

“LORD JESUS, RECEIVE MY SPIRIT”!

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And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon *the Lord* and said, “**Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!**” And falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” And having said this, he fell asleep (Acts 7: 59-60).

“Surely Stephen’s dying prayer to Jesus to receive his spirit proves that Jesus is God?”

This statement was made at a recent Bible study I was attending. The reasoning goes that since God is the Creator of our lives, then when dying Stephen committed his “spirit” to the Lord Jesus, we are surely meant to conclude that Jesus *ipso facto* must himself be God!

Hard to fault that logic!? Well, let’s dive a bit deeper.

GOD IS THE GOD OF THE SPIRITS OF MEN

Indeed, there are many verses which do say that the God of the Bible is **the God of the spirits of all flesh** (Num. 16:22; 27: 16). And Ecclesiastes 12: 7 states that at death, **the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.** (¹)

The Psalmist prayed with confidence, “**Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O Yahweh God of truth**” (31:5). Jesus must have held the comfort of that prayer dear for, as he drew his last breath on the cross, **Jesus cried out with a loud voice and said, ‘Father, into your hand I commit my spirit.’** And having said this, he breathed his last (Lk 23:46).

Even the living should be conscious that our “spirits” are in God's hand ... **All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the spirits** (Prov. 16: 2).

These few verses are samples from many which could be used to show that it is God our Creator who holds our “spirits” in His loving care in both life and death. However, before rushing off to conclude that Stephen believed Jesus is God just because he asked the Lord to receive his spirit in death, we need to bear a few salient points in mind. But first ...

THE HISTORICAL SETTING

Most Biblical and secular historians place Jesus’ crucifixion either in 30 or 33 AD. **Pontius Pilate** was Procurator for ten years in Judea from 26 AD to 36 AD, so Stephen’s murder in all likelihood occurred towards the end of his governorship. This sets Stephen’s martyrdom in

¹ The word ‘**spirit(s)**’ carries a lot of interpretive baggage. It is not my intention here to unpack the full range of its possible meanings such as — word, attitude, breath, mind, heart, demon or angel, that which is non-material, etc. I have done that elsewhere both in *They Never Told Me This in Church!* and in my articles on death on this website. Obviously, each time the word **spirit(s)** appears its local meaning must be determined by its context.

the mid 30's AD — at most, a few short years after their official murder of Jesus of Nazareth.

We may be certain therefore, that most of the **Sanhedrin** and other Jewish leaders who **gnashed at Stephen with their teeth** and **who cried out with a loud voice** and **covered their ears, and rushed together against him with one accord**, ***had been the very same ones who had falsely condemned Jesus to death no more than a couple of years previously!***

Let this fact sink in: Most, if not all, of the Jewish leaders who rushed upon Stephen with their killing stones would have been the very same 'dignitaries' who had condemned our blessed Saviour to execution under **Pontius Pilate**. And now, amongst other serious charges, Stephen holds them to account for having rejected God's **Righteous One** (v. 52).

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

Stephen's murder at the hands of the **Jewish Council of the Sanhedrin** is a case of *deja vu!* It's been said that those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it, so the **Sanhedrin** find themselves on the same treadmill at Stephen's defence. **Groundhog Day!**

Recall how at Jesus' momentous trial when the **Sanhedrin's false witnesses** failed to secure the needed agreement to implicate him in a crime worthy of death, that the High Priest then said to Jesus, **"I put you under oath before the Living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God"** (Matt. 26: 63). Jesus' inspired reply was to quote the first part of the famous vision from the prophet **Daniel** ...

"I tell you, From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26: 64; Dan 7: 13-14) ...

At this audacious claim to be the very celestial figure whom **Daniel's** vision anticipated as **the Son of Man**, we read that, **Then the High Priest tore his clothes and said, "He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You — ie., the entire **Council of the Sanhedrin** — have now heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?" They answered , 'He deserves death.'** (Matt. 26: 65-66).

How significant. The very same **Court** now rejects Stephen's testimony when he says he can see **"the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"** (Acts 7:56)! Thus, Stephen effectively reverses their previous judgement upon Jesus who claimed to be the fulfilment of **the Son of Man** vision. The authorities had been unable to stop the persistent testimony of the first Christian eyewitnesses that God had reversed their verdict by raising His Son from the dead. So much for eliminating all talk of Jesus being God's right hand man!

