

# Countervailing “missionary” forces: Empire and Church in Acts<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Scholarly consensus has long held the position that the second part of Luke-Acts was intended as some sort of Christian apology to the ruling authorities, serving to allay the fears of the imperial forces and their collaborators that the followers of Jesus posed no political threat. This scholarly edifice has been eroded somewhat, among others by the position that the source and direction of the apology were the reverse of the consensus position – a promotion of the imperial regime among followers of Jesus. Given these and other understandings of the imperial setting portrayed in Acts, the relationship between Acts and Empire clearly remains an unfinished and important discussion. This contribution aims to briefly discuss various interpretative positions on the relationship between Acts and Empire amidst first-century conceptions and positions of power, before highlighting a number of instances in Acts where this relationship comes to a head, suggesting some (six) important avenues for further investigation.

## 1. Introduction: How to describe Acts’ position towards Empire?

The Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament is a complex book, with multiple dimensions underwritten by specific geographical and historical settings, functioning together with the Gospel according to Luke as a double work<sup>2</sup> on the continuing story of Jesus migrating into the story of the church,<sup>3</sup> while also seeking to persuade the same emerging church about the reach of the gospel and role of Jesus Christ (cf Bryan 2005:95-105; Walton 2008:74).<sup>4</sup> The multiple levels and dimensions in Acts complicate its interpretation, and require more nuanced investigations – not least when it comes to accounting for its stance on socio-political matters generally and its portrayal of the imperial context of the day specifically.

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<sup>2</sup> Postponing the question on whether the Empire is portrayed in the same way in the Gospel according to Lk and Acts, to another time, it bears mentioning that feminist scholars have argued that while women in Lk occur in gendered pairs that actively participate in the ministry of Jesus, exhibit ideal virtues of leadership, are custodians of the word and bear witness throughout, in Acts women are silenced although the boundaries of the church are continuously pushed beyond the family-like audience of Jesus to the public sphere of the world of men. Women are increasingly marginalised in Acts, and forced to take up ascetic positions in order to retain some memory of their more active role in the beginnings of the movement (Seim 2004).

<sup>3</sup> “Church” is used as a collective shorthand to describe the multiple communities of Jesus followers in the middle to late first century CE, often diverse in nature and in various other aspects, and as described by Acts – its use here does not assume a unitary, normative ecclesial structure either in Acts or during the first century CE. However, as by the two instances where the term “Christian” is used (Ac 11:26; 26:28), the document does seem to be interested in accounting for at least certain aspects of the incipient early Christianity (cf Taylor 1994:75-94) although the Jesus-follower communities were still deemed a sect or “reform” movement within the Judaism of the time (cf Spencer 2005:113 n28).

<sup>4</sup> For a brief account of a few important shifts in the history of the interpretation of Acts, cf Walton (2008:74-76) who stresses the earliest commentary of Chrysostom wanting to relate Acts to Christian life and faith in *his* day; how Acts, courtesy of the nineteenth-century missionary movement, increasingly turned into a charter document for Christian mission; how historical critical studies, and redaction criticism in particular, with a decided history of religions focus gradually gave way to debates about the “delay of the parousia”-debates in work on the double volume by Luke (prefigured in Conzelmann’s three-fold understanding of the unfolding history of the church in Lk-Ac – *Heilsgeschichte* – as replacing the early church expectation of an imminent end: time before Jesus’ birth; Jesus’ ministry; and, the time of the church [Lk 16:16]); and, how narrative criticism with its focus on the final form of the text, grew into prominence since the 1980’s.

The double volume of Luke-Acts is more politically attuned than most other writings in the New Testament. Already in the Gospel, Luke is more than any of the other gospel writers, keen to situate the story of Jesus in the political context and circumstances of first century Judea, referring to local and centralised power in the forms of Herod, king of Judea (Lk 1:5), Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea (Lk 3:1-2) and Caesar Augustus (Lk 2:1-2). Luke subtly reminded his readers of Rome's imperial presence in the region, from which the Herodians, a Judaised Idumean dynasty benefitted greatly; while Luke's references to the census and the Roman governor of Syria would have invoked, respectively, notions of power exerted through taxation and a threatening military presence on the borders of Judea (Burrus 2007:134; cf Cassidy 1978).

Acts, as the second part of the double work, is often regarded as the most *pro-Roman Empire* document in the New Testament (Alexander 1991:15), showing Roman authority generally in a positive light (Hollingshead 1998:xii). A long-standing consensus on the book of Acts has described its stance towards the Roman Empire along the lines of accommodation, in other words, that Acts was a deliberate attempt to present the early communities of Jesus followers in such a way that it would be clear that they did not constitute a political threat to imperial power and politics. In fact, some scholars were in the past even of the opinion that Luke as author of Acts was intent on gaining recognition for this new religious grouping in order to ensure its status as *religio licita* with its accompanying benefits and privileges (Walton 2004:248). The accommodationist consensus has recently been challenged by a variety of alternative positions, with as the most conspicuous alternative interpretation the suggestion that, rather than an apologetic of the church offered to Empire, Luke had the reverse in mind: offering an apology for the Empire to the followers of Jesus<sup>5</sup> (Walaskay 1983; cf Walton 2004:248).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Arguing against the consensus position, it has been noted among others that the title "Lord" (κύριος) which was bestowed on Jesus would not have elicited conflict with Caesar's similar claim; and, in absence of the characteristically strong attacks on the Roman Empire as found in other Second Temple Jewish writings (e.g. 4 Ezra; *Sibylline Oracles*; Revelation), Luke places the development of the early Christian church within imperial history (Lk 2:1-5; 3:10-14) (Walton 2004:248-249).

<sup>6</sup> Besides the seeing Luke-Acts as a political apology on behalf of the church (directed at Roman officials) or apology on behalf of Empire addressed at the church, other, in-between options are listed in Walton (2001:2-12): providing legitimation for the church's identity; equipping the churches to live in the Roman Empire; and, that Luke-Acts was not interested in politics at all. Bryan (2005:95) adds also that two other possibilities were advanced in the past, namely that Luke had no interest in Empire at all but within a purely theological focus was intent on showing how God's actions in Jesus Christ were integral to God's faithfulness to his promises to Israel (cf e.g. LT Johnson, J Jervell); or, that Luke's intention was to prepare his audience for their impending suffering for their faith, either from the Empire or elsewhere (cf e.g. Cassidy). This is not, however, to deny

These broad, but divergent, interpretative frameworks evidently recognise the significance of Empire in Acts, generally doing so while they engaging Acts in full awareness of its complexities. In this way, they have set the scene for a further range of positions which developed a keener eye for the ambivalence towards Empire in Luke-Acts, perceiving Acts as serious interventionist literature intend on ameliorating Christian perspectives on and attitudes towards the Empire. While some scholars (e.g. Esler 1987) are of the opinion that Luke-Acts offered legitimation<sup>7</sup> for the faith of the early followers of Jesus, and for Christian faith's compatibility with loyalty to the Empire, others (e.g. Cassidy 1987) argue that Acts harboured some ambiguous positions towards Empire. For example, given the portrayal of Paul's actions as frequently causing social disturbances, and notwithstanding the apostle's cooperation with the authorities, indications are that his loyalty to the Empire was dubious at best (e.g. Ac 24:25; 25:10-11; 28:19). This had led some to posit a differentiated purpose in Acts' attitude towards Empire, with some ascribing a threefold purpose to Acts: communicating Luke's faith in Jesus; offering guidance to fellow believers on life under Roman rule; and, providing direction and support for believers who may end up in a trial before Roman authorities (Cassidy 1987). In fact – and building on the former – it has been argued that Acts presented some scripted settings or scenarios of imperial attitudes towards the followers of Jesus, which would present believers with guidance on how to act in similar situations (cf Walton 2004:248-249).

The array of positions that want to account for the relationship between church and empire in Acts will probably not too readily be dissolved into a common consensus – this is also not the ultimate purpose of *my* argument. Rather, my purpose is to demonstrate that no discussion of Acts can afford to neglect the pervasive presence of empire in, and its impact upon, the document, complete with all the accompanying ambivalence. Acknowledging that amidst the various interpretative stances on the

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that Lk-Acts portrays a struggle among messianic Jews as part of a broader spectrum of disputes between different Jewish groups about whom or what constituted "true Israel", the sins that required repentance and the accommodation and role of gentiles in God's salvation and judgement (Tiede 1988:328).

