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WHO SPEAKS FOR (OR AGAINST) ROME?
ACTS IN RELATION TO EMPIRE*

Matthew L. Skinner

Scholarship on the political outlook of the Acts of the Apostles is in a messy state right now. No clear consensus has emerged about what the book’s political outlook actually is, although that is to be expected. Rather, the real messiness resides here: there seems to be no widespread, dominant, coherent understanding about what it means to explore the ways in which Acts is embedded in and participates in its ancient political settings. The nature of the inquiry itself remains undecided.

The complexity and ambiguity of Acts as a narrative, to say nothing of the persistent uncertainty regarding the book’s provenance, contributes to the state of affairs. Justifiably, then, all parts of Acts now receive scrutiny from scholars interested in these questions. This has not always been the case. Also, many methodological choices present themselves for use in contemporary scholars’ toolboxes, leaving the workbench rather crowded. Of course, the presuppositions that drive these methods and the findings that they generate also vary, making it difficult to keep track of and evaluate all the projects.

Yet interpreters of Acts should consider any mess that has arisen as a positive, creative mess. We find ourselves currently in a situation in which scholars are pushing beyond some of the longstanding questions, methods and assumptions that have governed, and perhaps stunted, inquiries into Acts and the Roman Empire. Scholars are trying out various hypotheses for how best to analyse the book’s sense of the early Christian movement’s relationship to, or estrangement from, the empire. In this case, I mean ‘trying out’ in the most salutary sense of the phrase. As most artists, inventors, young children and other creators can attest, messiness and experimentation are usually the prerequisites of breakthroughs.

* I am grateful to Eric D. Barreto for reading an early draft of this paper and offering me counsel.
On the whole, scholarship is making progress – not ‘progress’ in the sense of obliterating variety or approaching a single solution that will clean everything up and put the question to rest once for all, but ‘progress’ in scholarly fecundity and in the ability to articulate a complex issue and name its many dimensions.

This essay surveys some of the claims that previously and especially more recently have been staked regarding how to understand Acts in relation to the Roman Empire. It begins by revisiting Steve Walton’s oft-cited 2002 essay, ‘The State They Were in: Luke’s View of the Roman Empire’, and then offers an update in the same orienting spirit of that important study. Like Walton did nearly fifteen years ago, I take stock of the current landscape of scholarship on the political outlook of Acts, aiming to lend clarity to the methodological alternatives and to offer several proposals for advancing the discussions into the future. As much as possible in a limited space, I refer to individual passages from Acts to make the proposals more focused or concrete and also to identify specific places in Luke’s narrative that might inform the conversation to follow. Like most status quaestionis overviews, this one must paint with broad strokes.

1. Where We Have Been

Just as Acts begins by renarrating and adjusting the final scene in the Gospel according to Luke, I take the liberty of beginning this sequel to Walton’s essay with a very brief overview of that previous essay’s structure and claims. In doing so I aim to highlight what I consider the most essential or durative elements of Walton’s presentation. Walton identifies in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Lukan scholarship five general approaches to the question of how Luke-Acts shapes its readers’ perspectives on the Roman state and the threats or advantages Rome might pose in its relationship to Christianity.

2. I limit the scope of this essay to the Acts of the Apostles. No one should infer from this focus that I consider the political context as entirely separate from the question of how Luke-Acts regards the ancient Roman political context as entirely separate from the question of how the Gospel according to Luke does so.
3. I occasionally use the term Christianity for simplicity’s sake, even though I acknowledge it is anachronistic as a reference to the communities and messages associated with Jesus’ followers in the book of Acts.
The primary focus of the first two of these five views is more apologetic than political. By that, I mean both views reflect scholarship that concerns itself with how Acts equips ancient readers to anticipate or avert specific forms of conflict. But these two views nevertheless make their proposals for understanding the apologetic purposes of Acts in response to exegetical observations that see Acts presenting the Roman Empire as essentially nonthreatening to Christian vitality and the church as willing to cooperate with Roman authority and imperial values. That is, the proposals are apologetic proposals derived from how scholars assess the political claims made in Acts.

