worthy successor of the Baptizer

Almost as a subjoinder we put forward a final yet not less compelling comparison with John the Baptist’s burial as described in Matt 14:12, καὶ προσελθόντες οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ ἦραν τὸ πτώμα καὶ ἔθαψαν αὐτόν καὶ ἐλθόντες ἀπήγγειλαν τῷ Ἰησοῦ; “et accedentes discipuli eius tulerunt corpus et sepelierunt illud et venientes nuntiaverunt Iesu”; “his disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus.”

⁵⁵ Notice how on occasion of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple the Maccabeans held a “great lamentation”, 1 Macc 4:39.

Strictly speaking, there is really only one point of parallelism between Acts 8:2 and this verse, and that is the fact that some good people recover the body of the martyr and give it a dignified burial. Linguistically there is no direct contact that would allow for an ulterior juxtaposition of the two scenarios, except for the coincidence of “sepelierunt” in the *NeoVulgate*’s rendition. On the other hand, the most salient difference is that in the Baptizer’s case no lamentation is made. Yet, looking at the following verse one is forced to think that Jesus himself mourns over his deceased predecessor: “Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself” (Mt 14:13).

At any rate, given the identical notion of the retrieval of a martyr’s body and its burial both in Acts and in Matthew should merit the conclusion that Stephen is measured according to the parameters of the forerunner’s grandeur. Just as John the Baptist gave his life in defense of the truth, so also the first deacon, his direct successor in undergoing such a cruel death, lays down his life witnessing to the name of Christ. As such he is lifted up to the height of a Christian hero. And this brings our train of thought to a close.

V. CONCLUSION

Instead of summarizing or repeating what has been illustrated above, let us adjoin a few more thoughts to round out the picture of Luke’s new hermeneutics of Christian martyrdom.

For one thing, in addition to the liaison established with Old Testament figures, we are also reminded of the momentous episode of Bethlehem’s Holy Innocents towards the end of Matthew’s Infancy Narrative, 2:16-18. Their silent profession of faith is undoubtedly brought to completion in Stephen’s testimony through word and blood. And why not also mention the first bishop of Jerusalem, James, who so courageously followed the high standard set by the first deacon of that church and whose martyrdom is commemorated in Acts 12:2.

Isn’t it also telling that Luke’s interpretation of the first official martyrdom encompasses the paradox of simultaneous weeping and joy? Death has lost its power; indeed, it becomes an achievement. The shedding of one’s blood for the Kingdom should be celebrated like a harvest feast: “There was joy, although there had been great lamentation” (Chrysostom).⁵⁶ Underlying that paradox is obviously the deeper Christian reality of life gained through death: “If it was even necessary to explain, this description showed that having a faith in the

⁵⁶ MARTIN, F., ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scriptures* 89.

resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:31) and a hope of resurrection and eternal life (Acts 23:8) was not inconsistent with the expression of a ‘great lamentation’ at the death of a beloved brother or sister (21:13f).”⁵⁷

Jesus Himself had solemnly announced this paradox in these terms: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:24-25). And the one who was converted through a martyr’s blood says it in these God-breathed⁵⁸ words: “For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’. ‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 15:53-57). Indisputably, the protomartyr’s death and burial should be viewed in the light of this jubilant statement of faith.

As a final consideration, we realize just how extraordinary the reputation of deacon Stephen must have been in the emerging Church, most likely far beyond the city of Jerusalem. Acts 8:2 expresses highest recognition by having him join the grand phalanx of some of the protagonists of the Old Testament. A new hermeneutic, drawing on ancient biblical imagery, is applied to his departure, that of a *harvest*, a *herald* and a *hero*. Initial wonderment in due course turned into veneration for a great saint.

⁵⁷ PELICAN, J., *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*, Brazos Press: Grand Rapids MI 2005, 109.

⁵⁸ Cf. 2 Tim 3:16, θεόπνευστος, *divinitus inspirata*.