<sup>7</sup> More than just pro-church apologetic, Esler contends that Acts provided legitimation in the sense of a social process for people who belonged to an old order (even Roman soldiers or administrators, e.g. Ac 10:1-11:18; 13:6-12; 18:7), with accompanying bonds and commitments, but who are now joining a new order and have to have it explained and justified to them. Stressing the Israelite ancestry of the church (Ac 3:13; 5:30; 15:10; 22:14; 26:6; 28:25), establishes the antiquity and thus credibility of faith in Christ (Esler 1987:1-23, 201-219; cf Bryan 2005:96) – Walton expresses concern about and caution with regard to Esler's mirror-reading approach to identifying Acts' audience (Walton 2004:249). More generally, for Luke's tendency to draw "a veil over most of the discord and disunity which racked much of the early expansion of Christianity", cf Dunn (1993:7).

relationship church and empire, other significant issues in Acts such as narratological structure and purpose, such as historiography and negotiating identity, and so forth,<sup>8</sup> are also important for understanding church and empire in Acts, the focus here is more restricted, in two ways. This contribution, firstly, limits itself to a brief consideration of some aspects of power as it appears in Acts within the church and empire relationship, referring to a few instances in the document. And secondly, as a probing investigation with limited engagement with the issues and ensuing discussion, it marks out those areas of importance that are relevant here and as they have emerged more recently in scholarly discussions.

## 2. Social conventions and structures of power

### 2.1 *Politics and religion: two sides of the same coin*

If there is any truth in the claim that, “Particularly in the Roman Empire, politics and religion were not only intimately connected, but arguably the same thing”<sup>9</sup> (Hollingshead 1998:x), it is the awareness of the relationship between the respective “missions” of the Roman Empire and communities of early followers of Jesus that forms the appropriate starting point for further investigation. However, and to begin with, this is not to suggest a level playing field on which the many disparate, fledgling, often disjointed communities of Jesus-followers (which are today in rather unsophisticated fashion all too easily assimilated under the rubric “early Christianity”, and here even Church) came into contact with the generally well-oiled, but in any case overwhelming and vast machinery of the *Imperium*, deployed with its military, social and religious dimensions across the ancient Mediterranean. However, with the intimate connection between politics and religion, the competition between Empire and Church for the submission, obedience or loyalty – the *pistis* – of first-century people, set the scene for a power struggle; even if during the time of the New Testament it was a rather muted affair for the Empire given the size and shape of

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<sup>8</sup> An important caveat is in order: the focus here is on Acts’ representation of the Empire, and in particular on Empire and Church as countervailing missionary forces. Not addressing certain important questions about genre, relationship to the gospel of Lk, issues of historicity and a wide array of others – all of which are of value for dealing with Empire in Acts – does not mean disregard for their related importance to our topic, but is simply due to the limitations of a paper such as this one. On the setting of Acts, cf Bauckham (1995) for a Palestinian setting; Gill and Gempf (1994) for a Greco-Roman setting. For a brief debate on how best to deal with introductory matters regarding Lk-Ac, cf Spencer (2005:104-24) and Wenham (2005:79-103). Cf especially the helpful remarks of Spencer (2005:118-121) regarding the tenuous link between textual references and historiographical veracity, especially in the first century CE, and therefore expressing care not too claim to much to references such as the Claudius’ expulsion of the Jews from Rome (Ac 18:2).

<sup>9</sup> Those notions we label as “theological” or “political” and especially the often earnest attempts to maintain the distinction between them, would not have been understood in the first century CE. “The attempt to suggest a division here between the ‘religious’ and the ‘political’ is entirely unhistorical” (Bryan 2005:27).

early Jesus-follower communities.

It is important to note, when contrasting the early Jesus follower communities with the Roman Empire regarding religious formations and practices, that whereas the practices of the former relied upon a body of beliefs and theology as well as practices, and even some sacred texts, in the case of religion as it manifested in and through Empire the focus was predominantly on participation in rituals. “The ritual was what mattered, rather than any doctrinal or theological rationale” (Bryan 2005:117), which would require caution for a construct such as “Roman imperial theology” (as used by Crossan and Reed 2004:10), unless it is admitted to have exactly that nature, that of being a construct. The important point is that officially sanctioned ritual activities constituted religion in the eyes of the Romans, and that notwithstanding some “theological reflection” (e.g. Cicero’s *On the nature of the gods*), for the general populace religious rites were that which constituted reality.<sup>10</sup>

This lends further support to the notion that religion and politics were considered interwoven, both in the sense that the political power and position were appropriated as divinely sourced and maintained, as well as that what the divine contribution required in return, was honour and respect through religious worship of one kind or another. Indeed, not only were those unwilling to participate (i.e. sacrifice) in Roman religions branded as atheists and seen as a security threat, but periods of Christian persecution coincided neatly with Empire’s troubled times.<sup>11</sup> Imperial decline was put before the door of those unwilling to participate in the religions sanctified by Empire; and therefore at times the need arose to remove the religious wayward in order to ensure the prosperity of the Empire. Following the relative peace the early Church enjoyed, it was during the times of Decius, Valerian and Diocletian and thus the times of political, military and economical troubles for the Empire, that delivered the most vicious persecutions for the Church – until the Church eventually persuaded the Roman emperors that this new religion, rather than the gods, were *religio* and not

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<sup>10</sup> A notion underwritten by the frequent references to the unacceptable practices (primarily, of not showing deference to Roman gods) rather than improper belief, reasoning or philosophy: “So, for pious Romans, Christians who refused to sacrifice were evidently *atheoi* – atheists” (Bryan 2005:118).

<sup>11</sup> The unwillingness of Christians to participate in Roman sacrifices, constituted largely by the various forms and formats of the imperial cult, meant that they were a threat to complex and fragile balance of power that existed between the gods and the state (Heyman 2007). The non-participation of Jesus-followers in these sacrifices, when e.g. processions passed by their homes, publicly exposed them (cf. Fiensy 2004:53).

*superstitio*<sup>12</sup> (Bryan 2005:118-119).

## **2.2 Proselytising: Doing mission / making followers?**

Given the situation pertaining to the Roman Empire, who naturally did not proselytise – not even, evidence seems to suggest, in the ever-widening reach of the Emperor cult – and the size and shape of the early communities of Jesus followers, it is difficult, on the one hand, to argue for imperial designs specifically and directly directed at eliminating Jesus-follower missionary activity. The historical situation does not suggest that the imperial cult embarked on a deliberate and full-scale programme intent on the annihilation of Jesus-follower communities. However, taking a more structural perspective and acknowledging the vast imperial apparatus including its social, political, economical and religious systems and elements – both obvious and harsh such as the military, as well as subtle and apparently innocuous such as a social system like patronage – it is on the other hand not difficult to understand why early followers of Jesus would have experienced imperial designs and activities as potent exertions of power and dominance.

In this regard the emperor or ruler cult remains a significant – but certainly not the only! – means through which the Roman Empire socially engineered itself. All indications are that the emperor cult was of vast significance and of great importance for the Empire, in providing an important centripetal force especially in the outlying areas such as Asia Minor (cf Friesen 2001). More recently two important aspects relevant to our discussion have emerged:<sup>13</sup> one is that the emperor cult was not a monolithic construct and the singular term could mistakenly be interpreted to imply either strong direct control exerted in this regard from Rome, or a certain normativity or at least a fixed body or rituals and actions. The second important aspect to be noted about the imperial cult is the extent to which it was absorbed into local religions, influencing and elaborating existing practices to the extent that imperial ideology is privileged without obliterating the particular religious expressions and

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<sup>12</sup> Two examples show that the Church was nevertheless until the end of the Roman Empire hard-pressed in this regard, and that Roman religion remained a force that kept on challenging Christianity: one, the erstwhile convert and later apostate emperor Julian (361-363 CE); and two, Augustine's protest in *City of God* that the fall of Rome to Alaric the Visigoth in 410 was not because Rome had forsaken its gods (Bryan 2005:118-119).

<sup>13</sup> Elaborating on work done by Friesen, Thompson and Price on the role and impact of the ruler cult in Asia Minor, Fiensy (2004:48-50) reasons that amidst some remaining uncertainties, the following three conclusions are important: emperor worship was important throughout many levels of society; it had wide support; and, it was more popular in the provinces than in Rome. Also relevant here, is the conclusion of Fiensy (2004:43-45) that the word "asiarch" (Ἀσιάρχης; Ac 19:31) should not be taken as a reference to imperial cult high priests.

formations.