The first view, clearly the dominant one over the long arc cut by historical-critical scholarship and the one that many Acts scholars still encounter with regularity in conversations with specialists in other religious or theological disciplines, those who assume the issue was settled long ago—characterizes Luke the author’s agenda as accommodationist or conciliatory: that is, the Christian message and the churches that articulate it pose no harm to Rome’s interests or to Rome’s survival. This view persists, with some contemporary biblical scholars continuing to offer their support.

to find it defensible. They characterize Acts as pro-Roman or willing to accommodate the claims and authority of the empire. Acts tells Rome (or Acts tells ancient readers, so they will communicate it to their neighbors and officials across the empire) that Christ’s followers willingly and eagerly play by the rules. Just like Jesus in Luke, in Acts his followers are consistently innocent of charges leveled against them, as even multiple Roman officials themselves recognize throughout the latter half of Acts. Henry Joel Cadbury, Hans Conzelmann and Ernst Haenchen have probably been the most influential proponents of this position.

The second view, exemplified most clearly in Paul Walaskay’s landmark study in 1983, rearranges the issue. The outlook on the empire in Acts is again conciliatory according to Walaskay, but in his view Acts persuades its wary readers that Roman rule is safe, nothing for the church to fear. Roman officials and the systems they manage (especially the legal-juridical world) can be trusted to treat Christians fairly when the Romans abide by their own rules. According to this interpretation, Acts maintains that it is Jesus’ and the church’s influential Jewish opponents who have caused trouble for the Christian mission and stirred up dissent or public disturbance.


6. For bibliography and other notable proponents of this view (including such notables as Burton Scott Easton and F. F. Bruce), see Walton, ‘State’, pp. 2-4 (pp. 76-78 in this volume). Following other scholars, Walton observes this perspective as far back as C. A. Heumann in the eighteenth century. Walton does not mention Haenchen in this discussion, but I believe he belongs in this camp and among its most influential members (see Ernst Haenchen, The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary [trans. Bernard Noble, Gerald Shinn, Hugh Anderson and R. McL. Wilson; Oxford: Blackwell, 1971], pp. 106, 693).

7. For bibliography, see Walton, ‘State’, pp. 5-6 (pp. 78-80 in this volume). As Walton notes, Vernon Robbins follows a similar line, reading Acts as endorsing the prospect of church leaders fostering symbiotic ties with Roman authorities. For Robbins, the message Acts conveys is: what’s good for church is good for state, and vice versa. Walton also includes Robert Maddox in this general category, insofar as Maddox suspects that Acts addresses Christian audiences that saw (or courted) martyrdom in their future.
The third perspective, which Walton roots in Philip Esler’s book *Community and Gospel in Luke–Acts*, also has Acts telling its ancient readers that belonging to the church is fully compatible with allegiance to the empire. Both spheres or institutions recognize the legitimacy of the other; they share values. One can faithfully and honorably serve both God and Caesar. Roman soldiers and officials can join the Way without conflict or mixed loyalties. Esler sees Acts as conciliatory, insofar as its vision of Christianity commends and reflects certain Roman values, such as antiquity.

The fourth view, the one among the five that is the most distinctive and perhaps a forerunner to more recent scholarly proposals, is Richard J. Cassidy’s. Cassidy advances it in his book *Society and Politics in the Acts of the Apostles*, tending carefully to the many scenes of conflict and public disturbance we read about in Acts. For Cassidy, Acts presents a ‘nondeferential’ church, a portrayal that equips readers to expect that their own witness, if done faithfully and following Jesus’ own pattern, will generate friction that will result in legal trouble from sometimes unappreciative and occasionally abusive imperial officials. More so than most of his predecessors in the field, Cassidy takes the violence, abuse and neglect perpetrated by Roman officials as definitive and as symptomatic of a more widespread Roman disease. His methods are largely literary and redactional, although he too speculates about the conditions of Luke’s earliest audiences and the author’s purposes for writing to them, both in a general sense and with a focus on the hazards that come with living faithfully to the gospel in the Roman world.


10. See discussion in Walton, ‘State’, pp. 9-11 (pp. 82-84 in this volume). Walter E. Pilgrim also belongs in this category; see his *Uneasy Neighbors: Church and State in the New Testament* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), pp. 125-43.

