

WHAT DOES “MISSION” IN ACTS MEAN IN RELATION TO THE “POWERS THAT BE”?

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My wife and I have recently worked our way through all seven seasons of *The West Wing* on DVD and greatly enjoyed the experience.¹ This is a fascinating series which portrays a devout Christian President of the United States and his staff engaging in the world of politics. One incident caught my attention recently in reflecting on our topic today—for those interested, it is in season 4 episode 11, called “Holy Night,” set just before Christmas at the end of President Bartlet’s first term of office. A new character, Will Bailey, has been introduced to the West Wing world, and he is now helping Toby Ziegler, the White House Director of Communications, with the President’s second inaugural address, presently as a temporary appointment for three months. Bailey is cautious of power and has been working in a hotel and meeting Ziegler in the lobby of the White House to discuss drafts of the inaugural which they are preparing. This is frustrating for Ziegler, and early in the episode Ziegler moves Bailey to the office next to his. They have given the President a draft of a section of the inaugural and get three notes back from the President on this section, for review; what Bailey doesn’t know is that one of these notes is deliberately mistaken and is there as a test of whether he will notice it is wrong and say so to the President. Bailey raises his concerns about this “bad note” to Ziegler, but when Bailey has two opportunities—one alone with the President, and one with the President, Toby Ziegler and Leo McGarry (the President’s Chief of Staff)—to mention his concerns to the President, he does not do so. This conversation follows during the second occasion, in the Oval Office:

“In his defense,” Ziegler tells McGarry in front of Bailey, “he caught the bad note. He came to me, he made it important.... He wasn’t distracted by the fact that his office was filled with bicycles.”

“Excuse me?” Bailey interrupts, “You said that I caught the bad note?”

“Yeah, that was planted there to see how you’d do telling truth to power,” Ziegler tells Bailey.

“Not very well so far,” the President muses.

“I have no difficulty, Sir, telling truth to power.”

“Okay, except when I asked you to come into the Oval Office,” the President says (referring to a previous opportunity), “You said, ‘No. No, no. No, no, no, no.’”

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“And I was firm in my convictions....”

Leo McGarry interrupts. “Can we get back to why you think....” And finally Bailey makes his point. “Maybe,” McGarry says. “But I’m not convinced and that’s ’cause you haven’t convinced me. This isn’t Tillman at the Stanford Club or the California 47th. This is big-boy school, Mr. Bailey. You understand?”

“Yes, sir, I do.”

One of the hardest things to do in political life—and in life in general—is to tell the truth to power, especially when the person with power has the power to affect your own life and career. And yet what politicians need around them as advisers is not people who are “yes” men and women, but people who will tell them the truth, however unpalatable. The thesis I want to suggest is that the essence of the way Luke portrays the earliest Christians’ engagement with the “powers” of their day is *speaking truth to power*.

Recent study of the NT has increasingly engaged with questions of politics, notably how the earliest Christians engaged (or not) with the Roman empire in its various manifestations, and (more broadly) the human “powers” and authorities in the ancient world.² In this paper, we shall consider the specific question of what we mean when we speak of “mission” in relation to these human powers and authorities.

To ask this question is necessarily to ask what we mean by “mission,” both in general and in the book of Acts, and our first task will be to seek a working definition, so that we know what we are looking for. Our question also requires consideration of the range of “powers that be” which are found in Acts, and our second task will be to consider the variety of people and institutions which come under this umbrella. We shall then be in a position to sample some encounters between the earliest Christians and these powers, before drawing some interim conclusions. Our conclusions will necessarily be provisional, as a fuller study would be required to provide a comprehensive answer to our question; hopefully, we shall have considered sufficiently typical examples to enable us to come to interim conclusions which stand up to further scrutiny.

I. WHAT IS “MISSION” IN ACTS?

In thinking about constructing a NT understanding of “mission,” the passages which come most quickly to mind are not in Luke’s corpus: they are Matthew 28:18–20 and John 20:21–23. Both include statements by the risen Jesus

² E.g. Loveday Alexander, ed., *Images of Empire* (JSOTSup 122; Sheffield: JSOT, 1991); Allen Brent, *A Political History of Early Christianity* (London: T&T Clark, 2009); Christopher Bryan, *Render to Caesar: Jesus, the Early Church, and the Roman Superpower* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament* (Abingdon Essential Guides; Nashville: Abingdon, 2006); Richard J. Cassidy & Philip J. Scharper, eds., *Political Issues in Luke-Acts* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983); David Rhoads, David Esterline, and Jae Won Lee, eds., *Luke-Acts and Empire: Essays in Honor of Robert L. Brawley* (Princeton Theological Monographs 151; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011); Kazuhiko Yamazaki-Ransom, *The Roman Empire in Luke’s Narrative* (LNTS 404; London: T&T Clark, 2010); C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

in which he sends his followers with a task: in Matthew, the task is to make disciples (the imperative $\mu\alpha\theta\eta\tau\epsilon\upsilon\sigma\alpha\tau\epsilon$ is the main verb of the command); in John, the task involves bringing and declaring forgiveness of sins.

Acts 1:8 is sometimes understood to be a similar statement, but it is worth noticing a significant difference from the Matthean and Johannine passages, namely that Acts 1:8 contains no explicit command. Rather, it is a statement by the risen Jesus of what will happen: there is no imperative verb; there is no statement that the disciples are being sent. The same applies to Luke 24:47–49: the verbs there are indicatives, not imperatives—Jesus does not command the disciples to go out, but tells them that they are witnesses of the crucial events of his suffering, death, and resurrection. Let us explore Acts 1:8 further.

1. *Acts 1:8*. Several Isaianic echoes reverberate through Acts 1:7–8.³ Luke reads Isa 32:15 LXX $\xi\omega\varsigma\ \delta\upsilon\nu\ \epsilon\pi\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\theta\eta\ \epsilon\phi'\ \upsilon\mu\acute{\alpha}\varsigma\ \pi\nu\epsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha\ \acute{\alpha}\phi'\ \upsilon\psi\eta\lambda\omicron\upsilon$ “until a spirit from on high comes upon you,” which is located in a passage about Israel’s new exodus restoration, in terms of the Spirit’s coming to empower for witness. Isaiah 43:10–12 sits in a passage about the role of God’s servant, Israel (43:1), and proclaims “you are my witnesses.”⁴ Isaiah 49:6 speaks of the role of God’s servant not only as restoring Israel, but also as “a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”⁵ Isaiah 49:6 LXX is echoed in Acts 1:8 and will be directly quoted in Acts 13:47, in the context of the mission turning toward Gentiles. These Isaianic echoes signal that the disciples are to take part in God’s restoration of Israel (which is the Isaianic servant’s ministry) in order to bring light to the nations, in conjunction with Jesus the Messiah (cf. Acts 3:19–21). In this task they are to follow Jesus’ example and lead.⁶ Empowered by the Spirit, they will reach beyond and through the restored Israel to the world—a servant ministry in which Paul, too, will participate.⁷

Jesus’ response here thus reshapes the disciples’ assumptions in their question, “Are you at this time restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (v. 6). There is an eschatological hope of Israel’s restoration, but the restoration’s shape will not be Israel *ruling over* the nations, but *incorporation of* the nations into Israel’s hope through Israel’s Messiah—the restored and reshaped Israel will *serve* the nations as light-bringer, rather than rule them.⁸ It is not, however, that the disciples’ Spirit-

³ Max Turner, *Power from on High: The Spirit in Israel’s Restoration and Witness in Luke-Acts* (JPTSUP 9; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 300–301; David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (BSL; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 91–96; Peter Mallen, *The Reading and Transformation of Isaiah in Luke-Acts* (LNTS 367; London: T&T Clark, 2007) 78–84; Thomas S. Moore, “‘To the End of the Earth’: The Geographic and Ethnic Universalism of Acts 1:8 in Light of Isaianic Influence on Luke,” *JETS* 40 (1997) 389–99; D. E. Johnson, “Jesus against the Idols: The Use of Isaianic Servant Songs in the Missiology of Acts,” *WTJ* 52 (1990) 343–53, citing 346–49.