It is in the consideration of the intersection of Roman Empire and Church of Christ, that it becomes useful to refer to countervailing missionary forces. And (again) while the Empire could hardly be understood as primarily a religious movement or even ascribed a consistent programme of proselytising (whether for the Empire or the cult), the absence of a single term for mission<sup>14</sup> in the New Testament (Swartley 2003:77; cf Köstenberger 2008:10) also has to be registered. The term “missionary”<sup>15</sup> (forces) in the presentation’s title, is mostly reserved for deliberation on and activities (ancient and modern) related to people embarking on evangelism, church planting and the like in a concerted if not always structured way (cf Punt 2008b). However, given the comprehensive (i.e. directed at the “whole world”), and active (i.e. through military, socio-cultural and religious campaigns, strategies and discourse) campaigns of the Roman Empire to win over – and not simply to subjugate, although this may have been the dominant experience of the imperial subjects – the people encapsulated by the reach of Empire, the term “missionary” might not be wholly inappropriate to refer to the strong imperial design of conquering all, not only in body but also in mind and soul.

At times, such countervailing missionary forces come into clear view,<sup>16</sup> with the claim that the followers of Jesus were acting against the interests of the Empire, not infrequently put into the mouths of Jews (e.g. οἱ πάντες ἀπέναντι τῶν δογμάτων Καίσαρος πράσσουσιν βασιλέα ἕτερον λέγοντες εἶναι Ἰησοῦν “they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus”, Ac 17:7).<sup>17</sup> So also,

<sup>14</sup> *Mission* is often understood as a comprehensive term including both derivative adjectives, and related to a faith community perception of its identity and role in the world as one of reaching out to the world, in the form of preaching and confessing, as well through social engagement broadly speaking. Schnabel’s definition (quoted in Blomberg 2007:63) is comprehensive but probably reflects a more contemporary approach than the situation in the NT: “the activity of a community of faith that distinguishes itself from its environment in terms of both the religious belief (theology) and social behaviour (ethics), that is convinced of the truth claims of its faith, and that actively works to win other people to the content of faith and to the way of life of whose truth and necessity the members of that community is convinced”. Formulated in this way, it is already evident that the “missionary” activity of the Roman Empire can be described analogously in view of its proselytising secular (e.g. through offering Roman citizenship) and religious (e.g. the Emperor cult) activities.

<sup>15</sup> It has to be explained with reference another, cognate term sometimes used somewhat indiscriminately, *missional*, as a broad term (even inclusive of “missionary”) which can be taken to refer to how the early followers of Jesus identified and eventually organised themselves – in communities and towards others – socially, morally and otherwise. In the New Testament context, *missional* can be related to the self-understanding and sense of identity of the early followers of Jesus – both in terms of self-identity and group-formation – with regard to, and sometimes in contrast with, the contemporary broader society.

<sup>16</sup> At least at one occasion, in Ac 14:8-18, Paul and Barnabas found themselves also viewed as gods “in the likeness of men” (ὁμοιωθέντες ἀνθρώποις), an assignment they take great care to deny, and to refocus the audience’s eyes on the “living God who has made the and the earth and the sea and all that is in them”, invoking Ex 20:11 (Ac 14:15-17). Cf also the people on the island Malta who thought of Paul as a god since he was not adversely affected by a snakebite (Ac 28:6).

<sup>17</sup>; Or the accusations in e.g. Ac 16:19 about following unlawful customs and practices; or in 18:13-15 about acting contrary to the law. According to Ac 18:15 Gallio was quick to debunk the Jews’ accusation that Paul acted contrary to the law as rather a matter of the Jews’ “own law” (νόμου τοῦ καθ’ ὑμᾶς).

for example, when the end of Herod Agrippa I is described in Ac 12, he is portrayed as putting on his royal attire, and taking his seat on the throne, but while receiving the adulation of people (θεοῦ φωνή καὶ οὐκ ἀνθρώπου; “the voice of a god and a man”, Ac 12:22) he met his death. Ac 12:23 insists that Herod was struck dead for not giving glory to God. Furthermore, the next verse reads: “But the word of God grew (ἠύξανεν) and multiplied (ἐπληθύνετο)” (Ac 22:24). Notwithstanding the strong efforts by Herod as imperial representative and functionary, it is the power of God in the form of his word that prevailed.

Sometimes God’s power is mediated through other people in Acts, still bent on overcoming the Roman imperial influence, but rather than God acting in a direct way, God is presented as working through others. Episodes that can be included under this category would range from the well-known accounts of the miraculous deliverance of Peter from jail with the help of angelic figures (Ac 12:6-11) to the mustering the forces of nature such as the earthquake that led to Paul and Silas’ “release” from jail and the conversion of the jailor in Philippi (Ac 16:26).

The presentation in Acts of apparent good relations between those of the Empire and those of the Kingdom of God, especially in episodes where the Jews are presented as the cause and instigators of trouble and upheaval (e.g. Ac 21:28-36; 22:22; 23:12-15; 24:1-9), shows cracks, however, as soon as more than the interpretation of the Jewish law is concerned. When Paul is summoned to meet with Felix and his Jewish wife Druscilla, to talk about Christ, it is reported that when Paul starting talking about “justice, self-control and future judgement” (περὶ δικαιοσύνης καὶ ἐγκρατείας καὶ τοῦ κρίματος τοῦ μέλλοντος; Ac 24:25), Felix cut the interview short and sent Paul back to jail – where, in fact, he was left for two years because Felix wanted to do the Jews a favour (θέλων τε χάριτα καταθέσθαι; Ac 24:27), until Festus<sup>18</sup> took over the reigns from Felix (Ac 24:27; 25:1).

In the presence of what is best described an ideological battle, its ambivalent nature is probably clearest in Acts 26, where Paul made his presentation to king Herod Agrippa II, in the presence of his sister Bernice, governor Festus, and some high

<sup>18</sup> And, of course, even in a speech directed at Festus, Acts put Paul on record for claiming that he (Paul) have not offended against the Jewish law or the temple, and also not against Caesar (οὔτε εἰς Καίσαρά τι ἥμαρτον; Ac 25:8).



ranking military staff and other prominent people of the city (Ac 25:23). After receiving permission from Agrippa that he may “speak for himself” (ἐπιτρέπεται σοι περὶ σεαυτοῦ λέγειν; Ac 26:1) Paul retold his life story, focussing on his earlier persecution of the followers of Jesus and his eventual turn to Christ. Agrippa’s response to Paul was that his learning has made him mad (τὰ πολλά σε γράμματα εἰς μανίαν περιτρέπει; Ac 26:24), but not that there was guilt in Paul with regard to the Empire and imperial laws and regulations. Acts has Festus saying explicitly that Paul deserved neither imprisonment nor death; in fact, *but* for his appeal to Caesar, Paul should have been set free (Ac 26:31-32). While the representatives of Empire in their assessment of the charges against him (Ac 21:28, preaching against and defiling the temple), exonerated Paul as far as the Empire is concerned, they nevertheless incarcerated him to, according to Acts, keep the Jews appeased, as a strategy intended to lessen the changes of a revolt.

### 3. Engaging Empire in Acts<sup>19</sup>

It is this uneven setting of different yet competing claims and aspirations between church and empire that created the breeding ground for the ambiguities that characterised this relationship, at least as it is presented in Acts. This is not to suggest that the empire replaced the history and traditions of Israel as primary socio-cultural interpretative framework for understanding the significance of Jesus. The point is rather that the book of Acts shows upon the imperial context as the prevailing and primary, socio-political milieu for understanding the significance of Jesus in the contemporary urban<sup>20</sup> world and times. There are many different angles to the relationship between the kingdom of God and the Roman Empire, to their perception as countervailing forces from different perspectives portrayed in the narrative – with many ambiguities which the Acts narrative was apparently in no hurry to resolve. Such considerations are now the focus of this presentation.

