

THE ACTS AGAINST THE APOSTLES: HOW OPPOSITION SHAPED EARLIEST CHRISTIANITY

Lect. Amiel DRIMBE, PhD

Baptist Theological Institute of Bucharest, Romania

Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, Missouri, USA

adrimbe@mbts.edu

ABSTRACT: The Acts against the Apostles: How Opposition Shaped Earliest Christianity.

Earliest Christianity emerges within the antagonistic religious and political context of first-century Jerusalem. In this article, it will be shown how opposition from the Jewish authorities of the Judean capital shaped the identity and mission of the earliest followers of Jesus. It is the initial censorship, arrest and intimidation of the apostles that create a stronger community – both socially and spiritually. It is also under this initial opposition that the priorities of Jesus' followers are more firmly established and the internal boundaries are more clearly defined, making a prime distinction between traditional Judaism and nascent Christianity. Furthermore, as the opposition increases in intensity and becomes fierce persecution, Jesus' followers experience miraculous interventions, but also tragic losses. In all this, the progress of the Gospel "to the ends of the earth" is initiated and secured. The religious persecution in Jerusalem prompts the scattering of Jesus' followers from Judea to Rome and beyond.

Keywords: *earliest Christianity, opposition, persecution, freedom of speech, suppressed ideas, progress of the Gospel.*

Introduction

Christianity emerges within the antagonistic context of the first-century Jerusalem, a context in which concepts such as "freedom of speech" and "religious freedom" are too often disregarded.¹ In this article, it will be shown

1 The Romans guaranteed the freedom of ancient religions in their colonies, until these religions mingled with the affairs of the state. The religion of the Jews was largely tolerated

how nascent Christianity was *shaped* by this hostile environment. The first half of the Book of Acts depicts the beginnings of the Church and increasing opposition from the religious and political leadership of Jerusalem (2:1–12:24). It is this section of the book that is to be investigated in the present study.

Parrhēsía: The courage to speak when there is no freedom of speech

The opening action of the newly founded Church (2:1–4) is public engagement (2:14–40). The author records here the first sermon of Peter, the spokesperson of the group. In all, Peter has five speeches recorded in Acts: he explains the Pentecost event to the crowds gathered in Jerusalem (2:14–39); explains the miraculous healing of the Temple beggar (3:11–4:4); testifies before the Jewish authorities, after his first arrest (4:8–12); testifies before the Jewish authorities, after his second arrest (5:29–32); and preaches at the home of the Roman centurion Cornelius (10:34–43). It is worth noting that Peter is interrupted every time he is engaged in public speaking and barely finishes a speech.² On the one hand, some of these interruptions are seen as positive. In Acts 2:37, Peter is interrupted by the convicted audience: “Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?””³ In 10:44, Peter’s sermon is interrupted by the Spirit who descends upon those present in the house of Cornelius: “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.”

Most of the interruptions, on the other hand, are undesirable. Three times Peter’s speeches are ended by the political and religious leaders of Jerusalem (4:1, 21; 5:17, 33; cf. 4:18; 5:27, 40).⁴ Two times his public speak-

by the Romans. On their end, many Jews were exclusivists and intolerant. E.g., R.L. Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2019, pp. 7–9.

2 H. Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, Hermeneia, trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel, Philadelphia, PA, Fortress Press, 1987, p. 22. Cf. D.L. Bock, *Acts* (BECNT), Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 2007, p. 184: “It is common for Luke to leave a speech unfinished and move dramatically to its aftermath (Acts 7:54; 10:44; 17:32; 22:22; 26:24).”

3 For Conzelmann, *Acts*, p. 22, “what shall we do” is “catechetical style (cf. Mark 10:17).”

4 In the view of C.K. Barrett, *Acts 1–14* (ICC), Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1994, p. 218, these Jewish leaders are representatives of Judaism as a whole. See also A. Neageo, *The*

ing leads to his arrest and that of the other apostles (4:1–3; 5:25–28). Notably, in Acts 5:29, when he stands before the Sanhedrin for the second time, Peter resumes his speech with the same idea he was withheld from finishing during his first trial (4:18–21):

¹⁸Then they [the Sanhedrin] called them [the apostles] in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to Him (ὕμῶν ἀκούειν μᾶλλον ἢ τοῦ θεοῦ)? You be the judges! ²⁰As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” ²¹After further threats they let them go. (Acts 4:18–21)

²⁷The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. ²⁸“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.” ²⁹Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings (πειθαρχεῖν δεῖ θεῷ μᾶλλον ἢ ἀνθρώποις)!” (Acts 5:27–29)

Between the lines of this comparison, one might imagine Peter’s frustration at having his speeches censored by the Jewish authorities. At the same time, the Jewish leaders are “astonished” at the apostles’ *παρρησία* (4:13). Etymologically, *παρρησία* means “to say everything”. In classical Greek, the term was used “for the freedom of speech which was the right of the free citizen”.⁵ In the Book of Acts, however, its sense appears to be both similar and altered.⁶ As W.C. van Unnik argues, “In Acts it is typical that this *παρρησία* is [...] mentioned in connection with preaching in

Trial of the Gospel: An Apologetic Reading of Luke’s Trial Narratives (SNTSMS 116) Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 141 (n. 43).