⁴ MT: LXX has “be [γένησθε] my witnesses”; cf. also 44:8.

⁵ LXX $\xi\omega\varsigma\ \epsilon\sigma\chi\acute{\alpha}\tau\omicron\upsilon\ \tau\eta\varsigma\ \gamma\eta\varsigma$, echoed precisely in Acts 1:8.

⁶ Luke 2:32; Mallen, *Reading* 81–82.

⁷ Mallen, *Reading* 84–93.

⁸ Cf. Richard Bauckham, “The Restoration of Israel in Luke-Acts” in *Restoration: Old Testament, Jewish and Christian Perspectives* (ed. James M. Scott; JSJSup 72; Leiden: Brill, 2001) 435–87 (here 477). Anthony Buzzard, “Acts 1:6 and the Eclipse of the Biblical Kingdom,” *ErQ* 66 (1994) 197–215, esp. 203–14,

empowered witness “to the end of the earth” is the substance of the restoration of Israel, but rather that this witness is the means by which the way is prepared for what will become ἀποκαταστάσεως πάντων “the restoration of *all things*,” 3:21).⁹ Verse 7 clarifies (in similar vein to 3:20–21) that the timing of this (final) restoration is in the Father’s hands. The need for witness “to the end of the earth” implies that the promised return of Jesus (v. 11) will not be immediate.¹⁰

By contrast (ἀλλά “but,” v. 8) with the lack of clarity over the timing of restoration, Jesus expresses confidence over what will happen next: the Spirit will come and bring power for witness throughout the world. Luke signals that the purpose of the Spirit’s coming (a coming expressed in the subordinate genitive absolute clause ἐπελθόντος τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος “the Holy Spirit having come”) is that the disciples will receive power (main clause: λήψετε δύναμιν) for witness. This is the heart of Luke’s understanding of the Spirit’s role, although it is not the *only* facet of the Spirit’s work in Acts.¹¹

The disciples’ vocation as witnesses flows from the coming of the Spirit: ἔσεσθε is indicative “you shall be” rather than imperative “be!”¹² Jesus makes a promise that the disciples shall be witnesses as a result of divine enabling, rather than giving a direct exhortation to witness.¹³ For Luke’s readers this saying certainly signals that the heartbeat of the believing community is witness to the gospel, and also that with this great responsibility comes the promise of great power by divine enabling; to this extent Jesus’ words contain (as Haenchen puts it well) “at once gift and obligation.”¹⁴

Luke stresses the boldness of the believers’ testimony at a number of points,¹⁵ identifying their boldness as stemming from divine empowerment (Acts 2:4, 14; cf. 8:29; 10:19; 11:12; 13:2, 4; 16:6–7). Thus Peter confidently announces to the Jerusalemites that they were responsible for killing Jesus (2:29)—hardly the way to win friends and influence people. Peter and John speak boldly to the Sanhedrin (4:9–10, 13). Barnabas and Paul speak boldly in Antioch and Iconium (13:47; 14:3). Paul speaks boldly in the synagogue in Ephesus (19:8), before Agrippa (26:26), and while under house arrest in Rome (28:31).

rightly highlights that the disciples’ question is a natural one, but does not recognise how much the scriptural hope of Israel’s restoration is reshaped in Acts.

⁹ Bauckham, “Restoration” 476–77; Turner, *Power* 299–300.

¹⁰ John T. Carroll, *Response to the End of History: Eschatology and Situation in Luke-Acts* (SBLDS 92; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 124 notes that the parallel questions in Luke 19:11 (implied) and 21:7 receive a similar answer which suggests a period of time before the End.

¹¹ Agreeing with what Menzies affirms (Robert P. Menzies, *Empowered for Witness: The Spirit in Luke-Acts* [JPTSUP 6; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994], *passim*), but rejecting what he denies (with Turner, *Power*, esp. 431–33).

¹² *Contra* Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (2 vols.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004) 1:371 n. 240, who treats the future as having “imperatival meaning.”

¹³ See the excellent summary, with references, in Turner, *Power* 92–103. That the Spirit enables inspired speech is a commonplace in Jewish expectation of this period.

¹⁴ Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971) 144.

¹⁵ Using παρρησία and παρρησιάζομαι; see Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (SNTSMS 31; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 151–53.

Μου μάρτυρες (“my witnesses”) portrays the group both as witnesses who belong to Jesus (and are thus sent and authorised by him) and as witnesses whose testimony concerns Jesus—we need not torture the genitive μου to choose one or other alternative.¹⁶ This phrase suggests that Lesslie Newbigin (in an otherwise helpful article) overstates his case when he writes, “It is the Holy Spirit who is the Witness, and the Witness of the Apostles (words and ‘signs’) is subordinate,”¹⁷ for *the disciples are the witnesses*—empowered, for sure, by the Spirit. “Witness” is a judicial term, used metaphorically concerning testimony which these disciples will offer in order to persuade people to come to the right verdict concerning Jesus. The word group is widespread in Acts: the noun μάρτυς “witness” is found at 1:8, 22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 6:13; 7:58; 10:39, 41; 13:31; 22:15, 20; 26:16; the nouns μαρτυρία and μαρτύριον “testimony” at 4:33; 7:44; 22:18; the verb μαρτυρέω “I testify” at 6:3; 10:22, 43; 13:22; 14:3; 15:8; 16:2; 22:5, 12; 23:11; 26:5; and the verb μαρτύρομαι “I testify” at 20:26; 26:22.¹⁸ There are a number of courtroom or quasi-judicial scenes in Acts where such testimony takes place,¹⁹ but “witness” terminology is not restricted to these places.²⁰ This term’s use signals Luke’s wider purpose of providing apostolic testimony in writing Acts:²¹ Luke does not use “witness” language of the believing community at large, but uses it predominantly as a semi-technical term for ear- and eye-witness testimony to Jesus by people qualified to offer such testimony, principally the apostles (2:32; 3:15; 4:33; 5:32; 10:39, 41; 13:31), but also Paul (13:30; 22:15; 26:16) and Stephen (22:20).²² Hence, the qualifications for the replacement for Judas include the experience which will allow them to give eyewitness testimony (1:21–22), and the preface to Luke’s Gospel signals the importance of eyewitness testimony, clearly referring to the apostolic band (Luke 1:1–4). However, Jesus’ commission in Luke 24:44–49 does not distinguish between the apostles and those with them.²³ Further, the group being addressed here in Acts, mentioned rather vaguely in verse 6 as οἱ ... συνελθόντες “those who had come together,” may include the larger group mentioned in verses 14 and 21.²⁴

¹⁶ Cf. the same *double entendre* in Isa 43:12.

¹⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, “Witness in a Biblical Perspective,” *MisT* 3 (1986) 80–84, here 82, citing Acts 1:6–8; 5:32.

¹⁸ See Trites, *Concept* 128; Peter Bolt, “Mission and Witness,” in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 191–214, here 192–94 for helpful analysis of this word group.

¹⁹ Acts 4:5–22; 5:27–41; 6:12–7:60; 16:16–40; 17:6–9; 18:12–17; 21:27–26:32; cf. Luke 12:9–12; 21:12–15; see Allison A. Trites, “The Importance of Legal Scenes and Language in the Book of Acts,” *NovT* 16 (1974) 278–84; Johnson, “Jesus” 347–48.

²⁰ Trites, *Concept*, ch. 9.

²¹ Cf. *ibid.* 140.

²² Bolt, “Witness,” esp. 196–210.

²³ αὐτῶν (second use), αὐτοῖς and αὐτούς “them” in verses 36, 44 include “the eleven and their companions” and the two who walked to Emmaus, verse 33; see John Nolland, *Luke* (WBC 35A–C; 3 vols.; Dallas: Word, 1989–93) 3:1220.

