"Dr. John Pilch's *Stephen* is not a 'deacon'—ancient or modern—but rather a Mediterranean collectivist, a Greek-speaking Hellenist-Judean honored by provoking his antagonists to violence, a minister who cares for the neglected widows among his people, and a holy man who experiences altered states of consciousness. Pilch's cultural-anthropological portrait is new and distinctive. It will tease the imagination and challenge readers to re-think the one whose terrible death changed the life of the Apostle Paul forever."

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"This book is an engaging and lucid introduction to the figure of Stephen as he is portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles. A pioneer in the development of cultural anthropological approaches to the New Testament, John Pilch places Stephen the Hellenist within the context of ancient Mediterranean collectivist society. Pilch brings his particular expertise in the study of alternate states of consciousness to bear on Stephen and his companions as holy persons who have contact with the spirit realm. Readers will come away from the book with an understanding of Stephen more grounded within his particular age and culture than many other treatments of this figure."

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"John Pilch's discussion of Stephen is by no means just another book on him. Like a householder who brings forth old and new from his store, Pilch both presents old Christian materials about Stephen and offers new cultural perspectives to interpret Luke's narrative. The result is an informed, enlightened, and innovative treatment of Stephen. Like all of Pilch's writings, this book is an accessible study, a rewarding read, and an inventive exploration. The cultural lenses for interpretation have been clearly and carefully handled. 'Rich' and 'rewarding' best describe this book."

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Department of Theology
University of Notre Dame

"*Stephen* is a provocative look at the character in the Acts of the Apostles which integrates historical, grammatical, and social scientific sources to give us a fresh look at the Hellenistic martyr, which informs, corrects, and challenges the 'popular' and 'received' views. This is mandatory reading for those who wish to move beyond anachronistic and ethnocentric readings of the texts and contexts concerning Stephen."

—*Bishop F. Josephus Johnson, II*
Presiding Bishop of the Beth-El Fellowship
of Visionary Churches
Senior Pastor of The House of the Lord
Akron, Ohio

Paul's Social Network: Brothers and Sisters in Faith
Bruce J. Malina, Series Editor

Stephen

Paul and the Hellenist Israelites

John J. Pilch

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PREFACE

Human beings are embedded in a set of social relations. A social network is one way of conceiving that set of social relations in terms of a number of persons connected to one another by varying degrees of relatedness. In the early Jesus group documents featuring Paul and coworkers, it takes little effort to envision the apostle's collection of friends and friends of friends that is the Pauline network.

This set of brief books consists of a description of some of the significant persons who constituted the Pauline network. For Christians of the Western tradition, these persons are significant ancestors in faith. While each of them is worth knowing by themselves, it is largely because of their standing within that web of social relations woven about and around Paul that they are of lasting interest. Through this series we hope to come to know those persons in ways befitting their first-century Mediterranean culture.

Bruce J. Malina
Creighton University
Series Editor

INTRODUCTION

Who Is Stephen?

This is not as easy a question to answer as might first appear. Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 403; *Haeres*. xx.4) identified him as one of the seventy disciples chosen by Jesus (Luke 10:1), but this is entirely unreliable. He is mentioned only three times in the New Testament, all in the Acts of the Apostles. Two chapters present essentially all we know about him (Acts 6:1–8:3). He was a Hellenist, a key figure in a group of seven Hellenists. In general, Hellenists were Israelites enculturated in Greek values, language, and customs. Paul called such Israelite Hellenists "Greeks" (for example: Rom 3:9; 1 Cor 1:22-24). Most lived outside of Israel, but some returned to live there. The entire country and even Jerusalem in this period was under unavoidable Hellenist influence. Some Hellenists in Jerusalem were offended by Stephen's preaching. They persuaded others to testify falsely against him and his message. They managed to get him arrested and presented to the Sanhedrin for judgment. Here Stephen pleaded his case eloquently, but those who heard him were enraged by his speech and murdered him in a fit of establishment violence. Paul was an approving witness to the murder. Though it is difficult to date Stephen's death, the Western

Church celebrates it on December 26th. The reasoning behind this date is that since the commemoration of Jesus' birth on earth was assigned to December 25th, it is only fitting that the birth of Stephen in heaven as the first believer/martyr should be celebrated on the day after Jesus' birth.