5 BDAG, “*παρρησία*”, p. 781; E. Peterson, “Zur Bedeutungsgeschichte von *PARRHĒSÍA*”, in W. Koepf (ed.), *Reinhold Seeberg Festschrift*, Bd. 1: *Zur Theorie des Christentums*, Leipzig, W. Scholl, 1929, pp. 283–97; W.C. van Unnik, “The Christian’s Freedom of Speech in the New Testament”, *BJRL* 44 (1961–62), p. 477.

6 *παρρησία* is “one of the keywords in Acts”. F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (3rd ed.), Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1990, p. 152. Barrett, *Acts 1–14*, p. 233, lists the occurrences of *παρρησία* (noun) and *παρρησιάζομαι* (verb) in Acts: 2:29; 4:13, 29, 31; 28:31 (*παρρησία*); 9:27–28; 13:46; 14:3; 18:26; 19:8; 26:26 (*παρρησιάζομαι*).

the synagogues and to the Jews” (e.g., 13:46; 14:1–3).⁷ Also, in 26:26, the apostle Paul speaks with *παρρησία* before King Agrippa and Governor Porcius Festus. Finally, in the concluding lines of the book, Paul is placed under house arrest in Rome, waiting to stand trial before Caesar (28:16). Nonetheless, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is preached openly and it spreads unhindered (28:30–31):

³⁰For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. ³¹He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance (*μετὰ πάσης παρρησίας ἀκωλύτως*)!

In Acts, therefore, *παρρησία* seems to be a feature of the one who speaks (or of the speech that is delivered) before a hostile audience. Thus, it came to mean “boldness” or “courage.”⁸ It is noteworthy that, in this altered meaning, “courageous confidence” replaces “freedom.” In a sense, in the Book of Acts, *παρρησία* is *the courage to speak when there is no freedom of speech* (cf. 4:18; 5:27–28, 40). It is this *παρρησία* that “astonished” the members of the Sanhedrin, hearing Peter and John proclaim Jesus (4:13).

As soon as the apostles Peter and John are released from their first arrest, “after further threats” (4:21), there is a sudden change of context. From the public place of proclamation, the focus shifts to the private place of prayer (4:23–31). After 3:1, Peter and John had been isolated from the Christian community. The focus was exclusively on them (3:1–4:22). After their release from the arrest, they return within the community, to “their own” (4:23). As C.K. Barrett notes,

this paragraph marks the climax of the narrative that began at 3:1 and we may look to it for a summary of what Luke intended the whole to convey. Peter and John may have seemed to be acting on their own; in truth, however, they are acting in relation to and on behalf of their own people (*οἱ ἴδιοι*, v. 23) who support them and must be informed of what has happened...⁹

The first trial that comes upon the community from outside gives the apostles a sense of belonging (“their own”)¹⁰ and strengthens the unity

7 Van Unnik, “Freedom of Speech”, p. 478.

8 Van Unnik, “Freedom of Speech”, pp. 477–82; Bruce, *Acts*, p. 152.

9 Barrett, *Acts 1–14*, p. 241.

10 It also creates a separation – Judaism vs. Christianity. Neagoe, *Trial*, p. 141: “Luke

of the whole group (4:24–37). This unity is firstly expressed in common prayer: “they all raised their voices together in prayer to God” (4:24). Only one prayer is recorded by the author (4:24–30), as if they all prayed like one.¹¹ As for the content of their petition, it is interesting to note not only what they asked for in prayer, but also what they did not request. They do not pray for the removal of the persecutors, nor for their protection from persecution (4:25–28). Instead, they pray for *παρρησία*, the courage to proclaim Jesus: “Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness” (4:29). For R.N. Longenecker,

in the church’s prayer the sufferings of Christian believers are related directly to the sufferings of Christ and inferentially to the sufferings of God’s righteous servants in the OT. This theme of the union of the sufferings of Christ and those of his own is a theme that is developed in many ways throughout the NT [...] Most significant is the fact that these early Christians were not praying for relief from oppression or judgment on their oppressors but for enablement “to speak your word with great boldness” amid oppressions and for God to act in mighty power “through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (v. 30).¹²

It is not only the continuation of bold preaching that they pray for, but also for the continuation of miracles (4:30). The first arrest of Peter and John came as a direct consequence of the two apostles doing good: the healing of the crippled beggar at the Temple gate (3:1–4:1). Their charity was instead “rewarded” with threats and incarceration.¹³ Still, they pray to continue to be God’s outstretched hands for those in need, to continue to be agents of good, comfort and healing.¹⁴ Their priorities are defined under pressure.

portrays a conflict between the representatives of the new Christian movement and the representatives of Judaism.”

11 Barrett, *Acts 1–14*, p. 241, asks “whether Luke himself wrote the prayer or derived it from old liturgical tradition”.

12 R.N. Longenecker, *The Acts of the Apostles* (EBC 9), Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 1981, p. 309.

13 Barrett, *Acts 1–14*, pp. 216–17: “It is clear from [4:7] that in the story it is the act rather than the speech of Peter and John that provokes the authorities to arrest them [...] it was the miracle story that led originally to their appearance before the Sanhedrin.” Cf. 4:7–10 and 5:12–17.