Walton’s fifth group of scholars concludes that Acts has no interest in talking about the Roman Empire or shaping readers’ perspectives on navigating life within Roman rule. He puts Eric Franklin (whose work I will return to later) in this category, as well as the more influential Jacob Jervell.\textsuperscript{12} For Jervell, Acts is about the spread and proclamation of the gospel. The Roman Empire, for all its strength, proves essentially powerless to impede this advance and so it poses no real concern to Luke. When Jervell describes interactions between Christians and imperial officials, he says Acts presents the church as ‘politically harmless, no threat to the state’; further, ‘Rome is not only just and powerful; Rome can abide the Christian message’.\textsuperscript{13}

In many ways, and probably more by coincidence than cause, the publication of Walton’s essay marked the onset of the arrival of new approaches to the study of the political outlook in Acts. Walton did not set out to invalidate the five categories, but his essay added needed clarity to the discussion at a time when the terrain was beginning to grow messy. It is not obvious that the essay foresaw what scholars would propose between 2002 and now, but in retrospect Walton appears to have anticipated some aspects of what did indeed follow.

Walton’s own views constitute part of what came next, and they form what is essentially a sixth category in his essay, a view that characterizes Acts as operating at a ‘critical distance from the empire’.\textsuperscript{14} He takes seriously the violence and injustice carried out against the church (and against others) in Rome’s name. Walton notes other critical or antagonistic overtones, emphasizing the book’s consistent attempts to

\textsuperscript{12} See Walton, ‘State’, pp. 11-12 (pp. 84-85 in this volume).


assert Jesus' supremacy over the emperor as the true 'Savior', 'Lord' and 'King', terms that resonate with Roman propaganda and thus declare within the imperial setting 'an alternate vision of universal authority'. Yet Walton also cautions against overestimating two things: first, scholars' ability to determine too much about the circumstances or identities of Luke's original audiences and, second, the Roman Empire's importance in Acts, given that the story focuses primarily on God's activity and God's resolve to work out God's purposes. Regarding this second point: sometimes in Acts the empire's agents simply provide opportunities, usually unwittingly, for God's purposes to be accomplished (as in Philippi, Ephesus, Malta and Rome), although Walton does not categorize this tendency as necessarily threatening or a form of anti-imperial rhetoric. He identifies the accent on God's power as a means by which Acts reassures Christian disciples, not necessarily as a criticism of Rome's abuses or an aggressive yearning for Rome's come-uppance. Walton seeks to let a tension remain unresolved: depictions and language that characterize Roman power as flawed and depreciated, coupled with a theological vision that sets its ultimate concerns on other, almost trans-political realities.

Walton's two cautions have proven quite durable over the last decade. At least, they mark a gradual shift in the scholarship: a shift away from excessive - and perhaps speculative - preoccupation with Luke the author's historical audience and toward more nuanced consideration of what it means to read Luke's politics in light of Luke's theology. This does not mean everyone agrees with Walton, especially since his second caution contains within it the question of something that subsequent scholarship has shown to be a debated issue: whether or how Luke's theological outlook might express a political vision that engages the Roman context directly and whether that engagement happens overtly or subtly.

a. Developments since Walton's Study

Much has been proposed since 2002, keeping Walton's five categories mostly descriptive of past scholarship rather than proscribing directions that subsequent scholars had to travel. And so my survey moves now

to what followed Walton’s essay. A desire to limit this discussion to a reasonably sized foray instead of an exhaustive tour permits me to note only a few representative examples from the last dozen years. I must skip over others or leave them relegated to footnotes. 16

Once upon a time, someone might have categorized Kavin Rowe’s monograph World Upside Down as a study of Lukan theology and not, strictly speaking, a study of Lukan perspectives on the ancient political setting. Rowe contends, however, that those topics are inseparable. This is not to say that Rowe finds a particular political theology on display in Acts. Rather, Rowe explicates a tension manifest in Acts between Luke’s vision of Christianity and the constructions of the surrounding (polytheistic) culture; what we encounter in Acts are, at root, ‘competing realities’. 17

Lukan theology reorients basic cultural assumptions across the Greco-Roman landscape, rendering sociopolitical institutions and conventional values essentially insignificant or surpassed, from the church’s perspective. Rowe asserts that an ‘apocalyptic’ theology operates in Acts, constituted by the church’s claims about Jesus as the χάρις of the world, by the church’s universal mission, and by new (set-apart) Christian communities that sprout up throughout Acts. As Rowe sees it, an ‘apocalyptic’ Christianity entails an entirely new cultural vision established by God. It is not merely a political alternative to the Roman Empire; it is an altogether new society with an altogether different kind of king. 18

Since the realization of this new theological and social vision must mean the end of certain Roman foundations (honors to the emperor and worship of other deities, to take obvious examples), the Roman world experiences the church’s multifaceted witness as destabilizing and anti-imperial. But