²⁴ Haenchen, *Acts* 142–43; *contra* Nelson P. Estrada, *From Followers to Leaders: The Apostles in the Ritual of Status Transformation in Acts 1–2* (JSNTSup 255; London: T&T Clark, 2004) 47, who maintains that

Trites helpfully identifies that their testimony in Acts concerns Jesus in at least three senses.²⁵ They witness to: (1) the facts of Jesus' ministry (1:21–22; 2:22–24; 10:36–42); (2) Jesus' character of holiness and righteousness which gave rise to his deeds of power and healing (3:14; 10:38); (3) the Christian faith, in the sense that their testimony calls for a verdict of repentance and trust in Jesus (2:38; 3:22–23; 10:43). Their witness to Jesus is also interpreted in Acts as witness to the kingdom of God (28:23) in continuity with the Gospel (cf. 1:3).²⁶ However, they do not “take on Jesus' mantle” in the way that Elisha did after Elijah—the apostles are Jesus' witnesses, not his successors.²⁷

The testimony will spread in a series of growing circles which are widely understood to signal the structure of Acts.²⁸ First, they will testify in Jerusalem (chs. 1–7); then persecution will drive them into Judaea and Samaria (ch. 8), before the call of the key witness who will go to the end of the earth, Saul (ch. 9), and the beginnings of including Gentiles (10:1–11:18).²⁹ However, Acts does not follow such a structure tidily, since it returns on several occasions to Jerusalem (9:26–30; 11:2–18; 15:4–29; 19:21; 21:15–23:24). This statement, rather, reorders the disciples' perception of space,³⁰ for the land of Israel—and Jerusalem, and its temple in particular—is no longer central to God's ordering of the world: instead, the whole of the inhabited world becomes “sacred space,” for God meets people in the whole world, and Jesus sends his disciples into the whole world.

In sum, this verse clarifies the nature of the restoration of Israel which the disciples ask about (v. 6) by highlighting two features: the restoration will be empowered by the Holy Spirit who will shortly come upon the disciples; and the route to the final restoration of all things will be the Spirit-empowered witness of the disciples. For Luke's readers, there is an implicit call to participate in this task, but (to repeat) there is no call to “go” or sending vocabulary here. Luke's Jesus simply identifies that the disciples will be witnesses to, for, and of Jesus. Thus our central question, about the nature of the early believers' *mission* in the sphere of earthly power, can now be rephrased and clarified as a question about the nature of their *witness* in this sphere.

2. *Luke's “mission” vocabulary.* All that said, Luke does speak of people as “sent,” and he includes commands to “go” and to “speak” at a number of places. Let us explore how those terms contribute to our study.

Acts 1 has an exclusive focus on the apostles. For fuller critique of Bolt's view, see Mallen, *Reading* 191–93.

²⁵ Trites, *Concept* 144.

²⁶ Augustín del Agua, “The Evangelization of the Kingdom of God” in *The Unity of Luke-Acts* (ed. J. Verheyden; BETL 142; Leuven: Peeters, 1999) 639–61, here 655.

²⁷ Contra Estrada, *Followers* 96.

²⁸ E.g. Conzelmann, 7; James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 145.

²⁹ It is noticeable that it is not those present who mainly accomplish the later parts of the mission, to Gentiles (Giancarlo Biguzzi, “Witnessing Two by Two in the Acts of the Apostles,” *Bib* 92 (2011) 1–20, here 3–6).

³⁰ Matthew Sleeman, *Geography and the Ascension Narrative in Acts* (SNTSMS 146; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 70–72.

The theme of being “sent” is fairly common in Luke-Acts.³¹ Frequently, *God* is the sender, whether of angels (Luke 1:19, 26; Acts 12:11), Jesus himself (Luke 4:18 [quoting Isa 61:1–2], 43; 9:48; 10:16; Acts 3:26³²), John the baptizer (Luke 7:27, echoing Mal 3:1), or biblical prophets and Moses (Luke 4:26; 13:34; Acts 7:34, 35).³³ In Luke’s Gospel, *Jesus* sends disciples, in the missions of the twelve (9:2), those going ahead of him as he travelled to Jerusalem (9:52), and the seventy (10:1–3). *Jesus, God or the Spirit* sends in Acts: the exalted Jesus sends Ananias to Saul (9:17); Cornelius’s messengers are sent by God at the angel’s instigation (10:8, 17, 20, 22, 29, 32, 33; 11:13); Barnabas and Saul are sent out by the Spirit (13:4); Paul is sent by Jesus to Jews and Gentiles (22:21; 26:17, both in accounts of his Damascus road experience); and the gospel message itself can be described as “sent” by God (10:36; 13:26). In addition, Jesus sends the Spirit on the disciples to empower them for the task of witness (Luke 24:48–49), and Jesus himself will be sent at his return (Acts 3:20).

In addition, Luke’s Gospel contains commands to “go,” notably in the mission of the seventy (Luke 10:3). In Acts, Philip is told to “go” to a place where he meets the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26,³⁴ 29), and Peter is told to “go down” to Cornelius’s messengers (10:20)—both are rather specific commands, as opposed to general calls to “go.” Paul is told to keep speaking for Jesus (18:9), and Paul’s retellings of the Damascus road story include clear statements that Paul has an assigned task (22:10, 21; 26:16). Paul’s task of testimony³⁵ must be carried out in both Jerusalem and Rome, the Lord assures him (23:11).

Luke’s use of “sending” and “go” language provides evidence that the mission of testimony is both initiated and empowered by God, Jesus, and the Spirit; it is not a human initiative—rather, as I have argued elsewhere, the believers are frequently playing catch-up with the divine driver who expands the mission beyond the circles and circumstances in which the believers are comfortable.³⁶

3. *Summary.* Let us draw breath and review the point we have reached. The “mission” in Acts is a divine mission, which will ultimately result in the restoration of all things. It is a mission which will ultimately go to “the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8), a phrase which echoes Isa 49:6 and Jesus’ statement that the disciples will go to “all nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, Luke 24:47), and signals the universality of the mission.³⁷ Such a claim is implicitly critical of the claims of the Roman empire to

³¹ The key terms used are πέμπω and compounds, ἀποστέλλω, ἐξαποστέλλω, ἀπολύω.

³² And, implicitly, in the parable of the wicked tenants, where Jesus is the son (Luke 20:9–19).

³³ Cf. again the parable of the wicked tenants, where the servants are surely the prophets (Luke 20:9–19).

³⁴ Luke echoes the imperatives ἀνάστηθι καὶ πορεύου “get up and go” (8:26) precisely in Philip’s ready obedience: καὶ ἀναστὰς ἐπορεύθη (v. 27).

³⁵ Using διαμαρτύρομαι, a “witness” verb, which incidentally shows that it is not only the eyewitnesses who can testify to Jesus.

³⁶ See Steve Walton, “The Acts—of God? What is the ‘Acts of the Apostles’ All About?,” *ETQ* 80 (2008) 291–306; idem, “Acts, Book of,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright; London: SPCK, 2005) 27–31.

³⁷ See helpful summary of discussion of this phrase in Schnabel, *Mission* 1:372.

govern the world, exemplified in Augustus's claim that he had subjected "the whole world" (*orbem terrarum*) to the Romans (Preface, *Res. gest. divi Aug.*), or Ovid's statement, "The land of other nations has a fixed boundary: the circuit of Rome is the circuit of the world" (*Fasti* 2.684, LCL).³⁸ What form did the testimony take, then, when it encountered the "powers that be," whether Roman or other "powers" subordinate to Rome, such as the Jewish authorities or local officials in cities around the empire? To this question we now turn.