14 Longenecker, *Acts*, p. 309; Barrett, *Acts 1–14*, p. 249.

In Acts 16:26, an earthquake opens the prison doors where the apostles are incarcerated, so that the preaching of the Gospel could continue. In 4:31, an earthquake opens the mouths of the apostle, so they continue to proclaim Jesus with *παρρησία*. Their prayer is answered at once. For Barrett, “This verse [4:31] brings to an end the first part of a major section, beginning at 2:1, that Luke has composed with care [...] It is intentional that the section ends as it began with the gift of the Spirit, whose presence is shown by physical portents. The fire, noise and wind of 2:2, 3 are matched by the shaking (*ἔσαλεύθη*) of this verse.”¹⁵ In 2:4, the outpouring of the Spirit supernaturally enables the apostles to speak in various tongues. In 4:31, the filling with the Spirit enables the apostles to speak with courage. Following this correspondence, it could also be that *παρρησία* is in this case a supernatural manifestation of the Spirit’s filling.¹⁶

The first censorship, arrest and intimidation of the apostles by the Jewish authorities only help to create a stronger community, both socially and spiritually. Under pressure, their priorities are more firmly established: preaching and healing should be continued, no matter the opposition (4:23–31). It is also under this pressure that the internal boundaries are more clearly defined (“their own people”), and so is the perception of who is inside these boundaries and who is outside (4:23–37).

Persecution: The suppression of an idea that challenges the balance of power

Ideas that can challenge or shift the balance of power may be considered dangerous. Such an idea was Jesus of Nazareth being the Son of God and Israel’s Messiah. It was an idea that could void the religious leadership of Jerusalem of their power and influence.¹⁷ If Jesus was indeed who his followers proclaimed him to be, then the Jewish Sanhedrin was guilty of

15 Barrett, *Acts 1–14*, p. 249.

16 For Bruce, *Acts*, p. 152, *παρρησία* in Acts is “the confidence and forthrightness with which the apostles bore witness under the prompting of the Spirit”. Cf. Barrett, *Acts 1–14*, p. 250: “it would go too far to take it as implying prophecy or speaking with tongues, but it is not far from this”.

17 E.g., Bock, *Acts*, pp. 184, 199–200 *et passim*: “the [Jewish] leadership no longer represents the expression of God’s will and way... the Jewish leadership’s reaction to God’s activity is completely inadequate”.

“fighting against God” (5:29–32, 38–39).¹⁸ It is why the political and religious leaders of Jerusalem issued an edict against preaching Jesus (4:18; 5:40).¹⁹ When their “command”, however, was disregarded by the apostles (cf. 4:18–21; 5:27–29),²⁰ they unfolded a process of suppressing the Jesus idea and the new worldview that his followers were advancing.²¹

A rational way to disprove an idea is through debate or refutation. Such debates were very common in the variegated Judaism²² of the first century (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 13.5.9 [171]; 20.9.1 [199]).²³ As was noted above, the political and religious leaders of Jerusalem were representatives of Judaism as a whole (or of mainstream Judaism). To debate other Jewish factions or even themselves was their task (e.g., Acts 6:9; 15:2; 18:15; 23:7; 28:29). Thus, debates among the representatives of Judaism and of Christianity were unavoidable (6:9): “some members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued (συζητέω) with Stephen”. Moreover, if the *testimonia* hypothesis suggested first by A. Harnack (1894) and E. Hatch (1889) is valid,²⁴ and the earliest Christians did use apologetic collections of OT texts to prove the divinity and messianism of Jesus, then debates were expected as something habitual for the followers of Jesus (cf. Acts 18:15, 28; 28:29).

However, as seen in the case of Stephen (6:10–15; 7:54–60), debate was not the only way the Jewish authorities responded to the Jesus idea that undermined their authority and influence. If the idea could not be refuted, it had to be suppressed.

18 Bruce, *Acts*, p. 178.

19 Bock, *Acts*, p. 198.

20 Bock, *Acts*, p. 198. παραγγέλλω (“to command”) is frequent in Acts (1:3–5; 4:18; 5:27–28, 40; 10:42; 15:5; 16:18, 22–23; 17:30–31; 23:22, 30). It is God who commands all people, Jesus commands His followers, the Jewish authorities command the apostles, the Roman tribune commands the Jews, etc. The same dualism God/Jesus vs. men of authority is present here.

21 Bock, *Acts*, p. 609.

22 Some scholars prefer the plural Judaisms.

23 Bock, *Acts*, p. 237. In Acts, the Sadducees (5:17), Pharisees (15:5; 26:5), and Christians (24:5, 14; 28:22) are seen as αἰρέσεις (“factions”, “parties”) of Judaism.

24 A. Harnack, *A History of Dogma*, vol. I, London, Williams & Norgate, 1894, p. 175; E. Hatch, *Essays in Biblical Greek*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1889, p. 203.