<sup>19</sup> The role of Empire in Acts should, of course, be understood in conjunction with the broader message of the document. A brief catalogue of 5 proposals for the centre of Acts from a theological perspective illustrates both diversity but also the equalising force of a strongly theological interpretation: *salvation*, with God as the prominent driver within the narrative; *God*, portrayed as purposeful (fulfilling OT promises), as a missionary God focussing on first Jews then also Gentiles, as a God acting through people, and as a saving God; the *believing community*, complete with positive and negative aspects; *Jesus*, particularly the message about him; the *Holy Spirit*, in whom God is personally encountered, accompanied by discussions about the Spirit’s role in human empowerment and the Spirit’s place in conversion (Walton 2008:76-79)

<sup>20</sup> The narrative of Acts develops within an urban environment, suggested already by the interesting statistic that half of the references to “city” in the NT are found in Lk-Ac (cf Rohrbach 1991:125).

However, first the following three broad, often contradictory but never fully absent or transcended lines should be pointed out – noting that these are certainly not exhaustive of the tendencies which constitute the complexity of the narrative of Acts. They are, however, illustrative and important for recognising the ambivalences pertaining to socio-cultural influences, found in the narrative of Acts. In the *first* place, there are no indications in Acts that the traditions of Israel are ignored or made superfluous, that they are not taken into account in Acts. In fact, in Acts there is a concerted effort to link the early followers of Jesus with the traditions of Israel and with Israelite ancestors in particular, as is evident in Ac 3:13; 5:30; 15:10; 22:14; 26:6; and 28:25 (already signalled in Lk 1). But then, *secondly*, and without suggesting contradiction of the former, Acts at the same time stressed the compatibility of faith in Christ with loyalty to the Roman Empire (Esler 1987:201-219; cf Walton 2004:249). And *thirdly* and at still another level of discernment, the narrative of the (apparent?) accommodation of Jesus followers to imperial designs and structures such as the patronage system (Ac 12; 16; 18), availing themselves of the legal system (Ac 21-26), and even befriending Roman officials or garnering the support of the elite of certain towns (e g Ac 13:12; 17:4), simultaneously shows how a subtle political subversion is constantly, and even amidst those episodes where the imperial system is ostensibly tolerated if not also affirmed, at work (cf Burrus 2007:134-144).

Energy should not primarily be exerted on the mostly futile attempts to resolve these strains and tensions in the book of Acts, playing the one off in favour of the other, as if focus of attention amounts to a statistical calculation of ultimate weight, as indicated by the document's support for or in its denigration of the Empire. To put it differently and more positively, it is in the tensions and strains of the text<sup>21</sup> that it gradually emerges that two prevailing forces are locked in an intense struggle, as Acts presents the extent to which the totalising claims of one empire (Roman) is opposed with the totalising claims of another (God's kingdom). And then still further, the subversiveness of the text comes to full bloom in "the very ambivalence that earned Luke his reputation as an apologist for Rome" (Burrus 2007:139). Using the claims and the norms of the Roman Empire against itself, using the public transcripts

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<sup>21</sup> Cf Burrus (2007:133-155) for further ambivalences and ambiguities in the texts.

in hegemonic situations against the powerful (Scott 1990:106), the value of truth and the importance of justice are affirmed (Ac 21-26). At the same time, however, the imperial system is subverted in constantly portraying the Roman governors as well as the client rulers in a negative light, as was already the case with Herod in Lk 23 (Burrus 2007:140). As a first area for further investigation, the role ascribed to Acts' Jews amidst the countervailing missionary forces of Church and Empire requires some attention.

### **3.1 Role of the Jewish leaders and people: Jesus' death and Paul's suffering**

The position and the portrayal of the social matrix and materiality of Empire in Acts, has to be understood within the broader scope of the double-work of Luke-Acts, but also in relation to other antagonists, in particular "the Jews" as presented in Luke-Acts.<sup>22</sup> In as far as Acts sought to present an account of the apostles, and of Peter and Paul in particular, and their role in the establishment and growth of communities of Jesus-followers a decade or more after Jesus' execution, the document's narrative initially relates to a period when Agrippa I, client king of Rome, personal friend of the Emperor and grandson of Herod the Great, ruled both Judea and Galilee from 41-44 CE, and apparently found approval among the Pharisees according to rabbinic authors (cf *m. Bik.* 3.4; *m. Sot.* 7.8). Some scholars (e.g. Bryan 2005:28) surmise that this was the probable reason for Agrippa's opposition to the followers of Jesus, the early Christians, especially since Luke's Gospel already accorded Agrippa with the responsibility for the death of James brother of John and the imprisonment of Peter (Ac 12:1-5).

However, with the narrative of Acts, largely situated in towns around the Aegean Sea and in Asia Minor, the dominant social location is not Second Temple Judaism<sup>23</sup> but rather the Greco-Roman attuned, Gentile world of the East.<sup>24</sup> Given the frequent

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<sup>22</sup> Although the comparison between "Jewish" historiography as found in the historical books of the OT/HB and Lk-Ac cannot be elaborated here; suffice it note four important areas for investigation: linguistic (with Ac using "Septuagintal" language) and thematic (prophecy and fulfilment themes) connections; Ac used scriptural models for composing stories (e.g. God appearing and speaking to people); OT/HB literary techniques echoed in the use of set formulae (cf on church growth, Ac 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31), speeches summarising and forming the end to a narrative (e.g. prayer in Ac 4:24-3), periodisation of history, and focussing on a few main characters (Peter, Stephan, Philip, Paul); and, employing the OT/HB's theological understanding of history which particularly has God in control of all (cf Walton 2004:238).

<sup>23</sup> However, epigraphic sources confirm a significant Jewish presence in Asia Minor during the first century CE (cf Fiensy 2004:38).

<sup>24</sup> At another level, it is argued that although the Mediterranean world was a conflict-ridden world, and the stories about Jesus, his followers and related groups are told as stories about conflict, these conflicts were portrayed as conflicts about the practical means to some end, and never about the ends in themselves. "All the conflicts to be noted in Luke-Acts will be conflicts over ways to realize the traditional values of Israel; conflicts over structures, either new or revitalized ones, to

Jew-Jesus follower encounters, which were often hostile in nature, the first-century Jewish matrix cannot be ignored, particularly the extent to which Jewish authorities could exert power and force.<sup>25</sup> Amidst other uncertainties, there is also some debate about the Sanhedrin's ability to conduct executions in the first century CE. The three instances where local Jewish authorities appear to have had control over exercising capital punishment – the summary execution of foreigners entering the temple (*War* 6.126; *Ant* 15.417; Philo, *Ad Gaium*, 31, #212); the stoning of Stephan (*Ac* 7:54-8:1); and, the execution of James, brother of Jesus (*Ant* 20.197-203) – are probably exceptions proving the rule, and also indicative that the Roman Empire jealously guarded the power of the sword (Bryan 2005:71-75).

In any case, in what is widely understood as a consensus opinion on those responsible for the death of Jesus in Luke-Acts, the Jews were often singled out as the culprits.<sup>26</sup> In fact, while the Gentiles are generally portrayed positively, the Jews – in particular those from Jerusalem – are portrayed negatively.<sup>27</sup> As one scholar put it, “The Christians’ problems in Acts are with Jews, and the Romans are mostly portrayed in a positive or neutral light” (Wenham 2005:98). In fact, amidst the often positive reactions from Gentiles,<sup>28</sup> the negative reactions of Jews (e.g. *Ac* 13:48, 50) stand out; at times, the imperial forces are portrayed as saving the apostles from the Jews, e.g. after he was seized in the temple in Jerusalem, the tribune (χιλίαςρχος) together with centurions (ἐκατονάρχει) and soldiers (στρατιώται) rescued Paul.<sup>29</sup> The best example is probably the attempts by the Jerusalem Jews to kill Paul: after his

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facilitate proper obedience to the God of Israel” (Malina and Neyrey 1991:98). The situation regarding the nature of the animosity between Jews and Jesus followers remains unclear. While, e.g. it at times seems to be religious dissension about circumcision, with eventual agreements reached as in *Ac* 15, Paul nevertheless had Timothy circumcised because of Jews in Lystra and Iconium (*Ac* 16:3); again in *Ac* 21:23-26 Paul seems to slip under the burden of the appeal of the elders that he should join others in following certain rites of purification.

<sup>25</sup> At another level, the “Jewish/Old Testament rootedness of Jesus and the Christian gospel” (to use Wenham’s anachronistic terms) is evident in Acts (Wenham 2005:92).