Apart from this longer account there are two other brief references to Stephen in Acts. One reports that some fellow Hellenists who had to flee Jerusalem after Stephen's death traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch (Syria), proclaiming the gospel only to fellow Judeans there (Acts 11:19). These Judean audiences (the opposite of Greek Israelites) were quite likely very minimally acculturated to Hellenism, if at all. In other words, they did their best to avoid "contamination" by Hellenism and strove to remain "pure" in their observance of Judean traditions. They may even have continued to use the Aramaic language, at least in their own meeting houses (synagogues). Other Hellenists from Cyprus and Cyrene (North Africa) proclaimed the word to fellow Hellenists as well as to Judeans (Acts 11:19) about the Lord Jesus. Their preaching was quite successful. Many people in these Greek and Judean audiences believed! When word of this success reached Jerusalem, the community through its leaders sent Barnabas to Antioch to encourage and strengthen the faith of these new believers. He also succeeded in bringing still others into the fold. Barnabas traveled further to Tarsus to find Paul (now a believer in Jesus Messiah) and brought him to Antioch where both taught large numbers of people. Obviously by this time Paul had exchanged his conservative Judean orientation for the Hellenist approach to the Israelite tradition. Hellenists thus were the first ones to proclaim to Israelite Greeks and Judeans with a good measure of success.

The second mention of Stephen in Acts occurs in a speech crafted by Luke for Paul as he defended himself in Jerusalem before a mob stirred to anger by Paul's opponents. In this speech, Paul recounts to the mob an ASC experience that he had while praying in the temple (Acts 22:17). In the trance, the Lord Jesus advises Paul to flee Jerusalem quickly "because they will not

accept your testimony about me." Jesus warns Paul that his Hellenistic understanding of the Israelite tradition and Jesus' divinely appointed place in it will not be welcomed by Judeans in Jerusalem. Paul's response to the Lord includes this statement: "And when the blood of Stephen thy witness was shed, I also was standing by and approving . . ." (Acts 22:20). Jesus replies: "Depart; for I will send you far away to the Gentiles [non-Israelites]" (Acts 22:21).[1] This reference to Paul's role in Stephen's murder testifies to the dramatic change in understanding and viewpoint that Paul underwent after Stephen's death. Because of this change, Paul is aware that he will be less successful among fellow Judeans. They no longer trust Paul nor will they accept his new perspective when they remember full well his earlier zeal for the "untainted" Israelite tradition. For this reason, the risen Jesus sends Paul to Hellenists, fellow Israelites fully acculturated to Hellenistic culture.

The Nature of Acts of the Apostles

Given this amount of information, why is the question: "Who is Stephen?" not easy to answer? The reason has to do in part with the reliability of Luke. Scholars insist that Acts of the Apostles should be classified as a historical monograph, or hagiographical history, or kerygmatic history.[2] History should remain as part of the description of this work. This is a fair request provided the modern reader realizes that the sharp distinction between fact and fiction we expect from history does not reach further back than the eighteenth century. Ancient historians such as Luke blurred that distinction. Their histories are interpreted reports rather than purely factual reports. For example, scholars recognize that the portrait of Paul presented by Luke in Acts is significantly different from the self-presentation of Paul in his authentic letters. As the Stegemanns have concluded: "In our view, the Lukan picture of Paul [in Acts] represents a literary fiction, and for the estimation of the social position of the

historical Paul, his own letters have priority. The historical Paul was a citizen of neither Rome nor Tarsus."[3] Can something similar be said concerning Luke's report about Stephen: is it nothing more than another Lukan literary fiction?

In an address to a general audience on January 10, 2007, Benedict XVI demonstrated a similar critical and scholarly based reading of the information about Stephen in Acts.[4] He notes that Stephen is the most representative of a group of seven companions, but he insists that these are not "deacons"—a word that never occurs in Acts! The office and function of "deacons" is a later historical development. Thus Pope Benedict's preference for the word "companions" to describe this group is culturally appropriate for a group of collectivistic persons in a collectivistic culture, a concept which we shall explain later in this book.