Note: Stephen sees this vision of the exalted Christ **before** they drag him out for stoning. Not a single stone has been hurled yet. He is not concussed. All of his faculties are present and highly alert. The man who had been personally chosen by the apostles of Christ because he was **of good reputation, full of the holy Spirit and wisdom**, and a man **full of**

faith and power, who did great wonders and signs among the people, has a crystal clear vision; and **Stephen sees two distinct persons in heaven.**

He sees “the God” — the Greek text uses the definite article which is used of God the Father exclusively and approximately 1,325 times in the New Testament (NT) — and he sees the Son of Man. Let the historical *gravitas* of this ‘Stephen moment’ truly sink in!

JESUS’ FAVOURITE TITLE

Jesus loved to call himself “the Son of Man”. It was his favourite self-reference. (²) But he did not pluck his favourite self-description out of thin air. It is a term rich in OT connotations. It is a term from the OT to reference a true, genuine, human being — definitely NEVER used of, or by, the Almighty God for Himself. In fact, it is a term which contrasts One Who is NOT God from the One Who is the true God! (³)

Apart from the lips of Jesus, and apart from the Gospel accounts, there are, for sure, only two other places in the NT where Jesus is called the Son of Man (here in Acts 7: 56 and in Revelation 1: 13). They both occur after Jesus had been raised from the dead, and they both testify that there is presently a glorified man in heaven at God’s right hand. .

Thus there are at least two reasons why Stephen calls the resurrected and now glorified Jesus, the Son of Man:-

Firstly, Stephen’s dying testimony that Jesus is the Son of Man affirms that Jesus is a real human being — not God.

Remember when the resurrected Jesus told his confused disciples that he is “not a spirit” for, he said, “a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Lk. 24: 39)? Jesus was impressing upon the disciples his very real humanity before ascending into heaven. He is a glorified human being with a physical body, albeit, a now immortalised body. The Bible knows only that kind of Jesus who has now entered heaven.

Putting that in the negative: Jesus did not enter heaven as a non-material “spirit being”. Stephen saw the same flesh and bones Jesus whom the disciples had seen taken up into heaven just a few short years earlier. Stephen saw a glorified “flesh and bones” Man — a real human being, a physical man **at the right hand of God.**

He sees a glorified Jesus who has been immortalised and who will never be subject to death again. He sees the same human being who could be physically touched by his disciples after the resurrection, who walked on the seashore, who started a fire to cook some fish on, and

² The technical term for referring to one’s self in the third person is **illeism**. When Jesus called himself the Son of man 113 times in the NT, it’s clear he loved applying this Messianic “code” to describe himself as God’s future glorified human king destined in God’s plan to rule in the coming Kingdom of God, as predicted in Daniel 7.

³ E.G., Numbers 23:19; Job 25: 6; Ps. 8: 4; 80:17; 144:3 Is 51:12; Jer 49:18, 33; Ezekiel 2:1,3,6,8; 3:1, etc. Observe that in all of these references the term son of man compares and contrasts the polar extremes between mortal humanity and the Eternal, uncreated God of heaven!

who ate some fish in front of those awe-struck disciples in Galilee ([John 21:1ff](#)).

This fact ought to impress on us just what a high value the Almighty God places upon humanity, for Jesus' destiny to receive and rule in the kingdom on behalf of his God is also our destiny in union with him ([Dan. 7: 27](#))! (⁴)

In effect Stephen announced to the **Council of the Sanhedrin** that the promised descendant of David had already come and gone into heaven right in front of their very eyes, but they had ignored him, missed him, even killed him, as an imposter!

Secondly, Stephen affirms that Jesus is Israel's promised human Lord Messiah.

Stephen sees **the Son of Man** as the highly empowered human being through whom God will bring all of His promised purposes for mankind to ultimate fruition. Jesus now has been given universal 'lordship' at God's right hand with all the operational prerogatives of God ... **"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me"** ([Matt. 28:18](#)).