16. Not only is the discussion limited to representative examples, it also limits itself to scholarship that directly and explicitly engages questions about how Acts views the Roman state. Missing, then, are plenty of works that investigate how Acts may be adapting and reconfiguring the literature, forms and symbolism that gave shape to Roman identity. Consider, for example, the work of Dennis R. MacDonald and also Marianne Palmer Bonz’s The Past as Legacy: Luke—Acts and Ancient Epic (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000). These types of studies certainly pose implications for scholars’ explorations of how Acts regards and perhaps criticizes or reasserts Rome’s values and assumed prerogatives.


from the church's perspective, what is occurring is merely the in-breaking of new theological realities. Rowe further contends that Acts does not purport to establish a new Christian 'empire' that mimics Rome and its hegemonic tendencies, insofar as the church's mission in Acts rules out coercive tactics as inconsistent with the heart and origins of its good news.

Kazuhiko Yamazaki-Ransom also views Lukan theology as the route into an understanding of Luke's political outlook. For him, Acts crafts the Roman officials according to familiar ways of rhetorically branding outsiders (akin to how ancient Jewish texts treat gentile authorities). The officials thus provide something like foils to the book's ecclesiology. They, through their negative portrayals, accentuate God's determination to see the divine plan to its fulfillment. Thus, Acts exhibits a negative outlook on the empire, not because of Rome's abusive behavior or because of the arrogant claims and prerogatives it inculcates into human societies, but because imperial officials and other opponents of the gospel exemplify rebellion against God. Acts does not draw attention to the political world in which the church travels in order to condemn Rome qua Rome; Acts does so, instead, to declare more generally the futility of any rebellion, since no form of it can derail God's purposes.

My own work on Paul's extended legal travails in Acts 21-28 contends that Luke's theological outlook effectively minimizes claims about Roman prerogatives and thereby presents the Christian gospel as a corrosive force, one potentially destabilizing to Roman interests. I mostly agree with Eric Franklin's exegetical observations that Acts is primarily a story about God's persistence and that in Acts constellations of Roman


authority are coopted to assist in achieving divine purposes. But – and here I depart from Franklin – I find this phenomenon and the many stories about Jesus’ followers disturbing the Roman peace to contain subtle yet weighty sociopolitical implications, too.21

These implications, I contend, run counter to claims that Acts portrays a separate society that cannot be considered a political alternative to Roman society. Rather, Paul’s message, activities and preservation in Acts imply a power at work within a political network, particularly since aspects of Paul’s custody prove to contravene Rome’s efforts to manage an empire through protecting its sociopolitical interests. Paul’s trial (as well as other aspects of Paul’s public ministry in Acts 13–19) is a drama about the manipulation of Roman power at some of its highest levels, involving military tribunes, governors (procurators) and a client king. This drama stages a cultural contest, replete with competing and overlapping propagandas; the contest asks what true jurisdiction looks like and who possesses it.22 The trials are not merely legal; they are also about acceptability and power, for they reveal the strengths and weaknesses of a larger society.23 These details constitute a key element of the larger question about how Acts regards the Roman Empire. The gospel on display in Acts not only denies this particular empire its authority to exercise jurisdiction; it denies that Rome finally even possesses power or right to exert its presumed authority. To commandeer is to subordinate. As Demetrius the silversmith recognizes (Acts 19.23–41), to subordinate

21. See, e.g., Eric Franklin, Christ the Lord: A Study in the Purpose and Theology of Luke–Acts (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 138: ‘Luke does not suggest that God’s final action inaugurated by (Christ’s exaltation) will win over the Roman state. What he does maintain is that the Roman state is compelled to co-operate in something greater than itself, that God uses it to achieve his purposes.’ Franklin appears not to see in this the potential for Acts to deliver political critique. Cf. Jervell, Theology, p. 134.


23. Because of this, scholarship surrounding this topic cannot satisfy itself with seeking answers about whether specific Roman officials in Acts should be labeled as either kind or self-serving, either fair or corrupt. Analyses must also take seriously what it means when Roman strength finds itself unable to restrict Jesus’ followers from what they have been called to do, as seen when the incarcerated Paul exercises substantial control over his circumstances and continues to bear witness to Jesus Christ. This inability that plagues the officials in Acts extends beyond Roman governors; similar things occur in Acts 4–5 when the Jerusalem priestly aristocracy repeatedly finds its tactics of threat, violence, coercion and incarceration useless for inhibiting the apostles’ public ministry.
is potentially to humiliate and to undermine – and therefore to threaten, even if the threat does not present itself with revolutionary rhetoric or ambitions. Acts issues a warning, then, to any institutions or social groups that would choose tyrannizing tactics over the ethics inscribed in the gospel. When Roman functionaries do, Acts infers that the Roman Empire itself – and not just its leaders – has no clothes.