<sup>26</sup> The Jews are often portrayed as plotting against the apostles, e.g. like the Jews in Macedonia planning against Paul (*Ac* 20:3). A number of violent imperial actions are connected to the Jews and their influence, e.g. Herod went through on Peter’s arrest since Herod’s killing of James pleased the Jews (12:3); Jews stirred up Gentiles against Paul and others (14:2); Jews incite people to stone Paul (14:19); Jews incite the crowd in Thessalonica and Berea (17:5; 13); Jews attacked Paul before proconsul Gallio in Corinth (*Ac* 18:12-17). Negative reactions of Jewish leaders and people against the followers of Jesus are present even in the early parts of Acts, from referring to the Pentecost chaos as drunkenness (*Ac* 2:13), to arrest (*Ac* 4:3), verbal threats (*Ac* 4:21), and physical persecution (*Ac* 5), with the death of Stephan following shortly thereafter (*Ac* 8).

<sup>27</sup> In this regard, Tiede has warned not to underestimate the impact of anti-Judaism’s influence on NT interpretation, insisting that “Luke-Acts is a Jewish Christian story that fell into gentile hands” (Tiede 1988:327).

<sup>28</sup> As well as the God-fearers (*Ac* 10:2,22,35; 13:16,26) and God-worshippers (*Ac* 13:43,50; 16:14; 17:4,17; 18:7), who generally accepted the apostles’ message of Christ; notwithstanding some challenge to the consensus position which has long held that these were Gentiles knowledgeable about the Jewish law and maintaining a strong ethical lifestyle, the gist of this position has been confirmed by the inscriptions found on the pillar from Aphrodisias, a city in Western Asia Minor (cf. Fiensy 2004:38-42).

<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, this was followed with binding him with two chains (*Ac* 21:33), and some interrogation followed by further investigation of Paul in the barracks (εἰς τὴν παρεμβολήν).

speech (22:3-21), the Jews are undeterred, still looking for his blood (22:22); Paul's insistence on his Roman citizenship (22:25-29) saves his skin; the tribune conducted a meeting with the high priest and other priests the next day, with Paul making another speech and again being reprimanded by the high priest, and when his retort to the high priest was criticised, Paul admitted to his mistake (that Scripture forbids it to speak evil [οὐκ ἐρεῖς κακῶς] of a ruler of the people, Ac 23:5, cf Ex 22:27); Paul then exploited the differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees, with the end result that the Pharisees exempted Paul of all guilt (Ac 23:9); still the Jews wanted to kill Paul, vowing to go without eating or drinking until they have accomplished his death (Ac 23:12), making plans to ambush Paul on his way to being interrogated (Ac 23:15) – this led to Paul being sent under heavy guard and at night to Felix, the governor in Caesarea. Again, after Festus replaced Felix, the Jews are still out to kill Paul (Ac 25:2-3), the threat of which only disappears when he arrived in Rome (Ac 28:14) and the, at least, mixed response he received from the Jewish community in Rome (Ac 28:24).

Two immediate effects of such portrayals of the Jews in Acts can be registered. *One*, notwithstanding the generally less than approving attitude towards Jews in Acts, the focus on Gentiles is somewhat misleading, since they (the Gentiles) form part of the (ongoing) divine plan with Israel: “the gentile mission is fundamental to God’s determination to deal with a wilful Israel” (Tiede 1988:334); in short, it is important to see the bigger picture. *Two*, the effect of this consensus opinion was (and probably still often is) a soft approach to the Roman Empire and its mechanisms, to the extent of playing down and neglecting its role in Jesus’ death by ascribing all or most culpability for it to the Jews.<sup>30</sup> This socio-political framing is important for a number of reasons, but particularly also since the Jewish context can all too easily be invoked as a foil for not dealing with the pervasive presence and influence of the Roman Empire in Acts.

In a comprehensive study,<sup>31</sup> Weatherly has used the notion of responsibility for

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<sup>30</sup> Other contemporary Jewish documents also tend to involve the Gentiles in the suffering experienced by the Jews through the Roman Empire. *Jubilees* call Jews to repentance and therefore law-observance; *4 Ezra* portrays the gathering in of Gentiles before Israel as reproach and a call for repentance; *Second Baruch* presents the Gentiles as an instrument in God’s hands during the present time of divine judgement; and, later in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century-document of Jewish-Christian origin, the “Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs”, the Gentiles’ salvation has become fundamental to Israel’s own fulfilment (cf Tiede 1988:335-337).

<sup>31</sup> Following upon the work of JT Sanders (1987) and J Jervell (1972) who respectively argued that Lk-Ac is on the one hand

Jesus' death as yardstick for considering Luke-Acts' position on the Jews. He argued that in the gospel, Luke portrayed the Jerusalem leaders and its people as responsible for Jesus' crucifixion; and in Acts, the Jerusalem leaders are again associated with those who assented to Jesus' death (Weatherly 1994:50-98). Implicating the Jerusalem leaders and people in the death of Jesus did not, however, lead to the condemnation or denigration of the Jews generally (Weatherly 1994:99-175). Moreover, since "neither book indicates any consistent attempt to ameliorate Gentile responsibility in order to accentuate Jewish responsibility" for Jesus' death, and both in fact "affirm a measure of responsibility for various non-Jews, namely Pilate, Herod and the Roman soldiers"<sup>32</sup> (Weatherly 1994:271), neither Jewish culpability for, nor Roman exemption from Jesus' and his followers' suffering and anguish can be asserted from Acts.

### ***3.2 Paul's position vis-à-vis Empire***

In Acts the portrayal of Paul's relationship to Empire and the powers that be, is, to say the least, somewhat ambiguous.<sup>33</sup> On the one hand, Paul is pictured as holding the coveted Roman citizenship (Ac 16:37; 22:25-29)<sup>34</sup> and being from Tarsus (Ac 21:39; 22:3) – in addition to his Pharisaic training and life (Ac 22:3; 23:6; 26:5). On the other hand, Paul is often presented as a revolutionary, falling foul of the law, challenging the Roman authorities and frequently landing up in political hot water (cf Hollingshead 1998:xii).<sup>35</sup>

In Acts 17:6, antagonists accused Paul of belonging to the group that turns the world upside down. "As that Christianity exists within and at the sufferance of the Roman Empire, Acts cannot afford to be too clear about Paul's anarchy". In fact, from time to time, Paul innocence is attested in Acts by having him declared innocent in local

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anti-Semitic, held the Jews responsible for Jesus' death and the Jewish leaders (except the Pharisees) as opposed to the gospel and Jesus Christ, and on the other hand, that the Jewish people and their concern constitute the heart of Lk-Ac, underlined by mass conversions of Jews (Ac 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1,7; 9:42; 12:24; 13:43; 14:1; 17:10-12; 19:20:21:20), that the mission to the Gentiles was directed at God-fearers (e.g. Ac 11:21,24; 13:43; 14:1; 17:4,12; 18:8,10; only to be expanded to true Gentiles in Ac 28:28), and that Ac shows how the gospel drove wedge in ethnic Israel between the true people of God and those who reject Jesus (cf Walton 2004:247).

<sup>32</sup> Against a larger, post-WWII consensus built "on the pervasiveness of the supposition that Luke charges all Israel with the guilt for Jesus' death as part of a larger, anti-Jewish theological venture" (Weatherly 1994:37).

<sup>33</sup> For a brief survey of the portrait of Paul in Acts, cf Walton (2004:242-244). The question whether this portrayal is matched with how Paul appears in his letters cannot be addressed here; and therefore also not whether Ac reflects the interpretation of Paul by a later generation/tradition?

<sup>34</sup> In both instances, in political situations where Paul found himself respectively appearing before a Roman proconsul and in the custody of a Roman centurion.

<sup>35</sup> For more on Paul in prison, cf Rapske (1994).

courts of law (e.g. Acts 25:8). In the end, however, Paul's and the broader message of Acts built upon the resurrection which "apocalyptically undoes the world", posed a challenge for the status quo at different levels. "For Paul, grace is a disruptive miracle. Such miracles do not merely transform chaos into order. First, they transform someone else's world into chaos" (Walsh 2005:27) – and in Acts it is the Roman Empire in its different formats that are often at the receiving end.