II. THE "POWERS THAT BE" IN ACTS

To speak of the "powers that be" is to throw together into a bucket category a variety of different "powers," and so it is worthwhile first to distinguish these different authorities and their different realms and ranges of authority.³⁹

1. *The Roman empire.* At the top of the pile in the first century AD was Rome, focused in the emperor.⁴⁰ He, in conjunction with the Imperial Senate, led the Roman empire, which dominated its territory. In the first century the empire was divided into provinces, some under direct imperial authority and some under senatorial control. In charge of each province was a governor, normally of senatorial rank, supported by a (usually very small) staff under his immediate control. Only in frontier or troublesome provinces, such as Judaea, were significant numbers of Roman troops present, in order to preserve Roman control and political stability. A key member of the governor's staff was the procurator, whose duties could include the collection of taxes, as well as looking after the emperor's interests.⁴¹

³⁸ Cf. Acts 10:36; Steve Walton, "The State They Were In: Luke's View of the Roman Empire," in *Rome in the Bible and the Early Church* (ed. Peter Oakes; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2002) 1–41, here 26–28; James S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought: Geography, Exploration, and Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992) 121–27.

³⁹ Cf. the helpful overview of trials and authorities in the ancient world in Matthew L. Skinner, *The Trial Narratives: Conflict, Power, and Identity in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) 13–32.

⁴⁰ For fuller accounts of Roman administration, see the following: Joyce Reynolds, "Cities," in *The Administration of the Roman Empire 241BC–AD193* (ed. David C. Braund; Exeter Studies in History 18; Exeter, UK: University of Exeter, 1988) 15–51; Fergus Millar, *The Roman Empire and its Neighbours* (2d ed.; London: Duckworth, 1981); David W. J. Gill, "The Roman Empire as a Context for the New Testament," in *Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament* (ed. Stanley E. Porter; NT Tools & Studies XXV; Leiden: Brill, 1997) 389–406; David W. J. Gill and Conrad H. Gempf, eds., *The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting* (AICS 2; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1994); Andrew Lintott, *Imperium Romanum: Politics and Administration* (London: Routledge, 1993), esp. chs. 3–4, 8; A. H. M. Jones, *The Greek City from Alexander to Justinian* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940), esp. chs. IV, VIII, XI; Anthony D. Macro, "The Cities of Asia Minor under the Roman Imperium," *ANRW* II.7.2 (1980) 658–97. Helpful collections of sources in English translation can be found in W. K. Lacey and B. W. J. G. Wilson, *Res Publica: Roman Politics and Society according to Cicero* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970); Jo-Ann Shelton, *As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), esp. sections X, XII.

⁴¹ Judaea and Egypt were exceptions to this structure in NT times, not having their own governor, but rather a procurator or prefect of equestrian rank: Emil Schürer, Geza Vermes and Fergus Millar, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 BC–AD 135)* (rev. ed.; 4 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973–86) 1:358.

Within a province there would be a number of communities with “city” (πόλις) status, and the nature of this status could vary considerably from one community to another.⁴² Among its inhabitants, some were citizens of the city, and a smaller group (often much smaller) were Roman citizens. Philippi, Corinth, and Pisidian Antioch were Roman colonies, all of whose citizens were Roman citizens—many were former soldiers granted citizenship on their retirement from the army.⁴³ Athens, by contrast, retained the feel of a Greek city with the Areopagus as its ruling council.⁴⁴ In this case, the Romans had taken an established Greek city and permitted its own civic structures to continue, but now overseen by the governor of the province of Achaia and his staff. As long as the city ran smoothly and peacefully, and Roman taxes were paid promptly, the governor would not be likely to interfere.

Typically a πόλις in the eastern empire would consist of an urban center which controlled a surrounding territory, usually containing villages under the centre’s jurisdiction—thus, to think of a modern “city” does not give quite the right picture. When the emperor granted the status of πόλις to an existing place, he would allow the people to appoint (or, in the case of an established city, to continue to appoint) a council (βουλή) which could pass local laws, and to elect their own magistrates annually,⁴⁵ who dispensed justice in many matters and had their own subordinate officials.⁴⁶ Cities usually had a citizen assembly (ἐκκλησία), but under the Romans it was increasingly subject to the council, which tended to consist of members of the wealthy social élite.⁴⁷ Magistrates were frequently appointed from the council members, and on appointment were required to contribute financially to the city’s affairs,⁴⁸ further limiting those who could afford to be candidates for office.

The powers of these local magistrates, councils, and assemblies were circumscribed by those of the governor. Hence the Ephesian town clerk warns the citizens that the city is in danger of being charged with rioting (Acts 19:40), which could lead to the governor disbanding the citizen-assembly, punishing city officials or taking away privileges already granted to the city.⁴⁹

⁴² See Reynolds, “Cities” 23 for a helpful taxonomy.

⁴³ David W. J. Gill, “Macedonia,” in *The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting* (ed. David W. J. Gill and Conrad H. Gempf; A1CS 2; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1994) 397–417, here 411–413.

⁴⁴ Gill, “Achaia” 433–453, here 441–43, 447.

⁴⁵ Luke gets the designation and jurisdiction of these officials right in place after place; see Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (WUNT 49; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck] 1989) 115 (on 16:22), 119 (on 17:34), 121 (on 19:31), 122 (on 19:35), 123 (on 19:38), 153 with n. 152 (on 28:7).

⁴⁶ Cicero, *Att.* VI.1.15 (written c. 50 BC) says that he allowed Greeks to try cases between provincials under their own laws. Methods of election varied considerably across the empire: Reynolds, “Cities” 26–27.

⁴⁷ Millar, *Empire* 87.

⁴⁸ Reynolds, “Cities” 36.

⁴⁹ Paul R. Trebilco, “Asia,” in *The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting* (ed. David W. J. Gill and Conrad H. Gempf; A1CS 2; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1994) 291–362, here 344–45 (where examples are given).

More specifically, cases which could result in death or exile were reserved for the governor's judgment, as well as cases involving Roman citizens,⁵⁰ and some cases involving commercial questions or public order.⁵¹ The governor would travel annually to various cities within his province to try such cases, and others which the local magistrates could not resolve.⁵² In Achaia, Luke records Gallio hearing the Jews' case against Paul in Corinth, the governor's seat (Acts 18:12–17).⁵³ In Judaea, this comports well with John's assertion that the Jews were not allowed to "put anyone to death" (John 18:31).⁵⁴

It is within this setting that the Acts accounts of encounter between the Christians and the "powers that be" should be seen. This limits the number of *direct* contacts between the Christians and the Roman empire.⁵⁵ Specifically, Paul encounters the proconsuls Sergius Paulus in Cyprus (13:4–12) and Gallio in Corinth (18:12–17), the tribune Claudius Lysias in Jerusalem (22:26–30; 23:16–30), and the governors Felix (23:33–24:26) and Festus (24:27–25:12).

In terms of more local officials, we also encounter the magistrates in Philippi (16:16–40), the politarchs in Thessalonica (17:1–15), the Areopagus in Athens (17:16–34),⁵⁶ the Asiarchs and the town clerk in Ephesus (19:23–41),⁵⁷ the client king Agrippa in Caesarea (25:13–26:32), and the first man of the island in Malta (28:7).

2. *Judea*. A particular question is the role of the Sanhedrin in Judea, presented in the NT as "the Jewish supreme court of justice."⁵⁸ The believers have several encounters with this body in Acts (4:5–22; 5:17–41; 6:12–7:60; 22:30–23:10; 24:20), and its powers seem to have been considerable, although in the first century it was not allowed to administer the death penalty (John 18:31; cf. Josephus, *J.W.* 2.17.1

⁵⁰ Macro, "Cities of Asia Minor under the Roman Imperium" 671. Hence the Philippian magistrates are taken aback when they realize they have beaten Roman citizens, thus acting in a case over which they have no jurisdiction (Acts 16:37–39).

⁵¹ Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (First-Century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1994) 107–8.

⁵² See G. P. Burton, "Proconsuls, Assizes and the Administration of Justice under the Empire," *JRS* 65 (1975) 92–106, for a careful description of the system of travelling assizes.