A 2008 chapter by Brigitte Kahl urges readers to consider the delicate circumstances surrounding the writing of Acts.²⁴ It would have been a risky project for Luke or anyone to write a history of the church’s expansion through the Roman Empire, including encounters with high-profile Roman officials, during the post-70 world. For this world, as the Christian movement experienced it, was a context replete with distrust and ongoing threats of violence. Kahl sees mixed messages in Acts: the book describes a Christianity compatible with the Roman order, yet a Christianity that also makes bold claims about Christ’s and not Caesar’s lordship.²⁵ Acts neither indicts nor affirms the empire, as much as it reveals multiple narratives or ‘scripts’ at work. These scripts promote a sanitized public version of Christian history, yet one also marked with residue from more subversive elements of the nascent Christian movement. Keeping an eye on the historical setting after the destruction of the temple, Kahl concludes Luke was not a pro-Roman shill, but his writing betrays the struggles the ancient church faced – or, perhaps, the adaptations it made – in ensuring its long-term security in a potentially unwelcoming political environment, all while determining how to articulate its faithfulness to a savior who died ignominiously on a Roman cross.

Postcolonial biblical criticism has expanded the conversation along a number of angles, proving especially helpful in making sense of the mixed messages and tensions that many have detected in Acts. These modes of criticism remind us that the narrative’s ambivalent outlook is not necessarily a problem to be resolved, and that we must consider various ways of reading a text before making claims about how it ‘views empire’. Inquiries using these methods to examine the relationships between texts and power have underscored and given greater definition to what was already clear to most interpreters: Acts offers a complex


²⁵. Her reading of these dynamics bears similarities to Walton’s, as described above.
literary landscape, thereby creating a complex interpretive landscape. That landscape includes a complex and variegated sociocultural terrain with complex imperial realities, meaning that the early church could not choose between simply placating or resisting certain expectations, as if those two options were the only ones available. The ground between compliance and defiance necessarily involves careful and even ambiguous footwork, footwork that easily lends itself to varied conclusions among interpreters who seek to trace and characterize it.26

An explicitly postcolonial lens leads Margaret Aymer to find examples of colonial mimicry in Acts and in the history of its interpretation, meaning that colonized subjects find themselves called in Acts 1.8 to export into faraway lands what Aymer calls a ‘new imperial message’.27 But Aymer and other postcolonial interpreters also take seriously the ways in which Acts has been read through history, particularly among communities of African American audiences, to challenge totalizing impulses and to support liberative, anti-imperial movements.28 Contributions like Aymer’s beckon scholars to devote more energy to the role of reception history in their proposals.

Eric D. Barreto’s scholarship on how Acts depicts ethnicity offers another example of postcolonial categories’ ability to reveal the early Christian movement’s potential to destabilize Roman power.29 Acts provides multiple examples of hybridity – that is, a person’s or group’s ability to occupy a variety of ethnic and cultural identities (and loyalties)


at the same time. For example, Paul presents himself, depending on the circumstances, as either a Ιουδαίος, a citizen of Tarsus or a Ρωμαίος. By inhabiting various identities and privileges (or liabilities), Paul can, depending on the needs of any given circumstances, claim greater affinity with or greater distance from the empire’s totalizing and hegemonic means of defining hierarchies of belonging and exclusion. This dynamic highlights not only Paul’s craftiness as a literary protagonist but also the nature of an emerging Christian movement that hospitably embraces differences among its members and thereby embodies a new society that resists colonial tendencies to order, define and thus control imperial subjects. If the Roman Empire must claim and exercise such hegemonic authority, then it could find this new religious movement able to elude its imperial power to control or to coopt.

