Competing Missions in Acts: Countervailing “Missionary” Forces: Empire and Church in Acts

The Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament is a complex book and whose multiple dimensions are underwritten by specific geographical and historical settings. Often seen as part of a double work\(^1\) with Luke's Gospel, it tells the continuing story of Jesus migrating into the story of the church,\(^2\) while seeking to persuade the emerging church about the reach of the gospel and role of Jesus Christ (see Bryan 2005: 95–105; Walton 2008: 74).\(^3\) The multiple

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1 Without denying the dissenting voices, the long-held consensus that Lk and Ac are two parts of a double work provides the backdrop to this chapter. Also, postponing the question whether the Empire is portrayed in the same way in the Gospel according to Lk and Ac, 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 Ac 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 Ac, 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).

2 “Church” is used as a useful, 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 Ac—its use here does not assume a unitary, normative ecclesial structure either in Ac or during the first century CE. However, as indicated 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).

3 For a brief account of a few important shifts in the history of the interpretation of Ac, cf. Walton (2008: 74–76) who stressed the earliest commentary of Chrysostom wanting to relate Ac to Christian life and faith in his day; how Ac, 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
levels and dimensions in Acts complicate its interpretation, and require nuanced investigations—also in accounting for its stance on socio-political matters generally and portrayal of the current imperial context specifically.

How to Describe Acts’ Position towards Empire?

Luke-Acts is politically attuned more than most other writings in the New Testament. Already in the Gospel, and to an extent unlike the other gospel authors, Luke was 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; references to the census and Roman governor of Syria would have invoked, respectively, notions of power exerted through taxation and a threatening military presence on Judean borders (Burrus 2007: 134; cf. Cassidy 1978).

Moreover, Luke and Acts are often regarded as the most pro-Roman Empire documents 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 Empire along the lines of accommodation: Acts was a deliberate attempt to present the communities of Jesus followers as not constituting a political threat to imperial power and politics. Some scholars have argued that Acts was intent on gaining recognition for the 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, the author had...