(1) The first attempt to suppress the Jesus idea is the arrest and intimidation of the most prominent member of the movement.²⁵ Ever since Acts 1:15, Peter is described as the main leader of the newly founded Jesus movement. He becomes prominent in chapters 2 and 3, where the first public events are recorded. For E. Haenchen and H. Conzelmann, Peter is the sole protagonist of 3:1–26.²⁶ John is seen as a later addition: “in this way Luke prepares for the appearance of *two* witnesses before the Sanhedrin (4:19–20).”²⁷ Thus, the first hearing of Jesus’ followers before the Jewish authorities consists of “the testimony of two or three witnesses” (cf. Deut. 19:15).²⁸

Ironically, Peter and John are arrested “at precisely the moment when they announce salvation to Israel” (cf. 3:12–26; 4:1–3).²⁹ The arrest is conducted by the captain of the Temple guard, “a member of the high-priestly family and the number two man at the temple, an elite position among the Levites who made up the temple guard.”³⁰ His presence is meant to intimidate the two public speakers. The intimidation of the two apostles continues the next day, in the presence of the high-priestly family: “Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander” (4:6).³¹ Peter and John are surrounded by those responsible for the arrest, trial and execution of Jesus (cf. John 18:13–14, 24).³²

25 Bock, *Acts*, p. 200, calls this the “first touch of persecution against the apostles”. Similarly, for J. Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (KEK 3), Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998, p. 175, it is the first persecution of Christians in Acts.

26 Conzelmann, *Acts*, pp. 25–26.

27 Conzelmann, *Acts*, p. 26; E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*, trans. Bernard Noble, Gerald Shinn, and R.M.L. Wilson, Philadelphia, PA, Westminster Press, 1971, p. 201.

28 A third witness, the healed beggar, appears in 4:14–22.

29 Conzelmann, *Acts*, p. 32.

30 Bock, *Acts*, p. 186; J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AYBC 31), New York, Doubleday, 1998, p. 297: “[he] would have been second in importance, after the high priest”.

31 I.H. Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC 5), Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 1980, p. 106: “the temple affairs were very much in the hands of a few powerful families”.

32 Bock, *Acts*, p. 190: “Josephus notes an examination scene with the Sanhedrin involving Herod (*Ant.* 14.9.4 [168–76]). The participants would have been present in a semicircle around Peter and John (*m. Sanh.* 4.3 notes that the group was organized like

In the words of D.L. Bock, "All the top figures of official Judaism in Jerusalem are gathered to render a judgment about what to do with these two apostles."³³ Between the lines, a major concern of the Jewish leaders could be read.³⁴ Until this point, there had only been two events of public proclamation from the followers of Jesus. In both cases, thousands of people joined the movement (2:41; 4:4).³⁵ It is in the context of the second growth report (4:4) that "the top figures of official Judaism in Jerusalem" are introduced (4:5–6). The Jesus idea created an immediate impact and the spread of the new movement was beyond ignoring. If the same progression was maintained, soon all Jerusalem would adhere to the movement. Thus, "the Sanhedrin [...] will do its best to prevent further damage in the future" (4:17).³⁶ This time, however, the Jewish authorities restricted themselves to issuing "threats" and "orders" to cease preaching Jesus (4:17–18, 21). When their orders were ignored (4:19–20), repeating the threats was their only option: "After threatening them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people" (4:21). I.H. Marshall mentions at this point some aspects of the Jewish law "which laid down that in certain cases a person could not be punished on a first offence; rather he had to be warned that what he was doing was culpable (since he might have been acting in ignorance of the law), and then, if he knowingly committed the same fault again, he could be punished on the second occasion."³⁷ He also notes that the restraint of the Sanhedrin in this case was not due to

'the half round of a threshing floor so they could all see one another'). So the apostles are 'in the midst' (ἐν τῷ μέσῳ, *en tō mesō*).

33 Bock, *Acts*, p. 190.

34 Fitzmyer, *Acts*, p. 295.

35 Barrett, *Acts*, p. 222. R.P.C. Hanson, *The Acts* (NCB), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1967, p. 76 *et passim* defends the number 5,000 as reliable (Acts 2:41; 4:4), arguing that J. Jeremias' estimation of the population of Jerusalem, i.e., 25,000–30,000, is too low (see Diod. Sic. 40.3.8; Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.194, 197; *War* 6.422–5). Cf. J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Times of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period*, trans. F.H. Cave and C.H. Cave, Philadelphia, PA, Fortress Press, 1969, pp. 82–84.

36 Barrett, *Acts*, p. 235; Bock, *Acts*, p. 198: "The effort is both to silence and control the apostles and to bring any form of testimony about God's work through Jesus to a complete halt. This is damage control."

37 Marshall, *Acts*, pp. 103–104.

the law, but to the fear of the crowds, still under the impact of the healing miracle.³⁸ The unrecorded threats of the Sanhedrin, however, were serious enough to engender the communal prayer of 4:23–31.³⁹

(2) The second attempt to suppress the Jesus idea is the arrest and intimidation of the whole group of apostles, not just Peter and John (5:17–42). It is also the second consecutive time when the leaders of the Jesus movement are arrested for doing even more good deeds, this time healing a large number of people (5:12–16). No public sermon is recorded at this point, but only after their miraculous release from prison (5:17–21). They were put in prison for doing miraculous works; they were released from prison in a miraculous way.⁴⁰ Despite the miraculous circumstances surrounding the second arrest, the conduct of the hearing is unchanged,⁴¹ while the aggressiveness of the Jewish leaders against the apostles increases.⁴²

The “interrogation” of the apostles by the High Priest contains in fact no proper questions, but only a remark concerning their noncompliance (5:27–28).⁴³ Seeing that their threats are ineffective, the Sanhedrin conceive a hidden plan to kill the apostles;⁴⁴ for the fear of the crowd is still being felt (5:26). For J. Jeremias, this second hearing has the marks of a criminal trial, in which the accused are to be convicted of blasphemy.⁴⁵ This time the restraint comes as a result of Gamaliel’s

38 Marshall, *Acts*, p. 103.

39 Fitzmyer, *Acts*, p. 297, notes “a certain parallelism that Luke used in this episode with the passion narrative of his Gospel”.