⁵³ Most governors had at least one legal advisor among their personal staff (cf. Acts 25:12), whereas Gallio, a noted jurist, gives his own judgement without consulting advisors.

⁵⁴ Supported by Josephus, *J.W.* 2.8.1 §117. See discussion (and further references) in George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Dallas: Word, 1987) 308–10; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1991) 590–92.

⁵⁵ See the study of the three most direct Pauline encounters with imperial representatives, Steve Walton, "Trying Paul or Trying Rome? Judges and Accused in the Roman Trials of Paul in Acts," in *Luke-Acts and Empire: Essays in Honor of Robert L. Brawley* (ed. David Rhoads, David Esterline, and Jae Won Lee; Princeton Theological Monographs 151; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011) 122–41.

⁵⁶ See Bruce W. Winter, "On Introducing Gods to Athens: An Alternative Reading of Acts 17:18–20," *TynBul* 47 (1996) 71–90, esp. 75–80, for the role of the Areopagus.

⁵⁷ As well as the off-stage proconsuls, v. 38.

⁵⁸ Schürer, Vermes, and Millar, *History* 2:206; Graham H. Twelftree, "Sanhedrin," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter; Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 2000) 1061–65, here 1063. See Schürer, Vermes, and Millar, *History* 2:199–226; and Twelftree, "Sanhedrin," for the debate over the nature of the Sanhedrin(s) and its (their) authority.

§405; *y. Sanh.* 18a, 24b; *b. Sanh.* 41a).⁵⁹ The high priest presided over its meetings and, under the Romans, this body seems to have had considerable powers over Judea, but not other provinces within Palestine (and this may explain why they did not act against Jesus until he came to Judaea).⁶⁰ However, Luke presents the high priest as having sufficient authority (perhaps moral rather than judicial) to write letters authorizing Saul to arrest believers in Damascus (Acts 9:1–2). Thus the appearances of believers before the Sanhedrin were significant occasions on which the Jewish judiciary sought to quash the Jesus movement in its infancy, as they had sought to suppress Jesus himself.

3. Political or religious? A key point to recognize is that in all of these levels of power within the Roman empire, the two categories which we today distinguish, religion and politics, were inextricably intertwined.

Roman officials regularly functioned as priests, offering sacrifice to the gods in order to seek their favor. What westerners today would consider “political” decisions were taken in the light of auguries, haruspicy, necromancy and omens. Leaders were expected—nay required—not only to participate in cultic activities, including imperial cultic activities, but also to preside over them.⁶¹

In a different way, the same was true of the Jewish Sanhedrin. All of its members were significant people within Judaism and their decision-making was governed by the legal framework provided by Scripture and “religious” oral tradition.

This means that to try to distinguish and separate “political” and “religious” authorities and spheres in the ancient world is to make a category error. The ancient world had them joined inextricably together, and we should not seek to put them asunder. Peter Oakes provides a helpful example in considering a (reconstructed) family who were bakers in Philippi.⁶² Half their bread is sold to three well-off families from the social elite as a regular order; the rest is sold from their shop. Simias, the father of the family, is a member of a burial club which provides for its members to have a good burial, paid for by a regular subscription.

⁵⁹ The murder of Stephen in what appears to be a Sanhedrin meeting looks more like a lynching than a judicial execution (Acts 7:54–60). The inscriptions in Latin and Greek in the Jerusalem temple at the edge of the Court of the Women that any Gentile who crossed that line was liable to be killed looks, similarly, like a warning against mob action (*CIJ* 1400, n. 85; cf. Josephus, *J.W.* 5.5.2 §§193–94).

⁶⁰ Twelftree, “Sanhedrin” 1064.

⁶¹ E.g. Duncan Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West*, Vol. 3, Part 3: *Provincial Cult* (RGRW 147; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 360 notes three elements in imperial religion: “dedications to the gods on behalf of the emperor’s *salus*, sacrifice to the gods performed by the emperor himself, rites to the emperor modelled on the cult of the gods.” Bruce W. Winter (*Divine Honours for the Caesars: The First Christians’ Challenge* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming], ch. 3) exemplifies these three elements in one inscription from Sardis, *IGR* IV 1756 lines 6–21; I am grateful to Dr. Winter for sharing this material and references with me. Mary Beard, John A. North, and Simon R. F. Price, *Religions of Rome* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) document priesthoods and offices as augur held by emperors and senators, including the emperor’s role as *pontifex maximus*, intermediary between the people and the gods (1:186–96), and the roles of priestly figures who were magistrates in haruspicy (interpreting prodigies) and augury (establishing the gods’ will through various techniques; 1:19–24).

⁶² Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter* (SNTSMS 110; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 89–93.

At club meetings, Simias meets other bakers and these contacts are very helpful if they get a big order and he suddenly needs extra oven space. The burial club meets for meals on the anniversaries of the death of former members, and eats together at the former member's tomb and prays to the gods for their dead friend. What would it mean for such a family to become believers in Jesus? Simias would either withdraw from the burial club or miss meetings on anniversaries of death, since he would no longer be willing to participate in prayer to the gods. This would damage his friendship with others in the club, and that alone might lead to some of his regular customers withdrawing their trade and buying their bread elsewhere. It would also mean that fellow-bakers refused to help him when he needed extra oven space for a big order, so he would lose trade. Problems would arise at the shop, too. Simias and Ianthe, his wife, would remove the shrine of the god popular among bakers from the counter of their baker's shop, and this would rapidly be noticed by their customers and people would mutter that they were dishonoring the gods. The effect would be that people would assume the baker's family were now being disloyal to the city of Philippi—for they were disloyal to a town god—and thus people would stop buying bread in their shop, probably including at least one of the three elite families who are their biggest customers. In addition, their regular supplier of flour would stop supplying them so that they had to buy from another supplier at about 10% extra cost. Oakes's example is more extended, but this gives you the picture that for this family to become Jesus-believers would be costly, both economically and socially, precisely because the "religious" and "political" spheres were so intertwined in a city like Philippi.

III. THE BELIEVERS ENCOUNTERING THE "POWERS THAT BE"

We turn, then, to sample encounters between the believers and the authorities. After noting Lukan promises of help by the Spirit or Jesus when the disciples encounter the powers, we shall briefly consider key features of engagement with Jewish authorities (Peter and John before the Sanhedrin), city authorities (Paul before the Areopagus and in Philippi), and imperial representatives (Paul before Felix), before drawing together some key features which emerge from these stories.

1. *The promises of Jesus in Luke's Gospel.*⁶³ Luke's Jesus twice promises his disciples help when they are in front of the powers, in Luke 12:12 and 21:15.

Luke 12:12 appears in teaching about the importance of public confession of Jesus (12:8–10) and particularly in the context of trials before the authorities (12:11a). This teaching is addressed in the first instance to his disciples (12:1a) with the crowd overhearing (12:1b). In that setting, Jesus assures his disciples that the Spirit will teach them what to say (12:12) and thus that they need not worry in advance about how to defend themselves (12:11b).

⁶³ See fuller discussion of these promises in Steve Walton, "Whose Spirit? The Promise and the Promiser in Luke 12:12," in *The Spirit and Christ in the New Testament in Christian Theology: Essays in Honor of Max Turner*, ed. I. Howard Marshall, Volker Rabens, and Cornelis Bennema (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, forthcoming 2012).