However, while Paul is portrayed as being at odds with imperial forces (literally challenging the authorities against all odds, such as in Philippi where he insisted that the magistrates do not send the police but should themselves come and set Paul and Silas free, Ac16:37),<sup>36</sup> it was the Roman imperial system which also protected Paul, at least in generally providing him with due legal process. Not a stranger to political trouble, the accusation that Paul initiated a riot in Ephesus led to his running away from the town (Ac 19:23-20:1) whereas his involvement in creating a public disturbance in Philippi landed him in jail (Ac 16:16-40). Paul is portrayed as one acquainted with and versed well-enough with the legal system, so when he appeared in Roman courts of law, he apparently defended himself with eloquence (Ac 24-25). Paul apparently also knew to appeal to Caesar in order to avoid a trial by the Jewish leaders which might have led to his summary execution (Ac 25:10-11).<sup>37</sup>

### 3.2.1 *Lordship of Jesus*

Paul's ambiguous attitude towards and even relationship with the Empire is probably best seen in the tension between his appeal to Caesar on the one hand, and his insistence on the lordship of Christ on the other hand. In Acts, Paul is certainly not alone in his affirmation of Christ as Lord, as κύριος, a title imbued by power and set in political context, since in the first chapter of Acts already Jesus is addressed likewise (Ac 1:6), soon confirmed by his ascension<sup>38</sup> and the proclamation of the "two men in white robes" (Ac 1:9-11), and dramatically in Peter's Pentecost speech (cf Ac 2:36ff).

In affirming the lordship of Jesus, it appears from Acts that it was for Paul about more

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<sup>36</sup> Cf Burrus (2007:150-152) on Ac 16 and the contrasting images found in Lydia and the spirit-possessed slave girl in Philippi.

<sup>37</sup> Paul coped well also with the Jewish legal setup: he played different Jewish groups, Pharisees and Sadducees, off against one another in the presence of the Jewish leaders in order to create a distraction (Ac 23:6).

<sup>38</sup> Roman emperors often used the notion of the ascension of their predecessors' souls to heaven as final proof of the latter's divinity (Wright 2005:64).

than the use of a title, κύριος for Jesus Christ. In Ac 17, it is Paul and Silas who are dragged from the synagogue in Thessalonica, accused of proclaiming a different “king” (οἱ πάντες ἀπέναντι τῶν δογμάτων Καίσαρος πράσσουσιν βασιλέα ἕτερον λέγοντες εἶναι Ἰησοῦν they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus, Ac 17:7).<sup>39</sup>

To mark out a few aspects for future investigation, a lengthy quote from NT Wright will suffice, as a particular take on Paul’s ambiguous position, at once availing himself of privileges he evidently found himself entitled to as Roman, yet also insisting on the Lordship of Christ:

“Whatever we think of the historicity of Acts, the portrait of Paul before the authorities both pagan and Jewish tells us a good deal about the way in which the Jewish traditions were being reanimated and retrieved. He is prepared to submit to the courts, but is also more than prepared to remind them of their business and to call them to account when they overstep their duty. He uses his own Roman citizenship when it suits the demands of this mission. But at the same time he is fearless in announcing, and living by, a different allegiance. When the Paul of Acts is on trial in 17:7 for overthrowing the laws of Caesar by saying there is ‘another king, namely Jesus’, we see what I take to be an authentic memory of the typical impression made by his gospel preaching” (Wright 2005:70).

Related to Paul’s affirmation of Jesus as Lord, is the notion of the Kingdom of God. So for example, in Acts’ account of Paul’s preaching ministry, the arguments between Paul and Jews in synagogue in Ephesus which is reported to have continued for 3 months, was about the “kingdom of God” (Ac 19:8). Later, in Paul’s pre-Jerusalem visit speech to elders in Ephesians, Paul emphasised that he preached the “kingdom of God” (Ac 20:25).<sup>40</sup> In the end, it appears that Acts’ Paul did not so much challenge the emperor and Empire every step of the way, but rather that in his conceptualising of the socio-political significance of Jesus Christ, it is described in terms resonating with power structures which the Roman Empire would probably have chosen to reserve for their own use?

<sup>39</sup> In this regard, Ac 17:22-31, the well-known Areopagus speech, is also important for Paul’s emphasis on the creator God who calls all people to him, and who will judge the world in righteousness “by a man appointed by him” (ἐν ἀνδρὶ ᾧ ὠρίσεν, Ac 17:31), whom “he raised from the dead” (ἀναστήσας αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν, Ac 17:31).

<sup>40</sup> The term “kingdom (of God)” is also not a hugely popular term in Paul’s letters (used only 8 times, Rm 14:17; 4:20; 1 Cor 6:9, 10; 15:24, 50; Gal 5:21; 1 Th 2:12; cf. the 7 times that is used in the deutero-Pauline tradition: Eph 5:5; Col 1:13; 4:11; 2 Th 1:5; 1 Tm 1:17; 2 Tm 4:1; 4:18).



### **3.3 Kingdom of God**

It would be a mistake to consider the “political” stance of Acts only in relation to its reference to politically or ideologically loaded terminology, but it would be an equally serious mistake not to consider such expressions. An obvious term demanding some investigation is the phrase “kingdom (of God)” (βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ), even if its was used less frequently (only 10 times) in Acts compared to the almost 50 times it is found in the gospel according to Luke (cf Ac 1:3; 1:6; 4:26; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 25:14; 28:23; 28:31). Kingdom-terminology soon appears in Acts, with the first words of Jesus’ disciples being about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel (ἀποκαθιστάνεις τὴν βασιλείαν τῷ Ἰσραήλ; will you restore the kingdom to Israel?, Ac 1:6).

While the “imperial kingdom” remains on the background in Acts, it seems important to enquire about the role of Kingdom-thinking. One scholar contends that the kingdom of David of the Old Testament informs Luke’s description of Jesus’ kingship and kingdom, and subsequently describes how Luke-Acts evidences a shift from Davidic Christology to Kingdom ecclesiology (Hahn 2005:294-326). In the Old Testament, and amidst frequent references to the kingdom of David, the phrase kingdom of God is not found; however, the Chronicler used the phrase “kingdom of Yahweh” to describe the Davidic monarchy (1 Chr 28:5; 2 Chr 13:8; cf 1 Chr 17:14; 29:11-22).<sup>41</sup> Hahn further argues that Acts operates with a Davidic kingdom ecclesiology, derived from the Davidic royal Christology of Luke’s gospel,<sup>42</sup> and that the ἐκκλησία of Acts is the restored kingdom of David – bearing in mind that the anticipated restoration had the character of transformation rather than reimplementa-tion. The link between Davidic Christology and kingdom ecclesiology can be found in first three narratives in Acts: Ac 1:1-11; 1:12-26; Ac 2. (Hahn 2005:297-306).

It is interesting to note how Ac 28 picks up upon and continues the themes sounded in Simeon’s oracles in Lk 2:25-35. It is especially the notion that Jesus will lead to “the fall and rising of many in Israel” (εἰς πτώσιν καὶ ἀνάστασιν πολλῶν ἐν τῷ Ἰσραήλ,

<sup>41</sup> Chronicles further makes it clear that the kingdom of David was in the Old Testament context the manifestation of God’s rule over the whole world, both Israel and the nations, since the reign of the house of David was understood to be based on a divine covenant in which the son of David was also declared to be son of God (2 Sam 7:14; Pss 2:7; 89:27).

<sup>42</sup> Identifying 8 characteristics of the Davidic monarchy, all 8 are found by Hahn in Luke’s description of Jesus, with its decidedly political nature borne out by three of which have to do with exercising power: rule over the twelve tribes; rule over and international empire; and everlasting rule (Hahn 2005:300-301; 303-306; 315).

Lk 2:34) that may reappear in the Jewish leaders who turned up to listen to Paul as his lodgings in the “great numbers” (πλείονες, Ac 28:23) (cf Tiede (1988:333-334; cf Hahn 2005:316). An important element in the final few verses of Acts where Paul’s presence in Rome is stressed, is its emphasis on both the ongoing preaching activity of Paul as well as its content, namely the Kingdom of God (Acts 28:23, 31).<sup>43</sup> Paul is preaching the Kingdom of God in the heart of the Empire, indirectly juxtaposing the former with the latter, and thus challenging the very fibre and make-up of the imperial regime with the message about the one crucified by Roman soldiers who will establish a Kingdom, in fact, who has already establish a Kingdom but which will soon be expanded to include also the Roman Empire. The two countervailing missionary forces are at work!

