Hugo Méndez: The Cult of Stephen in Jerusalem. Inventing a Patron Martyr. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press 2022 (Oxford Early Christian Studies). XIV, 175 p., 2 maps. £ 76.00/$ 95.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-284699-0.

As related in the near contemporary *Revelatio sancti Stephani*, in December 415 the discovery of the bones of Saint Stephen in a field on the outskirts of Jerusalem sent ripples of excitement throughout Christian communities around the Mediterranean rim.[1] Even though Stephen was well known as the first martyr in the Christian tradition (as recounted in Acts 6:8–8:2), there were no active cults devoted to him until the early fifth century. The dissemination of these newly discovered relics from the Holy Land to Minorca and North Africa, and later to Rome, Constantinople, and elsewhere, inspired a veritable industry of devotional writings about him in Greek and Latin, including sermons for the celebration of his feast day and accounts of miracles that took place at new sanctuaries dedicated to him.[2] The arrival of Stephen's relics on the island of Minorca in 417 allegedly heralded the mass conversion of the island's Jewish population and the destruction of their synagogue.[3] Augustine was a particularly vocal supporter of his cult in the Latin tradition. In addition to eleven sermons preached about the protomartyr, the bishop of Hippo Regius also recorded several miracles of healing attributed to him both in his hometown and throughout the region.[4] So numerous were these manifestations of the saint's *virtus* that it would "fill many volumes" to account for them all.[5] After centuries of dormancy, the protomartyr emerged

1 For editions of the two versions of this text and related documents, see S. Vanderlinden: *Revelatio Sancti Stephani* (BHL 7850–6). In: REByz 4, 1946, pp. 178–217.

2 F. Bovon: The Dossier on Stephen, the First Martyr. In: HThR 96, 2003, pp. 279–315 provides a catalogue of the voluminous evidence. On Rome in particular, see M. Costambeys/C. Leyser: To Be the Neighbour of St Stephen. Patronage, Martyr Cult, and Roman Monasteries, *c.* 600–*c.* 900. In: K. Cooper/J. Hillner (eds.): Religion, Dynasty, and Patronage in Early Christian Rome, 300–900. Cambridge et al. 2007, pp. 262–287.

3 E. D. Hunt: St. Stephen in Minorca. An Episode in Jewish-Christian Relations in the Early 5th Century A.D. In: JThS 33, 1982, pp. 106–123; and Severus of Minorca: Letter on the Conversion of the Jews. Edited and translated by S. Bradbury. Oxford 1996 (Oxford Early Christian Texts).

4 Aug. serm. 314–324.

5 Aug. civ. 22.8.

as a powerful presence in Christian communities with access to his newly discovered relics.

While scholars have spent much effort tracing the influence of Stephen's relics on Christian devotional practices in the late antique Mediterranean world, they have largely ignored the epicenter of this seismic phenomenon: the promotion of the cult of the protomartyr in early fifth-century Jerusalem. Over the course of six chapters, Hugo Méndez's book examines "the impact of the find on Jerusalem itself – the city that actually produced the relics and coordinated their distribution" (pp. 1–2). The introduction to the book (pp. 1–17) sets the scene. The destruction of the city of Jerusalem during the First Roman-Jewish War (66–70 CE) and Third Roman-Jewish War (132–135 CE) was near total. Nothing is known about Christian cultic sites in the city before the early fourth century, when Emperor Constantine constructed shrines associated with the ministry of Christ and biblical figures like Lazarus. Even so, the city lacked a local martyr cult comparable to those fostered in Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria. The rising popularity of martyr veneration throughout the fourth century inspired Bishop John II (387–417) and his successor Julian (422–458) to lay claim to the legacy of the protomartyr as a native son of their city. The book focuses narrowly on the cult of Stephen in Jerusalem between 350 and 500 with attention to literary, liturgical, and archaeological evidence. Can we understand the sudden rise of Stephen's veneration in this period as part of a local, episcopal project to heighten the prestige of Jerusalem through its unique association with the first martyr of the faith?

