Caesar Jesus? The Kingship of Jesus and Political Authorities in Luke and Acts

Kendall A. Davis

{For footer: Kendall A. Davis is a PhD student in New Testament and Christian origins at the University of Edinburgh in the United Kingdom. He can be contacted at ~~Kk~~.~~Aa~~.~~Davis~~davis-3@sms.ed.ac.uk.}

I. Introduction[1]

It was not uncommon for Paul to stir up trouble as he traveled during his missionary journeys. Paul's preaching is routinely met with a mob, often composed of Jews, who bring charges against him to the local authorities (e.g., Acts 14:1–7,~~;~~ 17:1–9,~~;~~ 18:1–17,~~;~~ 21:17–36). While Acts makes it clear that the charges brought against Paul and others are often baseless (26:31–32) and rooted in personal animus (17:5), the charges nonetheless still reveal much about how non-Christians characters in the book of Acts perceive the gospel of Jesus and its effects on their society.

Commented [ET1]: Is this accurate?

The episode described at the beginning of Acts 17 in Thessalonica illustrates this point well. Paul teaches in a synagogue and is accused by some of the Jews who say~~id~~,

[1] An earlier version of this article was presented in September ~~of~~ 2023 at the Theological Symposium at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. I would like to offer thanks to the following people who read drafts of this article and gave helpful critical feedback: Katherine Dubke, Noah Dunsmore, Christian Einertson, Hayden Lukas, and Kyle Weeks.

~~Kendall A. Davis is a PhD student in New Testament and Christian Origins at the University of Edinburgh in the United Kingdom. He can be contacted at K.A.Davis-3@sms.ed.ac.uk.~~

military conquests of Caesar, a false *kyrios* and *sōtēr*."[33] There are, however, several problems with this reading. First of all, while it is certainly significant that Paul ends his journey in Rome, this is not because of some overarching conflict with Caesar. The last chapter of Acts mentions Caesar but only because Paul tells the Jews in Rome that he has come there because he has appealed his legal case to Caesar. Paul ~~does not~~ comes not to defeat Caesar~~,~~ but to appeal to him, to get ~~him~~ Caesar to declare ~~him~~ Paul innocent and perhaps for Paul to proclaim to ~~him~~ Caesar the ~~Gospel~~ gospel along the way. Moreover, the emphasis of this final part of the narrative is on how Paul continues his pattern of ministry now in Rome even while under imperial arrest.[34] Having begun in the capital of the Jewish people,: Jerusalem, Paul has now brought the gospel to the capital of the Gentiles,: Rome. This is a fulfil~~l~~ment of Jesus' words at the beginning of Acts that the apostles would be his witnesses in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (1:8). Now the gospel has, in a sense, come to the ends of the earth.

Secondly, the reference to Caesar Augustus in Luke 2:1 does not set up some kind of grand showdown between Jesus and Caesar.[35] While Jesus is indeed referred to with terms like κύριος and σωτήρ that were often used of Caesar, Luke does little to highlight this fact. Luke 2:1 is not even the first mention of a king in Luke's Gospel. Luke begins

---

[33] Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 80–81.

[34] Luke Timothy Johnson concurs that the point of the end of Acts is not Paul's confrontation with Caesar~~,~~ [~~(~~*The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina 5 [~~(~~Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992]~~)~~, 476). For more on the narrative complexities of the ending of Acts, see Troy M. Troftgruben, *A Conclusion Unhindered: A Study of the Ending of Acts within Its Literary Environment*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament~~WUNT~~ 2/280 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

[35] So also Michael Wolter, *The Gospel according to Luke*, trans. Wayne Coppins and Christoph Heilig (Waco: Baylor ~~University~~ Univ. Press, 2016), 1:126.

his Gospel by referring to "the days of Herod" (1:5). At the beginning of chapter 3, Luke again refers to a number of rulers to pinpoint the events in time. The purpose here is not to set up a conflict between Jesus and these earthly rulers but rather to locate these events in time, as any historian would do, and to evoke the language of the beginnings of so many of the prophetic writings (e.g., Isa 1:1; Jer 1:1–3; Hos 1:1).[36] The claims that Luke and Acts make about Jesus certainly conflict with Roman claims (e.g., Luke 1:33; 2:11; Acts 10:36; 17:30–31), but this particular conflict is just not as front and center as has often been claimed.