40 Longenecker, *Acts*, p. 319, notes “the threefold repetition of the motif of the miraculous opening of prison doors in [Acts]” and “its distribution between the apostles in Ac. 5:19, Peter in 12:6–11, and Paul in 16:26f.”

41 Conzelmann, *Acts*, p. 41; M.C. Parsons, *Acts* (Paideia), Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 2008, p. 77: “the apostles are released from prison by an angel, whose very existence the Sadducees deny (see 23:8)”. Cf. 5:17; Longenecker, *Acts*, p. 318: “Luke has the early opposition to Christianity arising principally from the Sadducees.”

42 The tension between the two groups also increases. Parsons, *Acts*, p. 77: “The old charge of teaching in this name (cf. 4:7) is coupled with a new reaction by the Sadducees to the accusation that the apostles’ teaching is intended to bring ‘this man’s blood upon us’ (5:28). The stakes have gotten considerably higher since the last confrontation.”

43 Longenecker, *Acts*, p. 320.

44 Cf. Conzelmann, *Acts*, p. 42: “The verse describes the mood of the council, not yet a firm plan...”

45 J. Jeremias, “Untersuchungen zum Quellenproblem der Apostelgeschichte”, *ZNW* 36.2 (1937), pp. 205–213. Cf. Conzelmann, *Acts*, p. 41.

address (5:34–40a), which Luke takes to be another intervention from God.⁴⁶ The heavenly ἄγγελος released the apostles from prison. The human ἄγγελος released the apostles from the Sanhedrin. Gamaliel's counsel, "held back the worst of Sadducean intentions", yet "it did not entirely divert their wrath".⁴⁷ No violence is used in the arrest of the apostles, out of fear of the people (5:26).⁴⁸ Hidden from the eyes of the crowd, the Jewish leaders hand the apostles over for severe flogging (5:40). The punishment of thirty-nine lashes could be inflicted by any official of a synagogue against any offender of the Jewish law (*m. Mak.* 3.10–14; *m. Kil.* 8.3; *m. Mak.* 1.1; Josephus, *Ant.* 4.8.21 [238]).⁴⁹ In this case, it could establish the precedent for any future punishments due to the "offenses" of the apostles' preaching and actions (Acts 16:37; 22:19–20; cf. 2 Cor. 11:24).⁵⁰ Only after the flogging were the apostles threatened again and released.

In spite of the intensified opposition, the apostles' commitment to public engagement is not diminished: they continue to proclaim Jesus daily in the very same place, the Temple of Jerusalem.⁵¹ There is no hiding, there is no backing down (5:4–42).

(3) Another attempt to suppress the Jesus idea is the martyrdom of Stephen (6:7–7:60). It may be noted that the trials before the Jewish authorities increase from verbal threats (4:21), to physical punishment (5:40), and then to public execution (7:58).⁵² Stephen's ministry includes preaching and healing (6:7–8), which parallels the ministry of the apostles.⁵³ The synagogues were places of reading of Scripture, prayer, worship,

46 Conzelmann, *Acts*, p. 43: "With the change from the subjunctive ('if this plan should be of men...') to the indicative ('but if it is of God...'), Luke indicates that the 'advice' really is from God; God has spoken his own judgment through the mouth of Gamaliel."

47 Longenecker, *Acts*, p. 324.

48 Longenecker, *Acts*, p. 320.

49 Haenchen, *Acts*, p. 254; Bock, *Acts*, p. 252. In Acts 5:40, the punishment of thirty-nine lashes is imposed, most likely, for the charge of blasphemy.

50 "Beating" is mentioned three times in Acts (5:39–40; 16:37; 22:19–20). Bock, *Acts*, p. 252.

51 Marshall, *Acts*, p. 131: "The Sanhedrin could probably do little to stop them evangelizing in their homes. But they also continued their activities in the temple..."

52 Bock, *Acts*, p. 267. Conzelmann, *Acts*, p. 47, sees the Stephen cycle as "the climax of the events which began with chapter 4".

53 Bock, *Acts*, p. 269.

and instruction. It was also a public space where various religious ideas were disputed.⁵⁴ Stephen defends Jesus in some of the synagogues where Greek-speaking Jews used to worship. Since they cannot outperform him in public debate, the Hellenists bribe (ὕποβάλλω) certain men to accuse Stephen of blasphemy,⁵⁵ and incite (συγκινέω) the people of Jerusalem and the Jewish authorities against him (6:11–13).