There are parallels to Luke 12:12 in the other Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 10:19–20; Mark 13:11) and Luke himself has an interesting parallel (21:12–15; cf. Matt. 24:9–13). There are clear similarities and differences among these four passages: (1) all are placed in a context of trial, although there is considerable variation in the specified authorities; (2) structurally, Luke 12, Matthew 10, and Mark 13 begin with a generalizing ὅταν (“whenever”) clause, whereas Luke 21 does not, for this seems to refer to a *specific* time of trials; (3) Jesus calls his disciples not to worry (μὴ μεριμνήσητε/προμεριμνήσῃτε) in advance in Luke 12, Mark 13, and Matthew 10, whereas Luke 21 simply specifies that the disciples must not prepare (μὴ προμελετᾶν) in advance; (4) Luke 12, Matthew 10, and Mark 13 mention the Spirit as the one who will give the disciples words to say (although Matthew alone specifies that it is the Father’s Spirit), whereas Luke 21 says that Jesus himself will give them words to speak; (5) Luke alone (in 12:11 and 21:14) uses the language of “defense” (ἀπολογέομαι), a word found only in these passages in Luke and only here in the Gospels, although it is also used in Acts in forensic contexts.⁶⁴

The Lukan promises are specific to the situation of judicial trial before authorities (Luke 12:11; 21:12), and thus stand alone among the promises of the Spirit to the disciples in the Synoptic Gospels in being situation-specific. Other Spirit-promises (granted that there are not many) are more general, concerning the role of the Spirit in equipping the disciples as witnesses to Jesus (notably Luke 24:49). Jesus’ assurance of the Spirit’s help in judicial trials prepares for the trials of believers in Acts, where Luke draws attention to the Spirit filling Peter and John when they respond to the charges against them in the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:8), and also Stephen on trial (Acts 7:51, 55; cf. 6:9–10).⁶⁵

The parallel promises in Luke 12:12 and 21:14–15 are suggestive, too, for the relationship of Jesus and the Spirit. Both relate the promise of aid during trials to the instruction not to prepare a defense in advance, both use the rare ἀπολογέομαι (“I defend”), and both explain the basis of this statement with a γάρ (“for”) clause. However, the one providing the aid in 12:12 is the Spirit, whereas in 21:15 it is Jesus himself (emphatic ἐγώ, “I myself”). This theme develops and expands in Acts, for while often it is the Spirit who empowers and leads the disciples in witness (Acts 4:8–12; 6:10; 8:29; 10:19; 13:2–4), sometimes it is Jesus (Acts 7:55–56; 9:4–5,

⁶⁴ Acts 19:33; 24:10; 25:8; 26:1–2, 24; the only other NT uses are Rom 2:15; 2 Cor 12:19.

⁶⁵ Both Joseph A. Fitzmyer (*Luke* [AB 28A–B; 2 vols; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981, 1985] 2:966) and Darrell L. Bock (*Luke* [IVPNTC; Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1994] 2:1144) draw attention to the immediacy of the promise (ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ ὥρᾳ “in that very hour”, v. 12) and compare Philo’s retelling of the angel’s instruction to Balaam: “Go on in the journey in which you have set out, for you shall do no good to those who have sent for you, and you must say what I prompt you, without any thoughts of your own, finding utterance, as I will guide the organs of your speech in the way that shall be just and expedient, for I will direct your words, predicting all that shall happen through the agency of your tongue, though you yourself understand nothing of it” (*Moses* 1:274). Philo goes on to tell how “the prophetic spirit entered” Balaam (προφητικοῦ πνεύματος ἐπιφοιτήσαντος, 1:277) with the result that he prophesied (θεσπίζει, 1:278). However, this is not strictly parallel, since it is about prophetic inspiration, rather than inspiration when on trial.

10–16; 18:9–10; 22:7–10, 17–21; 23:11; 26:14–18).⁶⁶ It is thus hard to agree with Green, if his implication is that it is *exclusively* by the Spirit that Jesus will be present to his disciples, when he writes:

Jesus thus portends his continual presence with the disciples even as they face the tribunal, following his death; only with the onset of Acts we understand fully that he will be present to the community of his followers by means of the Holy Spirit poured out among them.⁶⁷

Buckwalter points to an interesting parallel: in the OT, action by YHWH from heaven is described in similar terms to action by the Spirit, and YHWH is not limited to appearing on earth *as or by* the Spirit; in Luke–Acts, action by *the exalted Jesus* from heaven is described in similar terms to action by the Spirit, and again, Jesus is not limited to appearing on earth *as or by* the Spirit.⁶⁸ It is thus plausible that the parallel actions of Jesus and the Spirit in empowering and enabling speech when the disciples are on trial (in Luke 12 and 21) entail a relationship of Jesus in relation to the Spirit which is similar to that of YHWH and the Spirit.⁶⁹ Not only that, but the ability of the exalted Jesus to be present with disciples in different times and places when they are on trial shows Jesus (and the Spirit) to have the same multi-locational ability as YHWH.⁷⁰

2. *Peter and John before the Jewish authorities (Acts 4:5–22)*. Peter and John appear before the Sanhedrin in Acts 4:5–22 as a result of the healing of the man at the Beautiful Gate (3:1–10). The question put to them is, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” Luke then records the Spirit’s enabling to do this before they respond (v. 8). The Sanhedrin’s question both invites and enables them to focus on witness directly about Jesus in their response. They address the Sanhedrin respectfully, as “Rulers of the people and elders,”⁷¹ and then assert that it is through Jesus that the man has been healed. Not only that, but they boldly identify the Sanhedrin’s part in Jesus’ death, “whom *you* (emphatic *ὁμεῖς*) crucified.” Jack T. Sanders mistakenly understands this as placing responsibility for Jesus’ death on the Jewish people as a whole,⁷² whereas verses 5–6 make clear that it is the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem who are in view here.⁷³ The greatness of their error is highlighted by the contrasting divine verdict: God raised Jesus from the dead. Peter calls on Ps 117:21 LXX (MT 118:22) as witness to the crucial place which Jesus

⁶⁶ See the discussion by Douglas Buckwalter, *The Character and Purpose of Luke’s Christology* (SNTSMS 89; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 197–204.

⁶⁷ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 737.

⁶⁸ Buckwalter, *Character*, ch. 8.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 203–4.

⁷⁰ Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (NAC 24; Nashville: Broadman, 1992) 518–19. He goes on to suggest that we should therefore “describe Jesus as possessing an *essence* different from others” (519, his italics).

⁷¹ This phrase functions as a *captatio benevolentiae*, and is respectful without being fawning (Marion L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994] 45).

⁷² Jack T. Sanders, *The Jews in Luke–Acts* (London: SCM, 1987) 238–39.

⁷³ With Jon A. Weatherly, *Jewish Responsibility for the Death of Jesus in Luke–Acts* (JSNTSup 106; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 69; Skinner, *Trial* 111.

now has, as “head of the corner,” after being rejected by “*you* builders”—the insertion of ὑμῶν into the biblical citation hammers the contrast of verdicts home.

The evident boldness of Peter and John causes comment (v. 13), and clearly comes from their sense of compulsion to speak (v. 20). Verse 29 will further clarify that such boldness is a divine gift flowing from being filled with the Spirit (v. 31). This boldness stops the Sanhedrin in its tracks, and they go into private session to decide what to do. Their discussion is striking for its lack of mention or consideration of God and God’s purposes, by contrast with the bold speech of Peter and John. They cannot even bring themselves to mention the name of Jesus: they use “that name” (v. 18) instead.

By contrast with the Sanhedrin’s failure to speak about God, Peter and John identify the issue as being what God wants (v. 19). Thus the apostles turn the tables on the Sanhedrin by speaking truth to power: they have Peter and John on trial, but the apostolic κρίνατε (“you judge!”) puts the Sanhedrin on trial concerning their assessment of Jesus. The issue is not just their assessment of Jesus, but also their impotence in the face of what God is now doing: they lack any legal ground to punish the apostles and their verdict is at variance with the people’s (v. 21). The apostles are those who speak for God, rather than the Sanhedrin. Haenchen rightly notes that Luke wishes to bring

home to the reader the justice and obligation of preaching Christ, and showing from the example of the apostles ... how the Christian, certain of divine assistance, should fearlessly bear witness for his Lord, unquelled by police, arrest or official interdict.⁷⁴

3. *Philippi: engagement with local magistrates (Acts 16:16–40)*. By contrast with the plain speaking of Peter and John in Jerusalem, Paul and Silas are silent in what passes for a trial in Philippi. Here, they are attacked because of the economic consequences of Paul’s deliverance of the slave girl who has a “python spirit” (Acts 16:16–19). The owners of the slave girl have lost their source of income because she can no longer do divination for fees, and their (carefully chosen) claim against Paul and Silas is that they are advocating Jewish customs which Roman law prohibits (vv. 20–21). In the midst of what seems to be a disorderly crowd situation (v. 22a), Luke does not record any speech by Paul and Silas—after addressing the spirit to deliver the girl (v. 18), their next words in the story are to sing hymns to God (v. 25), not to address any human audience. After they receive a flogging, Paul and Silas are put in the innermost part of the prison (v. 24), presumably for security. However, God acts in an earthquake which opens the doors, and we next hear Paul and Silas speak in response to the jailer’s question, “What must I do to be saved?”, in response to which they lead him to faith in Jesus and baptize him and his household.