Commented [ET3]: Are my edits to the citation accurate?

Another problem for readings ~~which~~ that see the central conflict of Luke and Acts to be the conflict between Jesus and Caesar is that while Jesus himself almost never gets into direct conflict with representatives of Roman rule,[37] he is constantly getting into conflict with local Jewish authorities (e.g., Luke 4:22–30; 6:1–5; 11:37–52). When Jesus is put on trial, it is the Jewish council ~~which~~ that condemns him (Luke 22:71) while Pilate declares him innocent (Luke 23:4). Likewise, Paul and the other apostles more typically find themselves getting into trouble with Jewish authorities rather than Roman

---

[36] It has been frequently noted how much Luke evokes the language of the LXX, especially in the first several chapters of his Gospel; see Chang-Wook Jung, *The Original Language of the Lukan Infancy Narrative*, ~~JSNT~~ LNTS Sup. 267 (London: T&T Clark, 2004).

[37] In fact, Jesus seems to get along fairly well with the representatives of Roman power he encounters in the Gospel, for example the centurion whom he enthusiastically commends (Luke 7:9) and Pilate, who is constantly declaring him innocent (Luke 23:4, 23:15, 23:22).

David and the mantle of the prophetic ministry of Elijah in his own messianic ministry, Jesus does battle not with Rome or the Sanhedrin but with Satan. He fights Satan by undoing ~~his~~ Satan's work, by freeing God's people from death, sickness, uncleanness, and demonic powers. While it might not be immediately obvious that Jesus' healing ministry constitutes a battle against Satan, this becomes clearer when we observe the association between healings and exorcisms in Luke's Gospel. In describing Jesus' healings and exorcisms, the narrator frequently lists both actions together, often depicting the healings and exorcisms as occurring together (e.g., Luke 4:40–41~~;~~ 6:18~~;~~ 7:21~~;~~ 8:2~~;~~ 9:1–2). At several points the narrator or other characters talk about Jesus "healing" people of evil spirits (Luke 7:21~~;~~ 8:2 [θεραπεύω]~~;~~ ~~Luke~~ 9:42; Acts 10:38 [ἰάομαι]). Furthermore, sometimes demonic possession causes what modern people may otherwise identify as medical problems (Luke 9:37–43), and the healing of medical problems ~~are~~ is described using the language of exorcism (Luke 4:39). Consider the account of the healing/exorcism of the bent woman on the S~~s~~abbath (Luke 13:10–17). ~~She~~ The woman is described as having a spirit of illness (πνεῦμα ἀσθενείας~~,~~ 13:11). Jesus says that Satan has bound her in this illness for eighteen years (13:16). While Luke's Gospel still makes a distinction between healings and exorcisms, they often seem to be two sides of the same coin, and the kingdom of God is proclaimed equally against both as a battle against the devil (Luke 9:1–2). As Monnig concludes, "In Luke's view, all healing of illness, whether there is a direct involvement of an evil spirit or not, is an illustration of God's power being wielded against the oppression of the devil."[43]

[43] Monnig, "Satan in Lukan Narrative," 124–125; see also 124–132.

the church does not try to overthrow Caesar, the church does establish an alternative system of relations. This ~~does not merely~~ affects not merely spiritual matters but also the distribution of resources (Acts 4:32–37~~;~~ 6:1–6) and standards of behavior (Acts 15), that is, matters of the temporal realm. Most importantly, this is a polis that recognizes only God, not human beings, as the ultimate authority (Acts 5:29). Thus, the proclamation of the kingdom of God radically relativizes political authority, but it does not overthrow it.