Benedict XVI also recognizes that the early believers in Jesus who lived in Jerusalem were comprised of two groups: Judeans (in Latin: "Hebrews"), from the land of Israel and "others of the Old Testament Jewish faith . . . from the Greek-speaking Diaspora" known as "Hellenists." This latter is the group to which Stephen and his companions belonged. Pope Benedict continued by noting that besides tending to charitable services, Stephen also evangelized his compatriots, the Hellenists. In Jesus' name, he presented a new interpretation of Moses and of God's law. He also declared that the cult of the temple was over. Thus the speech Stephen delivered in his defense reiterated what he had been sharing with any Israelite interested in learning more about Jesus even before he was hauled before the Sanhedrin.

Though he does not use the word, Benedict XVI describes the behavior typical of collectivistic persons such as were the ancient Israelites.[5] Collectivistic persons hold the group in higher esteem than the individual. The group and its survival are paramount for a collectivistic person. Thus "charitable services" to others in their ingroup are a much higher priority for persons in collectivistic societies than for persons in individualistic societies. Individualists prefer to relegate such charitable services to organizations dedicated to these activities, though they themselves may (or may not) contribute to the support of these organizations.

Benedict XVI concluded his remarks noting that Stephen's interpretation of Moses, God's law, and the temple cult "in Jesus' name" was viewed as blasphemy by his largely Judean audience. Stephen was stoned to death for his alleged blasphemy. The Pope then exhorted his contemporary audience to imitate Stephen's virtues.

Stephen's Death

A legend reports that when Stephen was led outside the city, the appropriate place for capital punishment, Mary the mother of Jesus followed at a distance. She stood on a nearby hill with John, to whose care Jesus had entrusted her. They both witnessed Stephen's death and observed how Paul looked after the cloaks of the executioners. Both were appalled that Paul showed no pity for an Israelite facing such a violent death. Mary prayed to God to strengthen this first martyr and to receive his soul. This legend, of course, derives from a time long after Stephen was martyred. Yet as we read such legends, it is well to remember a comment by the Dominican archaeologist, Father Jerome Murphy-O'Connor about "Gordon's Tomb," mistakenly but intentionally identified as the burial place of Jesus despite a total lack of evidence to support this claim: "in Jerusalem the prudence of reason has little chance against the certitude of piety."[6] It is fair to say that piety is the driving force behind legends such as this one about Stephen, which should be interpreted accordingly. Scholars consider this legend entirely unreliable.

As for stoning, the process is described in the Mishnah. This might not necessarily have been the process to which Stephen was subjected, since Mishnaic traditions were edited by Prince Judah in Palestine around AD 200. This text, however, gives some idea of how the process was executed in that period:

> The place of stoning was twice the height of a man. One of the witnesses knocked him down on his loins. If he turned over on his heart the witness turned him over again on his loins. If he straightway died that sufficed; but if not, the

> second [witness] took the stone and dropped it on his heart. If he straightway died, that sufficed; but if not, he was stoned by all Israel, for it is written, "The hand of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death and afterward the hand of all the people" (Deut 17:7). All that have been stoned must be hanged. So R. Eliezer. But the Sages say: None is hanged save the blasphemer and the idolater. (*M. Sanhedrin* 6.4)

Obviously, Stephen the alleged blasphemer was not left to "hang out and dry" after his death. Luke concluded his report by noting: "Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him" (Acts 8:2). Burial was important in order to preserve the body from mutilation, which in the Pharisaic belief system would hinder resurrection. Stephen received a proper burial. Yet Luke makes no mention of where in Jerusalem Stephen was killed or buried. Some traditions have identified St. Stephen's Gate in the Third Wall as the place of his death, but that is not very likely. Others have identified a place north of Damascus gate, which is more plausible, but certitude is still elusive.