Other interpreters, such as Seyoon Kim and Drew Strait, criticize these newer proposals about anti-imperial rhetoric and theology in Acts - even while they sometimes agree with certain exegetical observations - and they contend that Rome remains simply incidental in Acts. Often following in Jacob Jervell’s trajectory, they argue that Luke’s horizon is eschatological in the sense that the characters in Acts remain uninterested in realizing the political realities of God’s reign in the here and now, which means for these interpreters that Acts presents no real discernible or noteworthy outlook on the nature of the Roman Empire, or any other empires for that matter.

b. The State of the Question

How, then, has this rapid survey depicted the state of the question as a messy state? It has traced the numerous avenues along which recent scholarship travels and noted that some diverge sharply from others, while others converge, and still others circle back to familiar places. These avenues follow a variety of trajectories, compelled not only by historical questions. Their methods also devote themselves to literary, theological, postcolonial and reception-history concerns. The conversations generated by this scholarship have launched many explorations – very productive.

explorations — but they have not yet been collectively mapped. Acts scholarship still awaits the emergence of a kind of shared vocabulary and parameters for this discourse. Acts scholarship also awaits a clearer consensus of whether there are certain methodological, historical or literary questions that absolutely must be accounted for in any sustainable or comprehensive attempts to address this issue.

If it appears that Acts has arrived late to the party hosted by empire studies, perhaps this is because Acts has had to travel a more challenging road to get there than other New Testament books have. What has made the road challenging? For one thing, so much of the long, dominant history of interpretation labeled the book as either accommodationist or disinterested in political matters, making Acts perhaps an unattractive subject for more nuanced empire-critical approaches. Second, the uniqueness of Acts among the contents of the New Testament in terms of its genre, its purposes and its source-critical and redaction-critical challenges may have kept it an outlier. Third, Acts has so far lacked an empire-criticism champion who has devoted sustained and prolific attention to Acts in the way that Warren Carter, Neil Elliott and Richard A. Horsley (to name just a few examples) have done with other New Testament writings.31

2. Where We Are Now

Where should the discussions go from here? Based on the generative spaces to which scholarship has taken this topic in the last decade and a half, I offer six brief observations and proposals.

First, as Walton notes in his 2002 essay, there are sharp limits to what anyone can deduce about Luke the author’s original readership and their specific circumstances, limits that inquiries into the political outlook of Acts must acknowledge better than they have in the past.32 The narrative dynamics of Acts, the general cultural setting of the broader Roman world, and the individual locales that appear as settings in Acts offer the most fruitful places to seek evidence on which to base scholarly proposals about Acts and politics. Those who reassert the older apologetic


arguments would do well to restrain proposals about what can be discerned regarding exactly what Acts might have equipped ancient readers to do or to withstand. Consider, for example, the question of how to characterize the charges brought against Paul and Silas in Acts 16.20-21 and Paul’s public shaming of the Philippian magistrates in 16.35-39. Proposals must still look deeply into the historical context of Philippi and the rhetorical potential of the colony’s ancient reputation, finding useful evidence to consider without making it serve posits about Luke’s earliest readers actively contemplating their own looming prosecutions or persecutions.

Second, if it was not obvious already fifteen years ago (as I am sure it was), the relatively recent rise of empire studies and the expanded applications of postcolonial biblical criticism have made it quite clear that discourse about ‘Rome’ and ‘empire’ too often remains prone to reductionism. The complexities deserve greater attention. Roman presence and privilege would have been experienced and depicted quite differently in colonial Philippi in comparison to off-the-tracks Lystra, for example. The dynamics of the Acts narrative appears to reflect such complexities, given the diverse sermons, diverse rhetoric and diverse types of controversies the book describes across a wide array of cultural contexts. At the same time, the diversity in Acts has its limits. For example, readers rarely receive opportunities to move beyond merely superficial references to characters of low social status; those with more social clout get much more attention from the narrator. The specific details involved in negotiating imperial realities obviously look different for various people in various settings, as James Scott demonstrates in his influential book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. The misdirection that a subordinate group in an imperial setting must employ to preserve its values or survival depends on the situations it encounters and those situations’ inherent risks. Exegesis and overarching proposals about Acts must respect this and account for the variety while not flinching at ambivalence.