### **3.4 Socio-economic concerns**

The way in which economic concerns are addressed in Acts does not make for easy reading; it has been argued, in fact, that “Luke’s view of economic relations finally presents an even more mixed message than does his view of Roman politics” (Burrus 2007:144). The initial portrayal of “communism” in Ac 4, among the early followers of Jesus in Jerusalem,<sup>44</sup> links up with the “radical economic platform” of Jesus as described by Luke in his gospel.<sup>45</sup> But the account of the deaths of Ananias Sapphira in Ac 5:1-11 and the unhappiness of the widows of the Hellenists (Ac 6) already signal that all was not well in this idyllically described setting. Such emerging strains betray the often paternalistic attitude towards the poor and also that the apparent radical economic approach – if indeed it ever existed – was soon watered down, with the Christian mission and its advocates increasingly turning to the economically privileged elites, eager to make presentations to potential patrons at high levels.

<sup>43</sup> Ac 28:31 is probably confirmation that Jesus’ reference to the geographical spread of the gospel (Ac 1:8), which informs the layout of the Acts-narrative, also encapsulates the spread of the Davidic kingdom. Jerusalem was David’s city (2 Sam 5:6-10); Judea his tribal land (e.g. 2 Sam 5:5) and Samaria northern Israel (e.g. 1 Kgs 12:16), and the “ends of the earth” the Gentiles (e.g. Is 49:6) (cf Hahn 2005:316).

<sup>44</sup> “[T]he Essenes’ practice of the common life in the Judean desert away from the city, and the Pharisees’ espousal of a modest lifestyle (Ant. 18.12, 18), represent the classic countercultural response to the prevailing aristocratic ethos by treating poverty as an ideal rather than as shameful” (Freyne 2004:34).

<sup>45</sup> Amidst remaining ambiguities, the radical economic perspective of Luke is present e.g. in the beatitudes’ focus on poverty (Lk 4:18), the parables decrying economic injustice (e.g. Lk 12:21; 16:19-31), the approving narrative of a repentant Zaccheus (Lk 19), and probably most explicitly or directly in Lk 20:22-26 (the less than subtle insistence that the demands of God’s kingdom might cause conflict with those of the Empire; or even, the return of the coin as a radical denunciation of the system it stood for) – cf Burrus (2007:140-144); Cassidy (1978:55-61); Horsley (2003:9); for a different position, cf Sugirtharajah (2002:89-90).

Luke appears to insist upon mentioning prominent urban patrons of high social standing by name or collectively (cf Ac 13:12; 17:4; 17:12; 19:31) as supportive of the Christian mission. As far as these patrons were generally women, it fits in with the situation that pertained in the Hellenistic first century, in particular, in the form of the beginnings of a more liberal dispensation for women. Amidst indications that the advantages and privileges of social class and economic power could prevail over the hierarchy of gender, women (far more than men) patrons are constantly identified by Luke as loyal supporters of the early followers of Jesus. The particular appeal by Luke to elite female patronage can be explained by wealthy, influential women patrons' privileged position, once they moved beyond the threshold of the home as the contemporary idealised position for women. Once beyond the household, women would be less likely to be suspected of tainted political reputation as in the case of men who might be thought to betray their duty for the sake of either a tempting seductress or increasing their honour by seeking association with a woman renowned for her moral rectitude. His focus on female patrons allowed Luke to honour these women while instructing women and men in what constituted proper roles of generous benefactors (Burrus 2007:143-144).

Acts does seem, however, to portray a scenario in which the confluence of economic interests and political motives placed the followers of Christ and the apostles in particular, in a difficult position. Some scholars are of the opinion that one of the main reasons for Roman hostility towards the followers of Jesus was that the activities of the latter threatened local economic interests, often citing Ac 16 and 19 as a good example of these tensions (Bryan 2005:116).<sup>46</sup> The connection between politics and economics is evident in the incident in Philippi described in Ac 16. The anger of the owners of the soothsaying slave-girl in Philippi who lost her divination ability and they as owners their lack of income, dragged Paul and Silas before the courts accusing them of disturbing the city (ἐκταράσσοισιν ἡμῶν τὴν πόλιν) and advocating customs

<sup>46</sup> The most persistent and prominent charge levelled against Jesus followers in the early years of the movement was that of *superstitio* (or irregular, improper relationship to the gods; cf Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44.5; Suetonius, *Nero*, 16.2; Pliny, *Letters*, 10.96.8) – the unwillingness of Jesus followers to show *pietas* (respect and honour) to the gods, as required by the need for Rome to uphold *religio*, its responsibility towards the *pax deorum* which in the first place upheld the *pax Romana*. Other charges was related to personal animosities (e.g. the marital intrigue and jealousies describe in Justin Martyr's *Second Apology* (2)); misunderstandings and distortions of Christian practices such as that they practiced cannibalism and incest in their assemblies (Athenagoras, *Embassy*, 3.1, 31-33; Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.*, 5.1.14,26,52; 9.5.2; cf Pliny, *Letters*, 10.96.2,7); the persistence in their own beliefs and practices and unwillingness to participate in other religious activities would have raised some eyebrows about the arrogance of Jesus' followers and provoked corporal punishment meted out by magistrates (e.g. Pliny, *Letters*, 10.96.3); and, at a later stage, the phenomenal growth of the Christian community (Bryan (2005:116)).

and practices unlawful for Romans to practice (ἔθνη ἃ οὐκ ἔξεστιν ἡμῖν παραδέχασθαι οὐδὲ ποιεῖν Ῥωμαίοις οὖσιν Ac 16:19). In the other incident in Ac 19, Demetrius the silversmith successfully “unionised” the traders in silver shrines of Artemis<sup>47</sup> to voice their concern about Paul’s activities, since Demetrius warns that Paul’s work may lead to disregard of the worship of Artemis and subsequently their trade (Ac 19:24-41) – here the link between religion and economics is clear,<sup>48</sup> and lurking in the background, this link’s further intersection with politics (emperor cult).<sup>49</sup>

A related element that emerges from the above and other accounts in Acts, and one that is supported by his letters,<sup>50</sup> is the suggestion that Paul was regularly in contact with slaveholders and slaves alike; still, it remains difficult to establish the level to which Paul engaged, respectively, slaveholders and slaves in the fledgling communities of Jesus followers he founded.

Any position of economics in Acts are coloured by ambiguity, by the shift from a radical approach to economics as found in the communism of Ac 4 to a more pragmatic response to the realities and attractions of economic patronage which was a central aspect of the ancient Roman world’s socio-political arrangements and relations. However, and notwithstanding the entangled relationship of politics and economics in the first century CE, “Luke’s very hesitations and apparent inconsistencies may point to an important fact, namely, that it is even more difficult and dangerous to question the invisible economic infrastructure of empire than to question the public face of its political leadership” (Burrus 2007:144).<sup>51</sup> But in the end, the extent, to which Acts anticipated a complete subversion of the top-heavy Roman economy, cannot be determined with great certainty – what is clear, however, is that also on economical terrain, the forces of Empire and Church pulled in different

<sup>47</sup> Fiensy argues that inscriptions found in Asia attest to the presence of labour unions, the gathering of which frequently resulted in riotous behaviour, all of which lend some credibility to the plausibility of a scenario as described in Ac 19 (Fiensy 2004:42-43).

<sup>48</sup> Cf Kraybill (1996) on the imperial cult and commerce in Empire.

<sup>49</sup> The riot incited by Demetrius was preceded by yet another economic loss (fifty thousand pieces of silver) when books on magic arts were burned, after the sons of Sceva’s attempts to invoke Jesus’ and Paul’s names at exorcisms backfired (Ac 19:19).

<sup>50</sup> Apart from the obvious situation in Paul’s letter to Philemon, e.g. the reference to “Chloe’s people” and the οἶκος of Stephanas in 1 Cor 1:11, 16; 16:15 (cf references to “households” in Ac 16:15, 34; 18:8) may have indicated the domestic slaves of a wealthy slaveholder, and would then underline the higher profile accorded to slaveholders in the Pauline communities. Cf Barclay (1991:165).

<sup>51</sup> Wenham (2005:102; cf 84-86) also wonders along with another colleague whether Acts’ emphasis on generous practical discipleship in a context characterised by the greed of religious leaders was not part of a larger apologetic for the followers of Christ and their concern for the poor and marginalised, and for building up the community?

directions.