This is not an unforeseen development. It had been announced in the key prophetic Messianic [Psalm 110](#) originally addressed to king David: **The LORD says to my lord, 'Sit at My right hand until I make your enemies your footstool'** (v.1)..

Notice the two 'Lords': **The LORD** ([Yahweh](#), or [Adonai](#) and never used of a mortal man or any other creature under heaven) and David's **lord** ([adoni](#) — which in all of its 195 OT occurrences *never* refers to the Deity, but always to a human superior such as a husband, a master, a king, and also occasionally to an angelic superior).

Here, in the spirit of prophecy, the first **LORD** addresses a still future descendant of David who will sit as **lord** over the kingdom of God: **"Sit at My right hand until I make your enemies your footstool."** On the [Day of Pentecost](#) in his first sermon the apostle **Peter** preached that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God had made his promise good:

"This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself:

'The LORD said to my lord, Sit at my right hand ...'

"Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ " ([Acts 2: 33-36](#)).

Note well how, just like Stephen, **Peter** sees two distinct persons in heaven ... **The LORD God** who raised '**this Jesus**' to be '**Lord and Christ**' by seating him at His right hand of power.

⁴ Contrary to popular ideas, [Enoch](#) and [Elijah](#) were never taken alive into heaven! See [They Never Told Me This in Church!](#)

What a stupendous claim! God's complete authority is invested in **that man**. No wonder, a couple of years later, the **Sanhedrin** again buckled big time under the weight of their own heinous crime for officially rejecting **that man**: **They were cut to the heart and gnashed their teeth** at Stephen and bundled him out for stoning for his outrageous claim!

However, there is a further related thought that is worth considering before we answer our initial question about Jesus being God because he receives Stephen's spirit at death.

STEPHEN SAW THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS!

No less a commentator than **C. K. Barrett** suggests that this vision was for Stephen **"a glimpse of the Parousia"**. ^(5) I think **Barrett** is spot on, for **"the Son of Man"** terminology is very often found in the Gospels when the triumphant return of Christ is anticipated. ^(6)

Stephen's dying faith was the very same faith that Jesus himself had died with; **who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and has now sat down at the right hand of God (Heb. 12: 2)**. Jesus died believing God his Father would **give him the dominion and glory and a kingdom ... which shall never be destroyed (Dan. 7: 13-14)**. He had often encouraged himself by meditating on **Daniel's "Son of Man"** vision, for in that vision he saw himself as the triumphant, glorified **Son of Man** who would receive the Kingdom of God on behalf of all God's people. That prophetic **Son of Man** vision sustained Jesus in both life and in death.

In his dying breath then, Stephen was claiming to see the *still future* triumphant **Second Coming of Jesus on the clouds of heaven**. He died in faith fully expecting that when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to earth at the end of this present wicked age, that **the Son of Man** would raise him up, along with all the saints of God to "eternal life". Stephen died with the eyes of faith fixed upon the coming glory of Messiah's **Parousia**!

JUST AS JESUS HAD PREDICTED!

We now arrive at our core question: How can Jesus NOT be God if he is the one who is able to answer Stephen's prayer; **"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"**?

To ask the question is to either not notice, or to forget, or to ignore, Jesus' own repeated statements that he would do this as God's fully authorised Messiah, i.e., as **the Son of Man**:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in himself, and has given him authority to execute judgement also, because he is the Son of Man" (John 5: 25-26).

⁵ As quoted in *ACTS: Understanding the Bible Commentary Series* by **David J. Williams**, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1990, p146

⁶ A few examples include **Matthew 13:41; 16:27-28; 19:28; 24: 27,30,37,39,44; 25: 13, 31; 26:64; Mark 8:38; 13:26**, etc.

It is God Who has granted and Who has given authority to Jesus, to raise the dead and to judge mankind precisely because he is the Son of Man! And again Jesus said ...

“Labour for the food which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set his seal on him ... Most assuredly, I say to you ... Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:27, 53-54).

Jesus himself teaches that he is the **Son of Man** whom God has **sealed**, fully authorised, and empowered, to exercise the prerogative of raising the dead at the Last Day. **Is this not just another way of saying that under God’s administration the Son of Man holds the destiny of every human being — our “spirits” — in his hand?**

Indeed, for God **now commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom He has ordained**. He has given assurance of this to all, by raising him from the dead (Acts 17: 30-31).