A corollary to this second point, this caution against oversimplification, is a caution against interpreters’ tendencies to find in Acts neat divides between anti-imperialist heroes and oppressive villains. Reception history promises to provide a helpful means of illuminating how Acts can prompt (and indeed has prompted) both resistance to and accommodation of imperial-colonial environments—sometimes simultaneously. Recall that no other New Testament book puts faces on imperial representatives to such a degree, naming names (e.g., Gallio, Felix, Drusilla and Festus) and allowing some officials to appear as more than flat characters. No other New Testament book provides as much detail about specific conflicts, which are mostly juridical in nature, as Acts does when powerful imperial figures directly engage the book’s main (Christian) protagonists. In these many scenes, with their detail and relative nuance, Acts should remind interpreters that all kinds of persons, not just accused prisoners, employ strategies to negotiate the imperial world. The appearance and brief characterization of Herod Agrippa II (Acts 25–26) signals to knowing readers that Paul is not the only cultural hybrid on this stage. If the church’s ‘resistance’ to the empire proves tricky to map in the narrative, so too does the empire itself, insofar as Agrippa represents ‘Rome’ with a measure of multidimensionality. Agrippa may be presented to readers in these scenes as a ‘king’, and his time in the spotlight may be a climactic moment for the Lukan narrative about Paul, but a nuanced understanding of the identity and position of the historical Agrippa requires interpreters to admit that a variety of pressures and negotiations are taking place in this narrative and in the figures and political circumstances it describes.

Third, the scholarly output has widened in the last decade or so from inquiries into ‘Rome’ (which typically rely heavily on historical and comparative analyses) into wider questions about ‘empire’, generally construed (which require expertise in ideological analyses and the findings of sociology and semiotics). I welcome this widening and find it mostly helpful for making sense of Acts not only in academic contexts but in ecclesial ones, too. Yet the widened methodological scope requires scholar Roman they exer-35. Agrippa II certainly presents readers with a more nuanced identity than his father (Herod Agrippa I), who appears in Acts 12 to round out Peter’s story. Both, however, contribute to the book’s conceptions of empire and its powers.

36. For an example of a study that leans toward a rather abstracted notion of empire, exploring how language constructs empire at a symbolic level, see Christina Petterson, *Acts of Empire: The Acts of the Apostles and Imperial Ideology* (Sino-Christian Studies Supplement Series, 4; Chung Li, Taiwan: Chung Yuan Christian University, 2012).
scholars to strive for greater precision about how Roman power and Roman agents in Acts might function in their particularity and also how they extend beyond this historical particularity. For when these figures are taken as more representative characters, rhetorically more expansive than merely stock Roman officials, they make Acts criticize other constellations of power, beyond Rome. Gallio the proconsul (Acts 18.12-17) offers an interesting test case for this in his lack of jurisdictional curiosity and his passivity and apparent disdain during the beating of Sosthenes.\footnote{37} Does the sordid and aloof nature of Gallio’s \textit{imperium} make him simply a villain inhabiting first-century Corinth, or does it make him betray a widespread, timeless imperial preference for violence and capriciousness when empires deal with difference within an occupied population?

Fourth, there are reasons to question many of the sharp distinctions that some Acts scholars have drawn between the church’s conflicts with Jewish opponents and its conflicts with Roman opponents.\footnote{38} When it comes to the opposition that Paul (and Peter before him) faces from members of the Jerusalem sociopolitical establishment, one cannot draw stark lines between, on one hand, the governor and his military officers (such as Claudius Lysias) and, on the other hand, the high priest and other members of the priestly aristocracy. These groups’ interests intersected, as Luke’s earliest readers probably readily knew; both groups represent forms of Roman authority, although in distinctive ways.\footnote{39} Whether investigating the opposition to Peter and others in Acts 4–5 or the opposition to Paul in Acts 21–28, scholarship must seek greater precision in its discourse about who or what counts as Roman, who or what represents imperialism and who or what is Jewish.\footnote{40}