### **3.5 Political / military functionaries**

Looking at the roles played by political and military functionaries of the Roman Empire in Acts, the narrative would seem to support the view of scholars who hold that hostility directed against Jesus followers were not due to imperial suspicion or disapproval (Crossan and Reed 2004:30-32). That is, the Church was neither the enemy of Rome nor Rome the enemy of the Church – and that “sensible Roman administrators” and “sensible Christians” knew this (Bryan 2005:105). Then again, however, the insistence on finding the notion that God held authorities, such as the Roman Empire, accountable to fulfil the purpose for which God gave them the power (Bryan 2005), as the authoritative grid for perceiving the socio-political of every single New Testament document places too heavy a secondary interpretative grid on the texts, at once attempting to conform all to the same norm and also obscuring ambiguities inherent to documents.

On the one hand, it is of course so that in Acts, positive reactions of Roman officials towards the apostles of Christ abound, ranging from a town clerk quelling a labour-related upheaval (θόρυβον; Ac 20:1) by the Artemis-traders in Ephesus (Ac 19:35-40), claiming, among others, that Gaius and Aristarchus (Paul’s companions) were “neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess” (οὔτε ἱεροσὺλους οὔτε βλασφημοῦντας τὴν θεὸν ἡμῶν; 19:37), to governors Felix<sup>52</sup> and Festus attributing Jewish antipathy towards Paul and his compatriots to intra-Jewish disputes and minor concerns (e.g. Ac 24:22; 25:19). Festus also agreed to Paul’s appeal to Caesar (Ac 25:9-12), and later the centurion of the soldiers escorting Paul on the ship to Rome, decided against killing the prisoners when their ship is lost at sea, because he wanted to spare Paul’s life (Ac 27:43). Moreover, Roman functionaries and soldiers were included in the conversion stories, with the centurion Cornelius who was converted through Peter (Ac 10-12), pro-consul Sergius Paulus (Cyprus) who was converted through Paul (Ac 13:12), and the prison guard in Ac 16 as probably among the best known.

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<sup>52</sup> Hoping and waiting for a bribe, Felix is said to have often summoned and conversed with Paul (Ac 24:26) – whether because of fear of Paul or regarding him a dangerous person, remains unclear in the way Felix’s interactions with Paul is reported.

On the other hand, however, the political and military functionaries of Empire were instrumental in the arrest, incarceration and punishment of the followers of Christ;<sup>53</sup> secondly, the Jewish vassal kings and other local authorities derived their authority and power from the imperial source, which can hardly lead to a call to vindicate Empire;<sup>54</sup> and, thirdly, the local elites and religious figures also held their positions largely due to their relationship with Empire (often, that of clients to the Empire as patron). In the end, according to Acts these military and political figures were like other Gentiles instruments in God's hands, legitimating a Gentile mission without legitimating Gentile supremacy: "the Gentiles are still understood by Luke to be the means of divine vengeance, but these Gentiles are Israel's enemies – probably the Roman armies, and certainly not the gentile Christians" (Tiede 1988:338). Acts affirms both God's faithfulness, even to a faithless people, and Gods vengeance and vindication (cf Ac 11:17-18; 13:46-47), which is probably best illustrated in the political and military characters in Acts: the missionary force of God's kingdom overruns the petty postures of the imperial forces.

### ***3.6 Confluence of imperial power and local authorities in Acts (cf 3.1; 3.4)***

It is not only the Roman authorities that are in view as dominating forces in Acts, as the early Christians are at times portrayed as offering fairly strong resistance to the Jewish authorities in particular, as well. In addition, it is also clear from the start that it is not possible to neatly distinguish between some ostensible Roman political and Jewish religious formation and authorities, given the porous boundaries between imperial power and the authority of the local elite, even if it is the latter's religious involvement that are mostly obvious and pronounced.

Through their "government without bureaucracy" (Garnsey and Saller 1987:20-40), the Roman Empire yielded administrative authority to indigenous elites which had a twofold purpose. On the one hand the local elites played the important role of keeping the imperial wheels turning, in many ways including that they ensured the collection of

<sup>53</sup> The numerous trials in Acts, besides Jesus Christ's trial in Lk 22-23, include those in Acts: 4:3-23 (Peter and others; in Jerusalem); 5:17-40 (Peter and others; in Jerusalem); 6:9-7:60 (Stephan; in Jerusalem); 16:19-36 (Paul and Silas; in Philippi); 17:5-9 (Paul and others; in Thessalonica); 18:12-17 (Paul; in Corinth); 21:27-22:30 (Paul; in Jerusalem); 22:30-23:10 (Paul; in Caesarea); 24:1-26 (Paul; in Caesarea); 25:5-12 (Paul; in Caesarea); 25:24-26:32 (Paul; in Caesarea); 28 (Paul; in Rome). Cf Malina and Neyrey (1991:121).

<sup>54</sup> Some of the most violent actions in Acts are ascribed to the Jewish king Herod Agrippa I: that he had James brother of John killed by the sword (12:2); then arrested Peter, during the festival of Unleavened Bread (12:3), and later had two guards killed after an angel freed Peter from prison (12:19).

tribute, organising business and politics, garnering support for Empire through bestowing benevolence and public works programmes. On the other hand, the elites were an important aspect of the imperial divide and rule-politics (Moore 2006:199), since popular resentment and even uprisings could be blamed on them while the imperial powers retained ultimate authority by remaining remote and unavailable.<sup>55</sup>

In this regard, one of the most prominent depictions of an early Christian challenge to Jewish authorities is found in the narrative of Stephan (Ac 6:8-7:70). In the narrative, Stephan, appearing before the Sanhedrin, was ultimately stoned for his refusal to recant from his insistence that Jesus will break down the temple and destroy the morals of Moses (Ac 6:14), and for his counter-conventional interpretation of Israelite (Jewish) history, concluding that their betraying and killing Jesus was true to form within his portrayal of the killing of God's prophets in the Jewish tradition (Ac 7:52). It is also significant to note that the Stephan narrative follows shortly after the well-known exclamation by Peter to the Sanhedrin about being obedient to God rather than to people (Ac 5:29).

#### **4. Conclusion**

The hybridical situations in which the church formations described in Acts found themselves in relation to Roman imperial forces, requires of modern day readers to disentangle these countervailing missionary forces. This does not mean an all too easy resolving of the ambiguities of Luke's ideological stance into claimed certainties and clarities, since while it on the one hand exhibits an apologetic, accommodating strategy, it on the other hand – but also at the same time, craftily – expressed subtle critique towards imperial tendencies; thus, attention is required for the book of Acts' political subversiveness.

For Luke, more than almost any other biblical writer (the most obvious exception being the author of Revelation), is attuned to the political complexity and universalizing ambitions of a Roman Empire that perhaps bears even more resemblance than do colonialist regimes of modern Europe to the globalizing, postmodern 'neo-empire' of the twenty-first century" (Burrus 2007:152).

It is the ongoing struggle between the countervailing missionary forces of the Empire of Rome and the Kingdom of God in Acts that remains when the document draws to a close. But, while locked in ideological positions, the final verse make the subversive

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<sup>55</sup> For more on the role of patronage, cf e.g. Chow (2000).

element of Acts clear: literally in the midst of Empire, Paul is reported to be engaged in Rome<sup>56</sup> in “preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered” (κηρύσσων τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ διδάσκων τὰ περὶ τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ μετὰ πάσης παρρησίας ἀκωλύτως; Ac 28:31).

The presence of imperial forces of various kinds in today’s twenty-first century world is palpable, ranging from a global superpower such as the United States of America not unwilling to unleash its considerable military power against those perceived to threaten USA-interests, to the excessively powerful multinational corporations with their geo-political footprint and ability to manipulate and control the lives of billions, not too mention their environmental impact – and back home, in the form of both the imperialism of political, economic, socio-cultural and religious forces as well as the confluence of these forces as illustrated around the time of (and subsequent to) the April 2009-general election.

But it is in the midst of such considerations of imperialist hegemony, that another question also remains: in the face of Acts’ countervailing missionary forces of Empire and Church, is it in the end, a matter of choice or reconceptualising? In other words, and knowing the tainted histories of both Empire and Church – and of the two who became one – studying Acts, and discerning missionary patterns involve more than the mere choice between the hegemonic tentacles of a Roman Empire, or the overpowering proselytising of “early Christianity”? In other words, and presuming a favourable reception among us for the church, is reconceptualising not also on the cards, that is, a different way of conceptualising the power and reign of God, over the whole world and all its people?

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<sup>56</sup> Foreseen and Paul forewarned in Ac 23:11 already!



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