As for Stephen's burial place, another legend fills in the gaps.[7] In AD 415, on a Friday, a priest named Lucian who lived in Caphargamala (about twenty miles from Jerusalem) had a dream in which an old man richly bedecked told him to alert Bishop John of Jerusalem that some bodies were buried in an unfitting place. He should rebury them in a more honorable location. Lucian asked who was speaking to him, and he identified himself as Gamaliel, Paul's teacher (see Acts 22:3). Gamaliel had been secretly baptized in his lifetime. After death, he was buried in this unfitting place along with Stephen and Gamaliel's nephew, Nicodemus, the same one who visited Jesus by night (see John 3). Nicodemus was later baptized by Peter and John. This so angered Nicodemus' fellow members of the Sanhedrin, they would have killed him except for the intervention of Gamaliel on his behalf. Instead they deposed him and beat him, leaving him to die. Gamaliel took him to his own home where

he died a few days later. He buried him in his family tomb at the feet of St. Stephen, whom Gamaliel had also buried after his murderers left his body for the beasts and birds. The fourth person in Gamaliel's tomb was his son, Abibas, who was baptized at the age of twenty. His wife Ethea and his other son, Selimus, did not seek baptism, so were buried elsewhere. With this the dream ended, and Lucian awoke.

He prayed to God to confirm the divine origin of his dream by sending it a second and third time. The following Friday, Gamaliel returned in Lucian's dream and asked why Lucian did not inform Bishop John. Lucian explained that he asked God to confirm his experience by sending the dream a second time. In this second dream, Gamaliel told Lucian what he would find in the tombs: red roses for Stephen the martyr; white roses for Gamaliel and Nicodemus; and the fourth tomb with saffron for Abibas who died a virgin. The third week, Gamaliel appeared in Lucian's dream quite irate. He scolded Lucian for the delay. But now Lucian was convinced the dream was of God.

The next day, Lucian informed Bishop John and the other bishops. Even before they began digging at the indicated location, the air was filled with such fragrance that Lucian thought he was in paradise. Immediately seventy-three people were healed, demons fled in terror, hemorrhages ceased, fevers subsided, and many other miracles took place. The legend also reports that a stone found in the tomb recorded Stephen's Hebrew name: *kelil*, which means "crown" or "wreath," and is translated into Greek as *stephanos*. The finding of these relics by Lucian is commemorated on September 15th.

Stephen's bones were then reburied at the Sion Church which until AD 335 had been the bishop's residence in Jerusalem. The origins of this church might reach back to AD 130, but if so, it was likely destroyed by Diocletian in AD 303. It was subsequently reconstructed as the erroneously presumed location of the Upper Room (= Cenacle) of the Apostles and named "The Upper Church of the Apostles." In the fifth century, the church was renamed as "Sion, Mother of all the Churches."[8]

Yet the bones did not rest here. Instead they began to travel far and wide. The reason for the wide ranging journeys of these now divided bones was the belief that bones of holy people were an avenue to power.[9] Thus royal, priestly, or monastic persons who controlled bones became highly desirable patrons. Such a patron was in a position to connect needy—usually poor—people with the saints whose bones they possessed. As one might expect, those who possessed the bones took pride in their holdings and competed with others similarly blessed. One such person was the wife of Emperor Theodosius II, Eudocia, who competed over relics with her friend, Melania, a saintly married woman. This is a complex relationship to unravel, but it seems that Eudocia visited Melania in Jerusalem and returned home in 439 bringing some of Stephen's bones from Palestine to Constantinople. Eventually she placed them in the church of Saint Lawrence there. This is commemorated on August 3rd in the Western church.

Subsequently, Eudocia built a basilica to St. Stephen in Palestine that was dedicated in June 460. Excavations in the late nineteenth century uncovered the complete plan of this church. A new basilica was dedicated in 1900 and forms part of the École Biblique et Archéologique Française founded in 1890 by French members of the Order of Preachers (the Dominicans). The church is located some two hundred meters north of the Damascus gate along Nablus road. In October 460, Empress Eudocia died and was buried in a tomb she erected for herself next to the basilica of St. Stephen. By the sixth century, this place where Stephen's relics were kept became confused with the place where he was stoned. The myth continued well into the Middle Ages.