\footnote{37. See further Walton, ‘Trying’, pp. 126-32.} \footnote{38. I have Jervell and Walaskay in mind here, as well as – although to a lesser degree – Yamazaki-Ransom.} \footnote{39. Skinner, \textit{Trial Narratives}, pp. 17-19; Martin Goodman, \textit{The Ruling Class of Judaea: The Origins of the Jewish Revolt against Rome, A.D. 66–70} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 36-44, 110-13.} \footnote{40. This point also calls interpreters to consider how topics pertaining to ‘Acts and Judaism’ relate to those under the umbrella of ‘Acts and politics’. Of course, the matter of how Acts depicts the church’s power or powerlessness vis-à-vis the wider Jewish population (and the church’s embrace or rejection of wider Judaism) remains another topic with no clear consensus among scholars and none coming on the visible horizon. Relating these modes of inquiry for the sake of understanding the book of Acts is hardly a unique challenge; consider other New Testament books such as Matthew, Romans and Revelation – all of which urgently beg interpreters to consider the church’s imperial setting in light of the books’ dispositions toward (or within) Judaism.}
Fifth, some recent studies in this field have set their scopes broadly enough to include the full range of the Acts narrative, not merely the book’s scenes of accusation and apologia, and not merely scenes involving face-to-face meetings between disciples and recognized authorities.\footnote{This is in my view, a particular strength of Rowe’s approach in World Upside Down.} The larger, comprehensive cultural vision(s) put forth in Acts deserves continued attention, for it is rooted in the whole of the book’s narrative rhetoric. Scholars also do well to continue looking carefully at those scenes of public accusation that frame conflicts in which questions of propriety, law and belonging are most obviously up for debate.\footnote{The legal questions and scenes are, in my mind, still vitally important subjects for additional scholarly analysis. For too long, studies of the juridical scenes in Acts have relied on unsubstantiated speculations about first-century provincial legal procedures and a sometimes uncritical reliance on A. N. Sherwin-White’s rather brief and occasionally derivative study Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963).}

Sixth, recent scholarship has made it appear impossible now to consider how Acts contributes to discourse about politics and empire apart from also considering the theological message that Acts advances.\footnote{Here I simply assume rather than make a vigorous case that Acts has a theological message. I explore the theological dimensions of Acts in a book addressed to popular audiences: Matthew L. Skinner, Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel: Encountering the Divine in the Book of Acts (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015). It strikes me as odd when some deny that Acts is concerned with describing God and God’s activity. Those deniers appear to be operating with a very narrow definition of what counts as ‘theology’ (e.g., Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Acts [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008], p. 10).} This might sound like an obvious statement, but I believe it represents a significant departure, at least in terms of methodological execution, from some of the formerly dominant proposals reviewed in Walton’s essay. Most of the inquiries since Walton’s essay that I sketched above make a similar point. To illustrate, I simply note that the scenes of most intense conflict and most suspenseful indecision occur when the church’s main activity – namely, the propagation of the gospel – occurs in settings purportedly under strict Roman control. These are scenes especially from the second half of Acts in which Jesus’ followers provoke responses from recognized officials. What kind of theology is at work in a story about a God whose word or good news has deep, transformative and maybe even manipulative effects on the culture it encounters? What kind of God does this, according to Acts? Is it accurate to speak of a totalizing ‘apocalypse’?
of God on display in Acts? With what means and toward what ends do Jesus’ followers in Acts respond to shaming circumstances or attacks? Those theological questions seem essential to consider before asking what kind of empire, with or without its consent, can become a vehicle through which such a God accomplishes God’s purposes. What kind of empire cannot abide the newness Acts describes – a newness created not by a visible king or political usurper but by a church talking about and embodying Jesus Christ? What are the various implications, according to Acts, when God ignores, manipulates or subverts this (or any other) empire, not through bald coercion, but through displays of power (as in Philippi in Acts 16), in stubborn persistence (as in Paul’s extend trial throughout Acts 22-28), and even despite suffering horrible loss (as in James’s execution in Acts 12)? Good scholarship has been done on these fronts, and it will surely continue.

3. Conclusion

If indeed the question of *How should we situate Acts in relation to discourse about politics?* is currently in a messy state, we need not expect that greater productivity and maybe even increased clarity in future scholarship will clean it up. Not only can the messiness lead to salutary outcomes down the road, the methodological messiness also may accurately reflect the reality of what it studies. Postcolonial critics, theological interpreters, those who deny Acts is even concerned about the Roman Empire, some historical critics – in all, a variety of interpreters have found Acts a book that exhibits meaningful tensions and resists simplistic solutions. Following the conventions of ancient historiography and in line with what makes for a compelling narrative, Acts tells its story with multidimensionality and inconsistency – forms of messiness themselves, perhaps – that lend verisimilitude to that story. If the book tells a tale of the church’s resistance, it may also turn out to be a story that valorizes the church, that implicates the church, or that does both. If the book describes Jesus’ ascendency, it could also tell the story of either Rome’s downfall or Rome’s irrelevance. The point is not that Acts supports any and every interpretive proposal, but that scholarship’s ongoing efforts should not expect the disentangling of the book’s perspectives to be any easier than it is for scholars to disentangle their own sociopolitical realities.