While the Acts of the Apostles stressed Stephen's association with Jerusalem, both as the site of his ministry and as the place of his martyrdom and burial, the earliest community to venerate him was not his hometown. As Chapter 1 ("The Prestige of Stephen," pp. 18–30) shows, commemoration of the protomartyr first appeared in the *Brevarium Syriacum* (also known as the *Syriac Martyrology*), a universal martyrology written in Syriac and compiled from multiple sources in 411. The section featuring Stephen derived from an Arian calendar written in Greek around 360 that originated in or around Nicomedia. Listed first among the confessors of the west, the commemoration of the protomartyr took place on December 26, followed by a cluster of other biblical figures on the following days: John and James on December 27; and Paul and Peter on December 28. Sermons on Stephen delivered by Gregory of Nyssa in 386 alluded to an identical cluster of feast days observed

in Cappadocia, as did a homily preached by Asterius of Amasea. When did the tradition of Stephen's feast day originate? Because the date of his death was unknown, like that of many saints of the apostolic age, it made sense to fix it on the day after Christmas, which was the first day of the Christian liturgical calendar. The ordering principle was priority of martyrdom; Stephen preceded the other apostles on the calendar because he was the first to die. From its undermined place of origin, this cluster of memorial feasts spread rapidly through Asia Minor and Syria before the end of the fourth century. According to Méndez, this regional efflorescence of interest in Stephen set the stage for his appropriation by the church of Jerusalem.

As Chapter 2 ("The Early Cult," pp. 30–58) shows, details in the *Revelatio Sancti Stephani* alluded to aspects of the protomartyr's cult that were already in place when his body was discovered in 415. The first was his association with the church of Holy Sion in Jerusalem. No church stood on Sion hill in the southwestern quadrant of the city until the mid-fourth century. Known as 'the church of the Apostles,' this shrine was analogous to similar contemporary buildings in Rome and Constantinople that commemorated the earliest disciples of Christ. By the end of the fourth century, however, locals identified this church as the 'house' frequented by the apostles in the first chapters of Acts of the Apostles. It also came to be known as the place where Stephen had been ordained archdeacon (Acts 6:2–7), but it housed no relics of the protomartyr. The second was the report in the *Revelatio* that the locals celebrated the memory of the protomartyr at the church of Holy Sion on 26 December. While later witnesses attested to this feast day on December 27, Méndez attributes this to Bishop Juvenal's introduction of the feast of Christmas into the liturgical calendar in the mid-fifth century, which bumped the established feasts back by a day. The discovery of Stephen's bones in 415 was thus not the root cause of devotion to the saint in the early fifth century, but rather yet another expression of a preexisting tradition.

Chapter 3 ("A Celestial Patron," pp. 59–76) examines how the Christian community in Jerusalem laid claim to Stephen as a local martyr through whose fame they could articulate civic pride and civic identity. The key piece of evidence for this chapter is a unique encomium for the protomartyr composed sometime after 439 by a presbyter of the city named Hesychius. After a survey of the ways in which early Christian communities around the Mediterranean fostered the cults of local martyrs to promote their civil identities in a climate of fierce rivalries, Méndez turns to the evidence of Hesychius'

encomium. He argues that this homily accomplished two tasks. First, it mobilized Stephen as a figure whose unique glory as the first martyr amplified the glory of Jerusalem itself. Throughout the encomium, Hesychius emphasized the city's unique prestige by referring to the saint as a fellow citizen, relative, and descendent of Jerusalem's Christian community. Second, Hesychius cast Stephen as an exemplary refuter of local Jews and as a victim of Jewish violence. In doing so, Méndez argues, Hesychius deployed his homily "to support the myth of Christian Jerusalem – a myth premised on a divine rejection and punishment of Jews" (p. 74). Given the paucity of contextual evidence for this encomium, it would have been useful for the reader to learn how Hesychius' anti-Jewish strategies compared to those of other contemporary prelates who wrote sermons about Stephen, including Gregory of Nyssa, Asterius of Amasea, John Chrysostom, and Augustine.

Chapter 4 ("The Bones," pp. 77–99) focuses on the *inventio* of Stephen's remains as related in the *Revelatio sancti Stephani*, a first-person narrative allegedly written by Lucian, the village priest responsible for the discovery of his body. Written in the manner of an encyclical letter addressed to all the holy churches throughout the world, this account circulated in the west in a Latin translation made by a Spanish priest named Avitus, who lived in Jerusalem (as explained in the *Epistula Aviti* that prefaced the *Revelatio* from its earliest transmission).[6] A longer version in Greek was addressed specifically to a bishop named Hymenius. The discovery of Stephen's bones allegedly brought much-needed relief at a moment of global crisis when a worldwide drought threatened to bring an end to the human race. Leading up to the unearthing of the saint, Lucian received three visions of Gamaliel, one of Paul's Jewish teachers (see Acts 22:3; not "Acts 2:23," a rare typo on p. 85), who claimed to have received Christian baptism and revealed the location of the tomb he shared with Stephen and two righteous Jewish leaders from the apostolic age: Nicodemus and Abibas. Lucian summoned Bishop John to attend the opening of the burial site. In a reversal of the protomartyr's expulsion from the city as recorded in Acts, his remains were returned to Jerusalem, which put an end to the devastating drought and bestowed great prestige both upon Bishop John as the mediator of the saint's power and on the church of Holy Sion, where his relics were installed. In contrast, the *Revelatio* disparaged the Jewish community in Jerusalem for leaving Stephan's body

6 The text has been edited by Vanderlinden (note 1), pp. 188–189.

exposed to wild beasts after his martyrdom and forcing Gamaliel to bury him in secret, thus depriving the city of his protective *potentia* for hundreds of years.