As anyone familiar with ancient "history" might suspect, there is another report, this one from the ninth century by Theophanes Confessor, with a different version of the transfer of the right arm of Stephen to Constantinople.[10]

> Under the influence of the blessed Pulcheria, the pious Theodosius sent a rich donation to the archbishop of Jeru-

> salem for distribution to the needy, and also a golden cross studded with precious stones to be erected on Golgotha. In exchange for these gifts, the archbishop dispatched relics of the right arm of Stephen Protomartyr, in the care of St. Passarion. When this man had reached Chalcedon, in that very night the blessed Pulcheria saw St. Stephen in a vision saying to her: "Behold, your prayer has been heard and your desire has come to pass, for I have arrived in Chalcedon." And she arose taking her brother with her and went to greet the holy relics. Receiving them into the palace, she founded a splendid chapel for the holy Protomartyr, and in it she deposited the holy relics.

Pulcheria was the sister of Theodosius, who was young when he became emperor. To retain power, an emperor should have been victorious in battle, but Theodosius hadn't done that. Pulcheria was concerned about this, so she convinced her two sisters to join her in taking a vow of virginity. This precluded pretenders to Theodosius' throne from seeking to marry one of the sisters and usurp his power. But the vow bestowed great power on the women, for now they were of God, who would side with them in any battle their brother might undertake. Who would dare attack Theodosius? It was in this context of enhancing power that this legend concerning Pulcheria developed. Since she obtained a relic of St. Stephen and had it enshrined in Constantinople in AD 421, her power with God was fortified. Scholars differ as to which of these legends is authentic, but opinion favors Eudocia (in 439) rather than Pulcheria (in 421) as the one who brought Stephen's relics to Constantinople.

Parallels between Jesus and Stephen

Careful analysis of Luke's report about Stephen reveals interesting parallels with the trial and death of Jesus. Scholars have offered a variety of detailed reports, but here is a simplified schematic comparison that suits our purposes:

Event	Jesus	Stephen
Challenge opponents	Luke 20:1-7	Acts 6:9
Arrest	Luke 22:54	Acts 6:2
Trial before the Sanhedrin	Luke 22:66-71	Acts 6:12–15
False witnesses	not in Luke; Mark 14:56	Acts 6:13
Location of murder: outside the city	Luke 23:32	Acts 7:58
Martyr's death	Luke 23:32 (crucifixion)	Acts 7:58 (stoning)
Final words: "accept my spirit"	Luke 23:46	Acts 7:59
Forgive murderers	Luke 23:34	Acts 7:60
Son of Man saying	Luke 22:69	Acts 7:56
Immediate salvific effect	Luke 23:39-43	Acts 8:1, 4

What is a reader to make of these parallels? As already noted, fact and interpretation are not clearly separated in ancient history as is expected in modern historiography. The fact is that Stephen was tried and executed. But Luke's report of those events in Stephen's life was patterned after the experience of Jesus as Luke recorded it in his gospel. Neyrey[11] reminds readers that Luke is a historian in the Graeco-Roman mode. Interpreted history is what they wrote. Neyrey's contribution to understanding Luke's report about Stephen is that his trial is part of Luke's overall report of trials in the gospel and in Acts. Jesus' trials reflect Luke's basic pattern. Jesus is on trial four times in the gospel: before the Sanhedrin (Luke 22:66-71); before Pilate (Luke 23:1-5); before Herod (Luke 23:6-12); and before the assembled crowds of Judeans (Luke 23:13-25). These four trial reports help Luke to develop themes that will be repeated in the trials of others. Neyrey suggests considering these four reports as a unity (The Trial of Jesus).

