

ST. STEPHEN: THE FIRST MARTYR AND PIONEER DEACON IN CHALDEAN LITURGY

“...so they chose Stephen, a man filled with faith and Holy Spirit.” (Acts 6:5)

“All those who sat in the Sanhedrin looked intently at him and saw that his face was like the face of an angel.” (Acts 6:15)

Martyrdom in Christian Faith:

1. Martyrs were “confessors” of the faith, those who confessed Christ before men at the cost of their lives. Disciples and early followers of Jesus Christ had suffered oppression as soon as they started their mission to proclaim the Gospel. The book of Acts reveals names and lives of some of these saints. Obviously, St. Stephen – who became the first deacon, became first martyr too when he did not sustain his life for the sake of his master’s name.
2. St. Stephen’s life previous to the task given to him by the disciples remains for us almost entirely in the dark. His name was a Greek equivalent to the **Chaldean** (kelila=crown). He was totally reliable for the work as a deacon because of his good abilities and character. The early Church by selecting him as a deacon confirmed him as a man of good reputation, full of Holy Spirit and wisdom. (Acts 6:5)

3. St. Stephen’s speech before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7), was a recital of the mercies of God towards Israel during its long history and of the ungratefulness by which, throughout, Israel repaid these mercies. By giving convincing explanations, St. Stephen emphasized how they were in dire need for the coming of Jesus Christ and that through Him as “Son of God” all the law and prophecies were fulfilled. Through his firm glance, St. Stephen condemned despotism and tyranny of the eldest and Pharisees who “dull their ears and close their eyes” as Isaiah prophesied (Isaiah 6:10)



St.Stephen in the faith of Chaldean Church:

1. It is a fundamental truth that the Gospel was proclaimed, evangelized and widely spread in the East from the early stages of Christianity. Many of the believers had suffered persecution and revenge from followers of other religions. Eventually, that suffering had led Christians to sacrifice their possessions and lives for the sake of their faith.
2. The **Chaldean** Church had appreciated, from the outset, all the martyrs who gave up their lives for the name of the Lord. Those saints who became witnesses for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the fact they have believed in through the experience of faith.
3. Many scholars of **Chaldean** Church had contemplated and meditated in St.Stephen’s life as a martyr and first of all deacons. They have written many poems and hundred of verses to magnify his role in the growing of faith of the early Church.

- The commemoration of St. Stephen is being celebrated in **Chaldean** Church yearly in the fourth week from the period of Baptism of the Lord.

On page 465 from the book of **Chaldean** prayers part (1)

The writer deeply meditates on how the martyr saint gained the crown of martyrdom by forgiving those who stoned him and he deserved to be memorized all around the world:



You O'splendid martyr,
 Stephen Gained the first
 crown of martyrdom
 You cried out to thy Lord,
 whom they crucified:
 "Lord do not hold this sin
 against them...For they
 do not know what they
 do".

He, then, surrender
 himself for stones.
 And received the diadem
 Today we all memorize him
 In most remote parts of the world.

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In another stanza, the writer contemplates furthermore on how the angles of heaven were astonished because of Stephen's fearlessness before the eldest, blaming them for being hard-hearted by rejecting God's will, that which was prophesied through prophets.

Your insistence amazed angles of Heaven
 Your persuasiveness embarrassed the eldest:
 "You unrighteousness and hard-liners,
 You are called to be David's siblings,
 And yet resist the truth,
 For your sake prophets prophesied,
 Give up your evil ways and confess to the
 Lord
 For His mercy washes our sins,
 To inherit the everlasting life."

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In the next verse, the writer promises St.Stephen that children of the Church will forever remember him and ask for his prayer to get God's mercy:

Your memorial, O, chosen saint
 Had put you along with sons
 Of light in Heavens
 On earth, the children of Church
 Are singing "Helellauia"
 Asking your prayers and supplication,
 To glorify God, and His mercy

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The **Chaldean** Church has also determined in the evening prayer for Tuesdays as part of hymns sung for the memorial of all martyrs, to remember St. Stephen. The poet contemplates how St. Stephen had established the way of martyrdom for all those who would not give up their faith in the future. Reflecting Stephen's readiness to sacrifice his life for the sake of the faith, the writer meditates how Stephen obtained the power from the Holy Spirit when he saw splendors of the Lord in the highest and never gave up proclaiming that Jesus is the Son of God:



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St. Stephen started the way
 That all the martyrs walked in
 (The angles celebrated his martyrdom)
 Like a heavenly groom.

While he was being stoned
 Saw in the highest, Lord's brightness
 And the Holy Spirit blessing the believers.

St. Stephen prayed for his executors:
 "Lord do not hold this sin against them"
 For they do not know what are doing.

Although being stoned
 Stephen cried unto them:
 The Christ is Son of God

Conclusion:

The fathers of **Chaldean** Church had strongly appreciated and considered experience of faith lived by our martyrs and saints as a spring that we can draw from and fill our emptiness, they are like flowers brightening the vine of the Lord. Let us today join our fathers in giving thanks and prayers for those saints that sacrificed their lives to give us the faith that we have today. Amen

Note: in this article we have adopted an explanatory translation rather than literal translation of the Chaldean verses.