Almighty God is going to judge the world by His human agent and representative — **the man whom He has ordained**. The Lord Jesus is a real human being exercising all of his delegated powers as God’s right hand man. This agrees with Jesus’ own testimony after being elevated to heaven: “**I am he who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. And I have the keys of Hades and of death**” (Rev. 1: 18). Jesus holds the eternal destiny of all peoples’ “spirits” in his hand.

In his last dying moments, when Stephen **sees Jesus, the Son of Man standing at God’s right hand** and prays, “**Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!**”, he is dying with the conviction that Jesus is the Christ of God, that he is coming to judge all men (including the Jews who were right then rejecting Stephen’s testimony about Jesus) and that he possesses all of God’s authority to raise the dead and to determine their status in the Kingdom of God ... whether they enter with joy or are excluded with anguish and gnashing of teeth in bitterness of soul.

STEPHEN SAW THE SON OF MAN STANDING!

On that point, the careful reader will have observed that in his vision Stephen sees **Jesus, the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God**. Why was Jesus standing? After all, the prophecy was that the Messiah would be invited to **sit at the right hand of God** (Ps. 110:1). After Jesus’ resurrection the NT again and again states that Jesus now **sits at God’s right hand** (e.g. Eph. 1:20; Col. 3: 1; Heb. 1: 3; 1 Pet. 3: 22; etc.). When Stephen was being martyred, why does he say he sees **Jesus, the Son of Man standing**?

I think this is another indication that Stephen is actually seeing a vision of the future **Parousia**, the Day when **the Son of Man** returns in the glorious power of God and of the holy angels riding on the clouds of heaven to judge the nations. Standing is the posture of readiness to act. Sitting is a posture of rest.

The dying Stephen sees Jesus standing, ready to act in judgement upon the nation of rebellious Israel which was committing a most heinous murder of Stephen, one of her finest sons. Nor is it beyond the realms of probability that every time one of his own precious sheep is being tormented and martyred that Jesus stands ready to return in judgement on their behalf at his *Parousia*. He is not indifferent to the suffering of his body, the church. How can love sit when the beloved is suffering?

IN SUM

“Surely Stephen’s dying prayer to Jesus to receive his spirit proves that Jesus is God?”

No, we actually conclude that Stephen’s prayer to Jesus that he receive his spirit does NOT prove Stephen believed Jesus was God. Stephen saw *two persons* in heaven. He saw “*the Son of Man*” at God’s right hand. Stephen saw Almighty God and the man whom that God had raised to glory from the dead!

Stephen saw a glorified man empowered by God to exercise all the prerogatives of God — a man with all of God’s delegated authority for determining the destiny of every single man and woman for eternity — for he certainly will return to raise the dead and judge all mankind.

A FINAL THOUGHT ON THE DRAMA OF THE GREEK VERBS IN STEPHEN’S MARTYRDOM

When the *Sanhedrin* heard what seemed to them an outrageous claim — that *Jesus, the Son of Man* whom they had put to death, was in fact now at God’s right hand in heaven in fulfilment of the Messianic prophecies — they acted in murderous rage.

Stephen was dragged out of the city. *Luke* the writer of the *Book of Acts* narrates the final dramatic climax with a remarkable economy of words. That is to say, the imperfect tense of the Greek verbs indicates that Stephen *was calling again and again on the Lord Jesus to receive his spirit* as they *kept on pelting him with stones*— until he fell to his knees and then to the ground, dead. What an example of the one who has been called “the First Christian martyr” who died, like his Lord, also praying for forgiveness for his murderers!

When our time comes to draw our last breath, may the eyes of our faith be inspired by Stephen’s vision. May we too be found *gazing intently into heaven* from whence *the Son of Man* shall come again. For, friend, that Day is certainly hastening when *the sun shall be darkened, and the moon will not give its light: when the stars of heaven will fall, and the powers of heaven will be shaken, and all will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory ...* (Mark 13: 24-26).

“ Lord Jesus, receive my spirit! Remember me when you come in your kingdom!” Amen.