A key element that Luke wants to highlight is Israel's rejection of God's prophets (Luke 6:22-23; 11:47-51; 13:33-34; 20:10-15; Acts 7:51-53). This applied to Jesus (Luke 6:7, 11; 7:31-35; 10:13-16; 11:47-51; 13:33-34; 19:14, 17; 20:10-15) and to Stephen (Acts 6:11-14). A further insight of Neyrey's on Luke's use of trials in his work is that Jesus predicts future trials for the church (Luke 12:8-12 and 21:12-15) and this is fulfilled in the trials of major figures in Acts: Peter, Stephen, and Paul. The trials take place in all the major places where Luke's gospel is preached (Judea, Jerusalem, Achaia, and Rome). They occur before Israelite courts as well as Roman tribunals. Sadly, the Israelite trials of Peter and the trials of Paul before Felix (Acts 21–24) and Festus (Acts 25–26) conclude with a final verdict.

Stephen's trial fulfills the pattern foretold by Jesus (Luke 21:12-15). He was prosecuted (Acts 6–7) and delivered up to a synagogue (Acts 6:9) and the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:12). Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen delivers a powerful witness on behalf of Jesus (Acts 6:10//Luke 12:11-12 and 21:14-15. The opponents are unable to withstand or refute his testimony (Acts 6:10//Luke 21:15). Their decision to put Stephen to a violent death is an admission of defeat. In Middle Eastern culture, the one who resorts to violence loses the argument.

Perhaps the most important contribution Neyrey makes to understanding the trials in Luke-Acts is that they all constitute one trial of Jesus. In other words, the trials have a double character. Jesus' trials in Luke's gospel and the trials of the apostles are trials of Israel. It was Israel who sat in judgment on Jesus and rejected his witness. This Israel judged itself guilty of false judgment in its rejection of God's prophet, Jesus. But in Luke's understanding, this trial was premature, and the trial should continue. Indeed it does in Acts of the Apostles. At the trials of Peter, Stephen, and Paul in Acts, Israel continues to hear witness about Jesus but continues to reject it all, thus increasing its guilt.

Neyrey has shed bright light on Luke and his compositions. The reader can understand Luke's intentions and the literary strategies he employed to communicate them. We understand

now much better that Luke's report about Stephen is fact and interpretation. Like Jesus, Stephen was a real person who really existed and died. The tradition about the discovery of his bones appears to assure us of this. Whether Stephen died the way Luke reports is open to discussion. Even if there is a factual basis for the entire account, it is very heavily embellished or interpreted by Luke to fit his story line.

Social Science Approaches

Since the publication of his research on the parallels between Luke's gospel and Acts in 1995, Neyrey, along with many biblical scholars, has added a new tool to his interpreter's kit: social science methods. For more than twenty years, the Context Group of biblical scholars has been focusing on the ancient, Middle Eastern cultural context in which the Bible, its authors, and characters ought to be situated in order to be respectfully understood and interpreted. The tool is actually multifaceted since it includes a range of social sciences: Mediterranean anthropology, cultural anthropology, psychological anthropology, cognitive neuroscience, shamanistic studies, and many more.

In 1993, the Pontifical Biblical Commission published a document on the *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* that summarized and evaluated the various methods used by biblical scholars in their research.[12] The centerpiece, the historical critical method, can be usefully supplemented with other methods. Among approaches that use the "human sciences," (from a Latin phrase more commonly translated in English as "the humanities"), the document approvingly includes the approach through cultural anthropology. It is widely known that the three paragraphs in this section reflect papers delivered by Context Group members at an International Meeting in Medina del Campo, Spain, in May, 1991.[13] As a founding member of that group, I am experienced in social science methods and eager to apply them to the biblical data concerning Stephen, one of the Seven.

Being the high-context documents that they are, all the books of the Bible presume that readers will supply the appropriate cultural information necessary for a complete understanding of what the documents meant to their intended audiences. It is not that the writers made incomplete reports. Rather, the writer presumes that he and the readers share the same language, culture, and perspectives. Why belabor the obvious? When readers do not share the same specific Mediterranean language, culture, and perspectives with the writer, miscommunication, misunderstanding, and misinterpretation will result. Social scientists try to provide some of the context that is necessary for readers who don't share the language, culture, or perspectives to interpret the texts.

