

10.24

Stoning: A Form of Capital Punishment

Acts 7 records the stoning of Stephen, who is regarded as the first Christian martyr. The event is presented as one in keeping with judicial sentences stipulated in the Old Testament.

Stoning was a form of capital punishment. It consisted of pelting a human with rocks in a manner that would cause the person's eventual death. Hypothetically, it could be viewed as a merciful form of execution, since one or two large rocks could bring a quick demise. Little is known, however, of how the punishment was enacted in practice.

According to the Old Testament, most of the offenses punished by stoning were crimes against the sovereignty of God. These included blasphemy (Lev. 24:15–16; cf. 1 Kings 21:13; Acts 7:1–58), incitement to worship other gods (Deut. 13:6–10), worship of other gods (Deut. 17:2–7), worship of Molech by child sacrifice (Lev. 20:2–5), divination by mediums (Lev. 20:27), violation of the Sabbath (Num. 15:32–36), and violation of the taboo of devoted objects (Josh. 7:25). Stoning is also specified in cases of adultery (Deut. 22:21, 24; cf. John 8:3–7), filial insubordination (Deut. 21:18–21), and a goring ox who kills a person (Exod. 21:28–29).

A description of the procedure in judicial stoning may be gleaned from various references. The stoning usually took place outside the

city (Lev. 24:14; Num. 15:35; Deut. 17:5; 22:24; 1 Kings 21:13; but cf. Deut. 22:21). The criminal was probably stripped (Ezek. 16:39). The witnesses were the first to cast stones, followed by the entire community (Deut. 13:9–10; 17:7; cf. John 8:7). Accounts of nonjudicial stoning are recorded in 1 Kings 12:18; 2 Chronicles 24:21.

The custom continued into New Testament times, but there is no sure evidence that it was practiced as an official legal procedure. In addition to the account of the stoning of Stephen, the book of Acts reports that Paul was subjected to a stoning, which he survived—though he had been left for dead (14:19); Paul mentions the latter incident himself in 2 Corinthians 11:25. In the cases of both Paul and Stephen, however, the stoning is described as more of a spontaneous mob action than the result of a judicial process.

John 8:3–11 tells of an occasion when Jesus is asked whether the commandment of Moses requiring the stoning of an adulterous woman should be carried out. He replies, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (8:7). The posing of the question in itself indicates that such a sentence was not automatic: indeed, Jesus’s interlocutors do not actually propose that the woman should be stoned; rather they seem to be presenting him with a test case regarding legal interpretation, to determine whether he favors strict applications.