Local devotional responses to the discovery of Stephen's relics took two forms. First, as Chapter 5 ("More Numerous Feasts," pp. 100–128) shows, there was an amplification of liturgical commemoration for the protomartyr "that sought to project in still stronger terms the unique relationship between Stephen and Jerusalem in order to enhance the prestige of the latter" (p. 100). This was expressed in several flourishes to the city's ritual calendar, namely, the addition of two new celebrations for Stephen on the second day of the Epiphany octave (7 January) and on the third day of the Paschal octave (Bright Tuesday). Like the December feast day, which placed Stephen at the beginning of the Christian calendar immediately following Christmas owing to his preeminent place in history as the first martyr, the start of Epiphany held a similar significance as the commencement of Jerusalem's liturgical year. The memorial added during the Paschal octave elevated Stephen's importance even further by including him in the week of celebrations for Christ's resurrection. The so-called *Armenian Lectionary*, which preserved evidence of ritual practice in Jerusalem in the later fifth century, detailed the psalms and lessons employed in the three feasts of Stephen. Perhaps unsurprisingly, psalms chosen for the occasion (for example, Psalms 5 and 20 LXX) permitted wordplay on the protomartyr's name, which meant "crown." Likewise, Gospel readings from Acts 6:8–8:2 and John 12:24–26 made explicit the comparison between the suffering and death of Jesus and Stephen.

The final chapter ("A Very Great Sanctuary," pp. 129–151) examines the constructions of shrines to Stephen in and around Jerusalem in the early fifth century. When the protomartyr's relics arrived in the city after their discovery in 415, they were placed in the church of Holy Sion. We learn from Gerontius' *Life of Melania* that two new *martyria* also housed his remains. Around 431 or 432, Melania the Younger completed the construction of a monastery for women on the Mount of Olives. This complex included an oratory that housed the relics of many martyrs, including Stephen's, which Méndez presumes were a gift bestowed to the holy matron by Bishop Juvenal. Three years later, some of these relics were translated to the oratory of a newly built monastery for men also located on the Mount of Olives. Around that same time, during the 430s, Bishop Juvenal sponsored the con-

struction of a massive basilica church dedicated to Stephen north of the city at the site of his death. Dedicated on 15 May 439, Juvenal found financial support in this enterprise from Empress Eudocia, who made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 438, and then returned in 443 and stayed until her death in 460. She was buried in a tomb built twenty paces away from the new basilica. Méndez argues persuasively that the "earlier *inventio* of Stephen's relics, scripted by local church authorities, stands directly behind the kind of Jerusalem-oriented Stephen piety manifest in the lives of Melania and Eudocia" (p. 151). This marked the high point of his cult, however. As the brief conclusion to the book ("Epilogue," pp. 152–154) relates, the rapid rise in Marian devotion in the wake of the Council of Ephesus in 431 stood in direct competition with Stephen's cult in Jerusalem and eventually eclipsed it altogether.

This study offers a thorough examination of the development of the cult of Stephen the protomartyr in late antique Jerusalem. The narrow focus of the inquiry begs some questions about the relationship between devotion to Stephen in his hometown and the spread of his cult in the western Mediterranean. Méndez mentions several times that church leadership in Jerusalem made claims on the saint that were both "assertive" (p. 78) and "local" (p. 100), but never addresses to what extent these claims were exclusive or how they developed within the context of the saint's burgeoning cult in other regions, particularly North Africa, where parallel initiatives to foster devotion to Stephen were wildly successful. Did the bishop of Jerusalem coordinate the distribution of relics to places outside of Jerusalem and what did this mean for the city's exclusive claim on Stephen's patronage? Did western authors recognize the authority of Jerusalem and its bishops in relation to the saint's *potentia*? External comparisons seem especially pertinent to the situation in Jerusalem when one considers the instrumentality of Stephen's relics in the forced conversion of the Jews of Minorca. While Méndez's short book treats the local cult of Stephen in admirable detail, it will be read most profitably alongside other studies that provide the broader context for the spread of Stephen's cult in the fifth-century Mediterranean world.

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