For example, the author of Genesis 24 ("J") presumes the readers of his account of how Abraham's servant found the appropriate marriage partner for Isaac, his master's son, share the same language, culture, and perspective. Specifically, he confidently assumes the reader knows the strategy a Mediterranean person uses in order to obtain a favor from another Mediterranean person. He assumes the reader understands the rules of Mediterranean hospitality. Rebekah's brother, Laban, transforms the stranger-servant into a guest (Gen 24:31-32). Next, food is set before the servant who replies: "I will not eat until I have told my errand" (Gen 24:33).

To a Westerner who has followed the story to this point, such an act sounds rude and ungrateful. A Mediterranean person, however, understands what the servant is up to. He will not eat until he receives an answer to his request that Rebekah accompany him back to marry Isaac, for they are kin ideally related in this culture to be husband and wife (a parallel cousin, i.e., Isaac's mother's brother's daughter). He concludes his request by saying in effect: "Well? Yes or no? Let me know what my next course of action should be" (Gen 24:49). Laban and Bethuel (Rebekah's father) agree to the favor (Gen 24:52), and the servant and companions eat, drink, and spend the night (Gen 24:54).

No Bible to my knowledge, nor even any commentary familiar to me, interprets the story in this way. Yet an Iraqi student in

class one semester said this is how any Middle Easterner would understand the story. It was an interpretation he shared with fellow students.

Conclusion

We can agree that Stephen was a person who really existed and died for his faith in Jesus Messiah as Luke reports and tradition has maintained. Yet as we read, we must keep ever in mind that Luke offers an interpretation of Stephen and his experiences. Luke is a high-context author of a high-context document who challenges modern Western readers to bring appropriate Middle Eastern cultural information to the task. That is what we aim to provide in this little book.

In chapter 1, we will reflect upon Stephen as a Hellenist, a "Greek." We have already given a brief definition of Hellenism above. Now we must probe the significance of this, especially as it helps to understand the tension experienced by the Hellenists regarding the neglect of Hellenist widows by the "Hebrews" (devout Judeans), notably the Twelve. In chapter 2, we seek further understanding of Benedict XVI's insistence that Stephen and his companions were not deacons. We will explore the evidence for that statement. Further, we will identify the role and function that the apostles created and recognized for the Seven in the community of believers: namely, commissioned ministers. A basic requirement for this ministry was that the candidate should be a "holy" person.

In chapter 3, we will try to understand why Luke refers to groups (the Seven, the Twelve) even as he focuses on individuals in these groups (Stephen, Philip, Peter, et al.). The key to understanding this lies in grasping the notion of collectivistic cultures and collectivistic personalities. This may be especially challenging for Western readers who in general are individualists, a person-type representing no more than twenty percent of the population on the planet. If collectivistic persons populate the

pages of the Bible, individualists will be baffled and tempted to erroneously interpret them as fellow individualists. However, understanding Stephen and his companions as collectivistic persons will help understand why they—and the Twelve, too—were so concerned about needy persons in the group, and that the group should exist in peace and harmony (Acts 2:42).

The fourth and final chapter will return to a consideration of Stephen and his companions as holy persons (introduced in chapter 3). The holy person has direct contact with the spirit realm and brokers favors from that realm to humans on earth. Contact with God and spirits is ordinarily made in alternate states of consciousness (see 1 Sam 3:1). Luke's Greek vocabulary makes it clear that Stephen entered this level of mental awareness at the end of his speech. In fact, Luke mentions such experiences more than twenty times in the Acts of the Apostles. We will focus on alternative states of consciousness to cast Stephen in yet another light that receives little attention.

At the end, the reader should have a fresh understanding of Luke's interpretation of Stephen and his companions. This understanding will differ from traditional views, because it will have a very high degree of Middle Eastern cultural plausibility. Readers who desire a more theological or spiritual understanding are encouraged to draw inspiration from Pope Benedict XVI, who based his own reflections on the sketch of Stephen's life and ministry produced by historical critical biblical research. It is this very same outline which serves as the framework of this book.

John J. Pilch
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Washington, D.C.

Feast of the Stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi
September 17, 2007