

“The Jewish Rulers and Their Deeds”

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It is a popular fallacy, into which many fall quite unconsciously, that the Jews in the days of Christ's flesh and of the early church were an exceptional class of men—more wicked and murderous than men are nowadays. The Bible teaches us, however, that the works of the flesh pertain to the flesh, and not to the times. Human nature is the same in all ages, and it manifests itself in a very similar manner under similar conditions.

One thing those Jews shared in common with quite a proportion of human kind in the present generation: they denounced the wickedness of their fathers, and looked upon former ages as barbarous. They built the tombs of the prophets, and said, “If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them of the blood of the prophets.”

But when the Saviour came, He taught the people not as the scribes—“book-men” as the Anglo-Saxon version puts it—speaking only the word of the Father. The practice of following the word of God, and rejecting the traditions of men, made His ways very unpopular with the rulers. Their errors of life and teaching were exposed, and the truth was undermining their very existence as religious leaders of the people.

We read the lesson badly when we fail to see that the story is one of men of the ordinary kind of flesh, who, having rejected truth and its Author, while professing loyalty to truth, were led on to the commission of the very sins of which they condemned in their fathers. It was not because they delighted in bloody deeds more than other men, but as He was challenging their authority, and unsettling the minds of men as to the forms and traditions of the elders, established by common consent and usage, they easily deceived themselves into a belief that they were acting for the good of society and the nation in crucifying Jesus. John 11:50.

Saul the persecutor was evidently not a man who delighted in cruelty. His whole manner of life forbids such an opinion of him. He thought he was doing God's service, and his case exactly illustrates the lengths to which a man of naturally cultured and not unkindly disposition may go when he is deceived by the idea that God commissions men to advance truth or put down error by employing force, either by personal violence or by the forms of law; for there is no difference.

The Sanhedrin that murdered Stephen was not composed of men who had no regard for a reputation for mildness and justice. Archdeacon Farrar gives an interesting sketch of the ordinary methods of this body in his “Life and Work of St. Paul.” He says:

Generally speaking the Sanhedrin were not a sanguinary tribunal. They shuddered at the necessity of bloodshed, and tried to obviate its necessity by innumerable regulations. So great was their horror at

putting an Israelite to death, that any means of avoiding it seemed desirable. Simeon Ben Shatach is the only conspicuous Rabbi who, for his cruelty in deciding causes, is said “to have had hot hands.” Josephus expressly marks it as disgraceful to the Sadducees that, unlike the rest of their nation, they were savage in their punishments. We are told that if even once in seven years—a Sanhedrin inflicted capital punishment it deserved the opprobrious title of “sanguinary.” The migration of the Sanhedrin forty years before the destruction of Jerusalem from their “Hall of Squares,” which was beside the great Court of the Temple, to the *Chanujoth* or “shops,” which were under two cedars on the Mount of Olives, is expressly stated to have been due to their desire to get to a greater distance from the sacred precincts, in order that they might not feel it so sternly incumbent upon them to inflict the strict punishments of the law. But if, after strict and solemn voting, a man was condemned to any of the four capital punishments, the utmost care was taken to remove from the punishment all semblance of vindictive haste. ...

On pronouncement of the sentence the condemned was handed over to the *Shoterim* or Lietors of the Sanhedrin, and led to the place of execution. An official stood at the door of the Judgment Hall holding in his hand a handkerchief; a second on horseback was stationed just inside of the first, and if, even at the last moment, any witness could testify to the innocence of the condemned, the first shook his handkerchief, and the second galloped at full speed to bring back the accused, who was himself allowed to be led back as many as four or five times if he could adduce a single solid proof in his own favour. Failing this he was led on with a herald preceding him, who proclaimed his name, his crime, and the witnesses on whose testimony he had been condemned. At ten paces’ distance from the place of death he was bidden to confess, because Jewish no less than Roman law valued the certainty derived from the “*confitentem reum*” and the Jews deduced the story of Achan that his punishment would be, as regards the future world, a sufficiently complete explanation of his crime. A bitter draught containing a grain of frankincense was then given to him to stupefy his senses and take away the edge of terror. At four cubits’ distance from the fatal spot he was stripped bare of his upper garments, and according to the older and simpler plan of procedure was then stoned, the witnesses simultaneously hurling the first stones.

This was not the kind of hearing that Stephen found, when they rose up and slew him in an outburst of fury, just as any mob might do. This body that generally have respect for at least the forms of fairness and justice, by taking one step after another in their opposition to truth, had lost all restraint; and as their conduct was condemned by the truth, they took the course that intolerance always has taken and

always will take to silence the reproofing voice—they used the power which they had at hand.

No sort of natural disposition is able to restrain from excesses of evil when the spirit of intolerance rules the heart rather than the Spirit of grace. Many times since, sage men, who reprobated the axe of the Jewish rulers, have sat in council and condemned the innocent in the name of Jesus as the Sanhedrin did in the name of God. And whether the victims were innocent or guilty in the religious conduct of their lives makes no difference; for to his own master every man must give an account.