In contrast to 4:21 and 5:26, on this occasion the people side with the opponents.⁵⁶ The “buffer that had previously protected the apostles” is removed.⁵⁷ Brought before the Sanhedrin, Stephen’s trial parallels Jesus’ in many respects (cf. Matt. 26:59–61, 65; Mark 14:55–64).⁵⁸ Given the possibility of addressing the council, Stephen engages in a bold *refutatio*, a deliberately offensive discourse, rather than an *apologia pro vita sua*. As in the case of Peter, Stephen’s discourse is interrupted by the members of the Sanhedrin, who begin to behave like an angry mob (7:54, 57). No legal deliberation of the Sanhedrin and no formal verdict are recorded, but only Stephen’s dragging out of the city and his stoning (7:58). This is mob or lynch justice (*Lynchjustiz*), as W. Eckey calls it.⁵⁹ And so, Stephen pays “the ultimate price for faith”⁶⁰ and becomes “the first named martyr” of Christianity.⁶¹

In Judea, a territory under Roman rule, capital punishment was a prerogative of Rome.⁶² Josephus, *Ant.* 20.9.1 (197–203), for instance, mentions that the controversial execution of James, also by stoning, which took place during an interregnum, caused “uneasiness” for numerous Jews. Concerned about usurping Roman authority, these Jews demanded the removal of Annas II (Ananus) from the office of High Priest (*ca.* 63 CE), due to his decisive role in the execution of James. Their demand was ap-

54 Barrett, *Acts*, p. 323.

55 See Josephus, *Ant.* 20.9.1 (200), for the Jewish charges of blasphemy against James, the brother of Jesus (*ca.* 62 CE); also *J.W.* 2.8.9 (145), where “blasphemy against Moses is said to be a capital crime”. Bock, *Acts*, p. 271.

56 Conzelmann, *Acts*, p. 47.

57 Parsons, *Acts*, p. 87.

58 Fitzmyer, *Acts*, p. 390; Bock, *Acts*, p. 309 *et passim*.

59 W. Eckey, *Die Apostelgeschichte: Der Weg des Evangeliums von Jerusalem nach Rom*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag, 2000, p. 181; Bock, *Acts*, p. 314.

60 Bock, *Acts*, p. 316.

61 Parsons, *Acts*, p. 85.

62 Cf. Fitzmyer, *Acts*, p. 391; Bock, *Acts*, pp. 313–14.

proved and Annas II was removed from office.⁶³ By stoning Stephen without Roman approval, the Jewish authorities show their willingness to escalate their abuse of power,⁶⁴ in order to confine the Jesus movement and control the spread of its ideas. For both persecution and martyrdom are primarily about control.

The martyrdom of Stephen marks a turning point in the opposition of the Jewish authorities (8:1–4). The persecution is redirected from the leaders to the community and escalates from threats to beatings, imprisonment and even “killing” (ἀνάρησις).⁶⁵ At this point, Saul of Tarsus becomes the organizer of the persecution and starts “ravaging the church” (λυμαίνω).⁶⁶ “The house-to-house nature of his search”⁶⁷ should communicate the idea that no follower of Jesus is safe (cf. 8:1–3; 9:1–2). It also shows the extreme zeal of this young persecutor (cf. Gal. 1:13–14).

Once again, the oppressive context shapes earliest Christianity: a major “parting of the ways” appears between traditional Judaism and nascent Christianity.⁶⁸ Moreover, *because* of this persecution, Christianity was spread throughout “Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (cf. 1:8; 8:1; 11:19–26).⁶⁹ It is also in this context that Saul of Tarsus meets Jesus on the way to Damascus (9:1–22) and becomes arguably Christianity’s most important theologian and missionary.⁷⁰

63 Bruce, *Acts*, p. 212; Bock, *Acts*, p. 314.

64 The lamentation over Stephen (8:2) should be seen as a form of peaceful protest against the terrible injustice and abuse of power. Haenchen, *Acts*, pp. 293–94; Bock, *Acts*, p. 319: “*m. Sanh.* 6.5–6 permits burial of one who was stoned but no lamentation. Their act is both defiant and a statement of their perception that Stephen was righteous.”

65 Bock, *Acts*, pp. 317–18, notes the movement from warning (4:21), to flogging (5:40), to martyrdom (7:58–60), and to persecution (8:1). This is the first occurrence of διωγμός (“persecution”) in Acts. Marshall, *Acts*, p. 160.

66 For Bruce, *Acts*, p. 215, λυμαίνω, a *hapax legomenon* in the NT, is “an appropriate verb for the ravaging of a body by a wild beast” (cf. Gal. 1:13).

67 Bock, *Acts*, p. 320; Neagoe, *Trial*, p. 171.

68 J.D.G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (2nd ed.), London, SCM Press, 2006, pp. 84–98.

69 Neagoe, *Trial*, p. 171.

70 Neagoe, *Trial*, p. 171: “Saul is portrayed as a vehement opponent of the word. No change in his attitude is yet anticipated. However, it is precisely through this negative portrayal that Luke skilfully prepares the reader for a better appreciation of a dominant theme in Acts: such is the power of the Christian witness that it cannot be destroyed by opposition; indeed, it is even able to turn the sharpest enemy into the most enthusiastic ally...”