Verse 40 suggests that Paul and Silas return to prison after eating at the jailer’s home; it is there, on the next morning, that the magistrates (οἱ στρατηγοί) seek to have them leave quietly. They send the lictors (ῥαβδούχος, v. 35) as messengers, and

⁷⁴ Haenchen, *Acts* 223–24.

the jailer relays the message to them. (v 36). It is at this point that Paul engages the magistrates, and sends a message back to them to the effect that they have acted unlawfully in beating Roman citizens without proper trial and imprisoning them, and that he is not now willing to leave quietly (v. 38). What is going on here? Why does Paul now seem to stand on his dignity, rather than earlier in this story? It may be partly that the earlier “trial” moved so speedily that it was not possible to object, but it is more significant that it is only following the earthquake that the magistrates decide to free Paul and Silas, and their desire to send them away quietly is designed to avoid the embarrassment of admitting that divine action by Paul and Silas’s god had persuaded them that they should release the two men—at this point, they do not know that Paul and Silas are Roman citizens. Thus Paul wants to insist that the earthquake demonstrated that God has vindicated him and Silas against the city authorities, and plays the card of Roman citizenship to force the authorities to come and apologize. Here is speaking truth to power which is double-edged. There is a delicious irony in this about-turn, for the charge against Paul and Silas was anti-Roman behavior (vv. 20–21) and the authorities have to apologize for *their* anti-Roman behavior (vv. 38–39).

Paul and Silas thus insist on the claims of God and the name of Jesus not being marginalized by the city authorities; these believers are prepared to require the authorities to act justly, and this should be seen as as really a part of Paul and Silas’s testimony to Jesus as Paul’s deliverance of the slave girl “in the name of Jesus the Messiah” (v. 18).

4. Athens: Paul before the Areopagus (Acts 17:16–34). The Areopagus’s powers in Athens as the “standing committee” of the citizen assembly (the Demos) were considerable and included jurisdiction over the introduction of new gods into the city and therefore over the construction of new temples. In an important article, Bruce Winter argues that this power is a key context for Paul’s speech to the council.⁷⁵ Paul, Winter argues, would have been perceived as seeking to introduce new gods into the city: “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign deities” (Acts 17:18), and it may be that he was seen as proclaiming Jesus and Anastasis as two gods. The Athenians took Paul to the Areopagus, and the council there stated that they had the legal right (δυνάμειθα = “we have the power”) to decide (γνώναι = “to form a judgment”; v. 19). They go on in verse 20 to say that they wish to make a judgment on what is being claimed by Paul. This is a polite enquiry, not a prosecution.⁷⁶ The council is concerned whether Paul’s new gods could be acceptable to join the Athenian pantheon. Were the Areopagus to accept Paul’s gods—or recommend to the Demos that they do so—Paul would be expected to purchase land, build a sacrificial altar, defray the costs at least of an annual dinner in the god’s honor, and probably also of cultic officials.

⁷⁵ Winter, “Gods,” citing R. Garland, *Introducing New Gods: The Politics of Athenian Religion* (London: Duckworth, 1992).

⁷⁶ Winter, “Gods” 83.

Paul’s Athens speech takes on a new light in responding to their question understood this way, for he declares that he is not introducing new gods, but one they already worship, albeit as “unknown” (v. 23). There was no requirement to acquire land for this god, for Israel’s God was the creator of all land (v. 24a)—indeed, this god did not live in hand-made temples (v. 24b), and so it was pointless to consider building a new temple for him. Paul thus undercuts the assumptions of the council, and denies that there is any need for further evidence for them to honour this god among their pantheon, for this god provides for all and does not need human attendants (v. 25). The quest for more gods to add to the statues in Athens was a mistake (v. 29).

Paul turns the tables on his interlocutors, for he asserts that the resurrection of Jesus—ironically—shows that the council, rather than making judgments *about* gods, faces judgment *from* the one true God through Jesus (vv. 30–31).

Luke thus presents Paul as undermining his hearers’ world view and offering them a replacement world view drawn from Jewish monotheism re-understood in the light of Jesus’ resurrection. Thus witness to Jesus in Athens in front of the Areopagus, a political body, involves speaking truth to power in the form of argument about world view, including engagement with and critique of the council’s assumptions. The speech is apologetic, but not as we often think of apologetics in today’s world and situations, for it does not involve argument about Jesus and his identity—those things are assumed and asserted, rather than argued.

5. *Paul before the Governor Felix in Caesarea.*⁷⁷ Felix enters the story of Acts as governor (technically, procurator) of Palestine who meets Paul after his arrest in Jerusalem. The tribune Claudius Lysias sends a letter to brief Felix on Paul’s case (Acts 23:26–30)—a letter which is rather economical with the truth, although it does make clear that the tribune regards the issue as an intra-Jewish matter which does not merit any serious penalty being applied to Paul (v. 29).

What we know of Felix from extrabiblical sources suggests that he could be a harsh governor who did not hesitate to use military means to keep the peace, and who was willing to cooperate with the *sicarii* terrorists to have the high priest killed.⁷⁸ However, Tertullus’s positive introduction that seeks Felix’s goodwill and attention (*captatio benevolentiae*, 24:2b–3)⁷⁹ is neither mere flattery nor simply disingenuous. Ananias, the high priest who led the delegation to Felix (24:1), and Ananias’s predecessor Jonathan had pressed Claudius to appoint Felix as

⁷⁷ See fuller discussion in Walton, “Trying” 132–36.

⁷⁸ Respectively, Josephus, *Ant.* 20.8.7 §§173–78; *J.W.* 2.13.7 §§266–70 and *Ant.* 20.8.5 §162; *J.W.* 2.13.3. §§254–57. See the helpful brief treatments in Brian M. Rapske, “Roman Governors of Palestine,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments* (ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids; Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1997) 979–84, here 982–83; *ABD* 2:783 and, more fully, David W. J. Gill, “Acts and Roman Policy in Judaea,” in *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting* (ed. Richard Bauckham; A1CS 4; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1995) 15–26, here 21–26.

⁷⁹ Bruce W. Winter, “The Importance of the *Captatio Benevolentiae* in the Speeches of Tertullus and Paul in Acts 24:1–21,” *JTS* NS 42 (1991) 505–31.

procurator.⁸⁰ It was an unusual appointment for a mere freedman rather than someone of equestrian rank.⁸¹ The Jewish delegation was thus compelled to support Felix's administration. Further, not long before this, Felix had brought peace following a rebellion led by an Egyptian.⁸² Tertullus's comments (24:2) may allude to this incident.