That being said, human authorities can also become Jesus' opponents when they ally themselves with the devil's kingdom rather than God's kingdom. As Monnig writes:

> "While it is true that Luke, especially in Acts, is subtly but clearly putting the gospel in tension with political authorities, the immediate narrative context is the theological one implicated by Jesus's conflict with Satan. Luke does not associate Satan with political powers in any systematic way, but rather with opposition to God and his work in Jesus in any way, in which both political and religious powers are associated."[44]

Rome's complicity with Satan is thus most clearly established when Roman authorities participate in the persecution of Jesus and his apostles, such as when Pilate acquiesces to the demands of the Jerusalem elite to have Jesus executed (Luke 23:1–25)[45] or when

---

[44] Monnig, "Satan in Lukan Narrative," 93, n. 118.

[45] This would also show how Israel's leaders are also subservient to Satan, a theme that recurs elsewhere in Acts (e.g., Acts 4:1–37, 6:1–8:40~~;~~ 17:1–9; 21:1–24:27)~~,~~ yet has received far less scholarly attention.

parousia (Luke 19:27; cf. Luke 9:51–56; 22:49–51; see also Acts 17:30–31),[49] thus offering human authorities a chance to repent.

V. Jesus, Lord of All

If this is the perspective Luke would have his readers take of earthly authorities, then his image of Jesus as the ultimate authority does even more to shatter the modern separation between spiritual and temporal authority. This is because Jesus is clearly the Lord of both of God's realms. To begin, we observe that Luke often portrays Jesus as one possessing authority. As mentioned already, the angel Gabriel says that Jesus will be given the throne of his father David forever (Luke 1:32–33). Jesus is born in Bethlehem, the city of David (2:11). Jesus is later acclaimed as son of David by the blind man on the road to Jericho (18:35–43). As he enters Jerusalem he is acclaimed as king by the crowds (19:38) and will later be crucified as the "king of the Jews" (23:38). Yet this is not the only discussion of authority. Jesus astonishes the crowds at Capernaum because his word and teaching possess authority (4:32), and he exercises authority over the demons (4:36). Jesus also gives this authority to cast out demons and to cure diseases to his disciples (9:1). Elsewhere, Jesus, when faced with a dispute about keeping the Ssabbath, affirms that he is Lord of the Ssabbath (6:5). When asked by some of the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem where he gets his authority, Jesus refuses to answer, but the implication of his response is that Jesus' authority comes directly from God (20:1–

[49] With at least two notable exceptions in Acts: Ananias and Sapphira (5:1–11) and King Herod (12:20–23).

temporal realm "is simply God's provision for the smooth functioning of the creation."[54] Thus, whenever Jesus heals the sick (Luke 4:38–40), cleanses lepers (Luke 5:12–16), makes the paralyzed walk (Luke 5:17–26), raises the dead (Luke 7:11–17), feeds the hungry (Luke 9:10–17), teaches the rich to share with the poor (Luke 18:22), or heals the blind (Luke 18:35–43), he is, in a proleptic way, restoring creation to its proper functioning. Any politician who figured out how to do even half these things would find himself hailed as one of the greatest statesmen ever.

Commented [ET7]: Should this sentence be adjusted to account for both male and female politicians? For example: "Any politicians who figured out how to do even half these things would find themselves hailed as among the greatest statesmen ever."

Jesus thus conducts his ministry in both the spiritual and the temporal realms. He heals the sick and forgives sins. He raises the dead and casts out demons. He cleanses lepers and preaches the good news of the kingdom. The healing of the paralytic who is lowered through the roof offers an excellent picture of how Jesus' ministry operates in both realms (Luke 5:17–26). The paralytic's friends bring him to Jesus so that ~~he~~ Jesus might heal him. However, the first thing that Jesus does is forgive his sins. When Jesus' authority to forgive sins is questioned, he demonstrates his authority over the spiritual realm by demonstrating his authority to make this paralyzed man walk again. The logic here is that if he has the authority to make the paralyzed walk, then surely, he also has the authority to forgive sins. Here ministry in both realms comes together. Jesus is concerned with the whole human person, and thus he ministers to the whole human person because he has authority over the whole human person. Thus, Jesus' fight with Satan is a grand cosmic battle that takes place on multiple fronts. This will even include, when necessary, conflict with human authorities by bearing witness to the truth in front of them (Luke 12:11–12).

---

[54] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 4.