(4) A fourth attempt to suppress the Jesus idea is the killing of James, son of Zebedee (12:1–2). James is the second named follower of Jesus to be killed, after Stephen. Moreover, he is one of the twelve apostles (Luke 5:1–11; Acts 1:13). Given his apostolic status, the lack of details concerning James' death is striking, when compared to the death of Stephen (6:7–7:60). Stephen's trial and execution were public events. It could be that James's execution is more private, involving the exclusive verdict of Herod Agrippa I (ca. 9 BCE–44 CE), i.e., the ancient correspondent of a silent execution or even assassination.⁷¹ If this is the case, then the privacy of James' execution and the lack of details accessible to the public, were meant to communicate the same message as above, that no follower of Jesus was safe.⁷²

Furthermore, among the very few details recorded, the author mentions that James was “killed by the sword” (12:2a). In some circles of Jewish tradition, beheading was “the most shameful of all deaths” (*m. Sanh.* 7.2). It was an execution reserved not only for murderers, but also for “the people of an apostate city” (*m. Sanh.* 9.1).⁷³ On the other hand, this method of execution could be explained by Agrippa's Roman upbringing: “Given Agrippa's background in Rome, he may regard execution by the sword (cf. Rom 13:4) as the most efficient and rapid method...”⁷⁴ Nonetheless, the beheading of James shows the determination of Agrippa I to cut off the head of the Christian movement (8:2–3).⁷⁵

(5) A final attempt to suppress the Jesus idea in Jerusalem is the intensified persecution during the reign of Herod Agrippa I. This time, it is

71 C.S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 2: 3:1–14:28, Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 2013, p. 1873, observes that Agrippa preferred “the most efficient and rapid method” of execution.

72 On the other hand, a more public execution would fit better Agrippa's purpose, i.e., to please the Jews (12:3).

73 Parsons, *Acts*, p. 173.

74 Keener, *Acts*, p. 1873.

75 Cf. Fitzmyer, *Acts*, p. 486: “no effort is made by the early church to reconstitute the Twelve on the death of the apostle James, as was done after the death of Judas Iscariot. The role of the Twelve has come to an end in Acts...”; Bock, *Acts*, p. 422: “no effort is made to reconstitute the Twelve after James's death, a point with implications about the view of a permanent role for the Twelve. In other words, Judas was replaced as the twelfth member, and then no replacement was made after James's death here, probably on the belief that the Twelve would be reestablished in the resurrection”.

the king himself (βασιλεύς), not just the members of the Sanhedrin, who persecute the followers of Jesus (cf. 4:27–28).⁷⁶ Descending from a royal family that was hated by the Jews, “Herod Agrippa I took every opportunity during his administration in Palestine to win their affection. When in Rome, he was a cosmopolitan Roman. But when in Jerusalem, he acted the part of an observant Jew” (e.g., *b. Pesah.* 88b; *m. Bikk.* 3:4; *m. Sot.* 7:8).⁷⁷ Persecuting the Jewish Christian minority was his way of pleasing the masses (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 19.7.3 [328–31]).⁷⁸ As Longenecker remarks,

Agrippa’s policy was the *Pax Romana* through the preservation of the status quo. He supported the majority within the land and ruthlessly suppressed minorities when they became disruptive. He viewed Jewish Christians as divisive and felt their activities could only disturb the people and inflame antagonisms.⁷⁹

Beyond the undisclosed execution of James, Agrippa I increases the harshness of the persecution. It may be considered likely that some of the Christians imprisoned by him endured torture (8:1). Κακόω is used by the author of Acts with reference to “physical injury” (7.6, 19; 12.1; 18.10).⁸⁰ One of the leaders of the movement is martyred; some of the members are tortured. As C.S. Keener notes, “Such events could challenge people’s faith, and Luke answers this challenge partly by the contrast with Peter’s miraculous deliverance (Acts 12:7–11), which underlines God’s unfettered ability to deliver and hence God’s sovereign purposes even when he does not do so...”⁸¹ Similarly, for Longenecker, Acts 12 is about “divine intervention on behalf of the Jerusalem Church.”⁸² Peter is delivered, by an angelic inter-

76 Fitzmyer, *Acts*, p. 485: “[Luke] shows that persecution came not only from religious authorities in Jerusalem or archpersecutors like Saul, but even from the ruling political authority, King Herod.”

77 Longenecker, *Acts*, p. 407.

78 Bruce, *Acts*, p. 280: “the principal targets of Agrippa’s attack were the apostles, and he attacked them, evidently, with popular approval (v. 3a). This change in the public attitude to the apostles since the persecution that followed Stephen’s death, when they appear to have been exempt from molestation, may be ascribed to the action of Peter, their leader, in consorting with Gentiles (members of the Roman army of occupation, at that) and to the others’ acquiescence in his action”.

79 Longenecker, *Acts*, p. 408.

80 Barrett, *Acts*, p. 574.

81 Keener, *Acts*, p. 1872.

82 Longenecker, *Acts*, p. 405.

vention, in a miraculous way which at certain points resembles Jesus' resurrection (12:3–19).⁸³ Moreover, God himself intervenes and removes the persecuting tyrant, Herod Agrippa I (12:20–23; cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 19.8.2 [343–52]).⁸⁴ Thus, the progress, even the triumph of the Gospel is secured (12:24). The Jesus idea cannot be suppressed.