Luke presents Felix as acting properly, at least initially, in handling Paul's case. First, he establishes whether Paul falls under his jurisdiction by enquiring which province he comes from (23:34). Cilicia was probably at this time under the legate of Syria, Felix's line manager. So for Felix to fail to hear the case and pass it on to the legate of Syria would be to risk appearing to waste the legate's time with a minor matter⁸³—even though the transfer of an accused person to his own province was optional at this time.⁸⁴

Second, Felix wishes to hear first-hand from Paul's accusers (23:35a; cf. 25:16), as was normal in Roman law.⁸⁵ Paul's defense speech (24:10–21) initially focuses on the charges made against him and denies that they are valid (vv 12–13). Paul then turns to testify to his faith as a valid form of Judaism, worshipping the God of the Jewish ancestors and holding to the Jewish Scriptures (v. 14), and a faith which entails resurrection hope (v. 15). Paul makes the point that at least some of the accusers are not present (24:19), thus implying that the charges were invalid.⁸⁶ Their absence is reflected in the reduced claims that Tertullus makes, asserting only that Paul "attempted" to profane the temple (ἐπειράσεν, 24:6), whereas the missing Asian Jews had claimed that Paul "had defiled" the temple (κεκοίνωκεν, 21:28).

Felix then acts within his powers in deciding to await testimony from the tribune Lysias (24:22), since he needs advice to help him decide between the two contradictory testimonies he has heard.⁸⁷ Luke does not tell us whether Felix was able to consult Lysias or whether a consultation took place but was inconclusive. Whatever the case, Paul remained in custody at governor Felix's pleasure (as the

⁸⁰ Tacitus, *Ann.* 12.54. Winter, "Importance" 515–16; F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (London: Oliphants, 1977) 325.

⁸¹ Claudius Lysias and Tertullus address Felix as "most excellent" (κράτιστος, 23:26; 24:3), a title undoubtedly used for those of equestrian rank, but not exclusively for such people (Loveday Alexander, *The Preface to Luke's Gospel: Literary Convention and Social Context in Luke 1.1–4 and Acts 1.1* [SNTSMS 78; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993] 133; F. J. Foakes Jackson and K. Lake, eds., *The Beginnings of Christianity*, Part I: *The Acts of the Apostles* (5 vols.; London: Macmillan, 1920–33) 2:505–7).

⁸² Josephus, *J.W.* 2.13.5. §§261–63; Acts 21:38.

⁸³ A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963; repr. 1981) 55–57; Brian M. Rapske, *The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody* (A1CS 3; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994) 155. Cilicia was probably not formally a province at this time, but this distinction does not affect the point noted.

⁸⁴ Sherwin-White, *Society* 55.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 17; Harry W. Tajra, *The Trial of St Paul: A Juridical Exegesis of the Second Half of the Acts of the Apostles* (WUNT 2:35; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989) 115.

⁸⁶ Luke T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (SacPag 5; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992) 417; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation and Commentary* (AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998) 737.

⁸⁷ Sherwin-White, *Society* 53.

British judicial system charmingly puts it). In the situation of waiting for Lysias’s testimony, Felix can afford to relax Paul’s conditions of detention, and so he does (24:23).⁸⁸

Strikingly, Paul’s confinement does not prevent him from testifying to the gospel, for Felix wishes to hear him on the subject on numerous occasions (24:24–26), thus partially fulfilling the Lord’s word to Paul (23:11). As Skinner notes, this situation gives Paul access to some of the most powerful people in Judaea.⁸⁹ Thus Paul the prisoner is Paul the *missionary*-prisoner.⁹⁰

Paul persists in being Jesus’ witness with Felix, speaking about “faith in Jesus the Messiah” (24:24), but the deal-breaker for Felix seems to be the moral demands of Paul’s testimony. Felix becomes fearful at Paul’s talk “concerning righteousness and self-control and judgment to come” (24:25) and therefore sends Paul away. These qualities imply a call to repent, a key feature of evangelistic proclamation in Acts.⁹¹ However, they may be particularly apposite for Felix as a governor who should act with righteousness and self-control, but had deceptively drawn Drusilla away from her former husband into his arms.⁹² Self-control (ἐγκράτεια) may thus focus here on *sexual* self-control.⁹³ In this light, “judgment to come” would be an unwelcome thought to Felix if his conscience was at all sensitive to what Paul said. Paul is portrayed here as “turning the tables” on Felix, his judge, by speaking to Felix of the values which (ironically) should be guiding his judgment.⁹⁴ Testimony to Jesus involves speaking uncomfortable truth to power at times.

Not only that, but testimony to Jesus involves rejecting underhand ways out, for Felix hoped for a bribe from Paul, and not just on one occasion, but repeatedly (24:26).⁹⁵ This was not uncommon among judges in the Roman empire,⁹⁶ although illegal under the *Lex Iulia de Repetundis*.⁹⁷ Luke takes a dim view of it,⁹⁸ for it results in Paul continuing to be held even though the tribune Lysias had written to Felix that Paul had not committed any crime worthy of death or imprisonment (23:29). As is often the case in Luke-Acts, how possessions are handled is an index of a

⁸⁸ On the possible nature of the relaxation of condition, see Rapske, *Book* 167–72.

⁸⁹ Matthew L. Skinner, *Locating Paul: Places of Custody as Narrative Settings in Acts 21–28* (AcBib 13; Atlanta: SBL, 2003) 137–38.

⁹⁰ The expression is from Rapske, *Book*, e.g. 429–36.

⁹¹ E.g. 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 11:18; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20.

⁹² Josephus, *Ant.* 20.7.1 §§141–44; Gerhard Schneider, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (HTKNT; 2 vols.; Freiburg: Herder, 1980, 1982) 2:351–52.

⁹³ BDAG 274 s.v.

⁹⁴ Cf. Richard J. Cassidy, *Society and Politics in the Acts of the Apostles* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987) 106.

⁹⁵ Although πικρότερον is formally a comparative form, the lack of anything to compare suggests a superlative sense, meaning “very often” (with MHT 3:30; C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (ICC; 2 vols; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994, 1998) 2:1116; *pace* BDF §244[1], who assert it to be ambiguous).

⁹⁶ E.g. Albinus, as reported by Josephus, *J.W.* 2.14.1 §§272–73. Rapske, *Book* 65–67 lays out the evidence for such corruption in the judicial system.

⁹⁷ Introduced in 59 BC to prevent corruption of this kind in the provinces; see Tajra, *Trial*, 131.

⁹⁸ Beverly R. Gaventa, *Acts* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2003) 330 suggests that Felix is portrayed in the image of the unjust judge of the parable (Luke 18:1–8).

person's standing with God,⁹⁹ and on that index Paul's stock is high and Felix's is low.

6. *Summarizing what we have seen.* We have seen the earliest believers engaging in a variety of contexts with the powers-that-be. Of necessity, we have sampled rather than attempted to be exhaustive, but some themes come through consistently and clearly concerning the shape which speaking truth to power—witness to and for Jesus—takes in these encounters.

First, testimony about Jesus himself is normally present, usually including some key moments from the gospel story being told or mentioned, notably Jesus' death, resurrection—understood as vindication by God, and his coming again to judge.

Second, believers speaking truth to power can involve direct attribution of responsibility for Jesus' death, as Peter and John do in Jerusalem.¹⁰⁰ The believers' testimony to the powers involves telling the powers when they have committed sin, and in this case sin of enormous magnitude. We have suggested that a similar theme is present in the scenes in Athens and with Felix.

Third, testimony to Jesus can involve calling the powers to act justly when they fail to do so, as Paul does with the magistrates in Philippi and with Felix in Caesarea. This is not only because to get them to act justly will (as we might say) open more doors for the gospel, but also (I suggest) because justice itself is part of the gospel the believers proclaim, for it is a key feature of the Christian God's character and a key Christian hope for the world to come; by contrast, injustice, in the sense of distinguishing between citizens and non-citizens, between elite and non-elite, was just the way the world was.

⁹⁹ For discussion of this theme in Luke, see Luke T. Johnson, *The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts* (SBLDS 39; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977) 144–58.

¹⁰⁰ Note the shift from “you” bearing this responsibility when speaking in Jerusalem (Acts 4:10–11) to speaking of “them”—the Jerusalemites and their rulers—as hearing that responsibility when speaking in Antioch (Acts 13:27–29).