The martyrdom of James and the torture of many Christians (12:1–2) serve as a reminder that not all are saved or spared.⁸⁵ The final victory, however, belongs to Jesus and his Gospel (12:3–24; cf. 28:31).⁸⁶ The individual lives of Christians are subordinate to the greater purpose: God's salvation reaching the ends of the earth (1:8).

Conclusions

Earliest Christianity emerges within the antagonistic context of first-century Jerusalem and, as this study has shown, is shaped by it. The first censorship, arrest and intimidation of the apostles created a stronger community, both socially and spiritually. Under this initial opposition, the priorities of the followers of Jesus are more clearly established, as seen in their common prayer (4:23–21): they do not pray for the removal of the persecutors, nor for their protection from persecution (4:25–28). Instead, they pray for *παρρησία*, the courage to proclaim Jesus in spite of persecution. Also, their internal boundaries are more clearly defined (4:23–37): fundamental distinctions between traditional Judaism and nascent Christianity begin to appear.

As the opposition increases in intensity and becomes persecution, Jesus' followers experience miraculous interventions, but also painful losses

83 E.g., Parsons, *Acts*, p. 171; Bock, *Acts*, p. 428.

84 E.g., Longenecker, *Acts*, pp. 412–13.

85 Longenecker, *Acts*, p. 409: "while God does not promise deliverance from persecution and death, at crucial times he often steps in to act for the honor of his name and the benefit of his people".

86 Marshall, *Acts*, p. 219: "From Luke's point of view the emphasis would appear to be on the triumphant progress of the gospel (12:24) which is not hindered by the death of one apostle or the imprisonment of another. When the church prays, the cause of God will go forward, and his enemies will come to naught, even if this does not exempt the church from suffering and martyrdom; Luke's belief in the victory of the gospel is thoroughly realistic and recognizes that though the word of God is not fettered, its servants may well have to suffer and be bound (2 Tim. 2:9)."

(6:7–15; 7:54–60; 8:1–3; 12:1–23). In all this, the progress of the Gospel to the ends of the earth is initiated and secured (6:7; 8:4; 12:24). In fact, it is the persecution that follows the martyrdom of Stephen that is seen as the *cause* for the spread of Christianity and for the mission to the gentiles (8:4; 11:19): “those who were scattered *because of the persecution* (ἀπὸ τῆς θλίψεως) that took place over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch...”

Perhaps the most important outcome of the persecution in Jerusalem is the conversion of the prominent persecutor Saul of Tarsus, who is to become Paul the apostle (9:1–30; esp. vv. 4–6). The ways in which Paul shaped earliest Christianity are fundamental, decisive and enduring,⁸⁷ yet they exceed the scope of this study.

Bibliography:

- Barrett, C.K., *Acts 1–14* (ICC), Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1994.
- Bock, D.L., *Acts* (BECNT), Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 2007.
- Bruce, F.F., *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (3rd ed.), Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1990
- Conzelmann, H., *Acts of the Apostles*, Hermeneia, trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel, Philadelphia, PA, Fortress Press, 1987.
- Dunn, J.D.G., *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (2nd ed.), London, SCM Press, 2006.
- Eckey, W., *Die Apostelgeschichte: Der Weg des Evangeliums von Jerusalem nach Rom*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag, 2000.
- Fitzmyer, J.A., *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AYBC 31), New York, Doubleday, 1998.
- Haenchen, E., *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*, trans. Bernard Noble, Gerald Shinn, and R.M.L. Wilson, Philadelphia, PA, Westminster Press, 1971.
- Hanson, R.P.C., *The Acts* (NCB), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1967.

⁸⁷ Paul is considered by certain scholars “the real founder of Christianity”. E.g., N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1997.

- Harnack, A., *A History of Dogma*, vol. I, London, Williams & Norgate, 1894.
- Hatch, E. *Essays in Biblical Greek*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1889.
- Jeremias, J., *Jerusalem in the Times of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period*, trans. F.H. Cave and C.H. Cave, Philadelphia, PA, Fortress Press, 1969.
- _____, "Untersuchungen zum Quellenproblem der Apostelgeschichte", *ZNW* 36.2 (1937), pp. 205–213.
- Jervell, J. *Die Apostelgeschichte* (KEK 3), Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998.
- Keener, C.S., *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 2: 3:1–14:28, Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 2013.
- Longenecker, R.N., *The Acts of the Apostles* (EBC 9), Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 1981.
- Marshall, I.H., *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC 5), Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 1980.
- Neagoe, A., *The Trial of the Gospel: An Apologetic Reading of Luke's Trial Narratives* (SNTSMS 116) Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Parsons, M.C., *Acts* (Paideia), Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 2008.
- Peterson, E. "Zur Bedeutungsgeschichte von ΠΑΡΡΗΣΙΑ", pp. 283–97, in W. Koepf (ed.), *Reinhold Seeberg Festschrift, Bd. 1: Zur Theorie des Christentums*, Leipzig, W. Scholl, 1929.
- Van Unnik, W.C., "The Christian's Freedom of Speech in the New Testament", *BJRL* 44 (1961–62), pp. 466–88.
- Wilken, R.L., *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2019.
- Wright, N.T., *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1997.