

## “CONTESTED DOMAINS” IN RELIGIOUS CONFLICT: A CASE STUDY OF ACTS 1-5

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### Abstract

The Book of Acts includes several instances of conflict. At first sight these conflicts are of a religious nature, as the Christian message encounters the religions and cultures of the Jewish and Hellenistic Roman world. However, these conflict narratives suggest that other factors were also involved. Acts records issues of authority, influence and control over identity. This essay follows a trend in recent research to appreciate that conflict that expresses as inter-religious is often at heart intra-religious, and that the violence that occurs is often due to non-religious factors. After a brief survey of recent theory and an analysis of the contested domains between the parties in the conflicts of Acts 1-5, the article draws some implications for understanding religious conflict in the present.

**Keywords:** Acts of the Apostles, Early Christianity, Gamaliel, Jerusalem, Peter, Religious Conflict, Wendy Mayer

### 1. Introduction

This essay is an exercise in applying recent theorising on religious conflict to one of several aspects of the conflict in Acts 1-5. What new aspects emerge when this conflict account is read from that perspective? In her essay *“Religious Conflict: Definitions, Problems and*

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*Theoretical Approaches*," Wendy Mayer argues that conflict is *religious*, when

... religion is also involved. This avoids questions of the nature: when is a conflict religious and when is it political/ethnic, since it allows that a conflict can be both. It also avoids questions about degree, that is, whether a conflict is primarily religious or primarily political/ethnic, since under this definition all conflicts are religious in which, whether in large degree or small, religion is involved... for the purposes of studying this phenomenon in as open a way as possible religious conflict can be said to occur when the following conditions are satisfied:

1. two or more collective agents are involved and the agents derive, for example, from separate religions, separate factions within the same religion, from within the same faction in the same religion, and/or secular authority;
2. a domain – e.g., ideology/morality, power, personality, space/place, group identity – is contested, singly or in combination;
3. there are enabling conditions – e.g., political, social, economic, cultural and psychological; and
4. religion is involved (the degree to which it is involved is deemed irrelevant).<sup>1</sup>

In view of these observations, we will focus in this essay on the contested domains between the parties to the conflict in Acts 1–5. Rather than using Mayer's abstract examples of such domains, we extrapolate them from the account itself.

When examining religious conflict in Acts, one also needs to keep in mind that Acts is the sequel to Luke's Gospel. A number of the conflict accounts in Acts recall conflicts Luke's Gospel.<sup>2</sup> The religious conflicts in Acts build on and continue these earlier conflicts. Acts presupposes that readers are familiar with the conflicts between Jesus and the religious readers. Therefore brief references suffice. The parallels in the portrayal of the conflicts caused and endured by the main protagonists of Luke-Acts contribute to the overall purpose of Acts.

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<sup>1</sup>Wendy Mayer, "Religious Conflict: Definitions, Problems and Theoretical Approaches," in W. Mayer, B. Neil, ed., *Religious Conflict from Early Christianity to the Rise of Islam*, Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 2013, 5.

<sup>2</sup>New footnote: Jesus was brought before the same Jewish Council in Jerusalem (Luke 22:54–71). He was questioned by the same High priest who also sentenced him. Like with the apostles, Jesus was persecuted because he faithfully fulfilled his divine calling. Through their own miracles and the miraculous liberation from their opponents' prison, the apostles were vindicated by God. Jesus was vindicated through his resurrection from the dead. Neither Jesus nor the apostles employ their supernatural powers against their opponents.

In this essay we concentrate on the *literary portrayal* of religious conflict and not discuss the historical validity of this portrayal<sup>3</sup> or its contribution to the reconstruction of early Christian history.

## 2. The “Contested Domains” in the Conflict of Acts 1-5

On the face of it, *the* contested issue is the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth, clearly a religious issue. However, other contested issues are also involved which are closely linked to the different evaluations of Jesus and the consequences drawn from this. As the contested domains often are interwoven with the enabling conditions in conflicts, brief reference is made to them where appropriate.

According to Acts 4:5f, the rulers, elders and scribes assemble in Jerusalem, with Annas, the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and others of the high priest’s family. The earlier group, consisting of priests, the captain of the temple and the Sadducees (4:1), is enlarged to include the high priest and his clan.<sup>4</sup> They question the apostles standing in their midst (4:5f) and inquire directly regarding the origin and nature of their *authority*: “By what power (δύναμις) or by what name did you do this?” (4:7). In response, the apostles explain and defend their own authority and de-construct the authority of the leaders with their charges and their behaviour. Most of the contested domains in Acts 1-5 fall in the category of *authority*. In what follows, for the sake of clarity we separate what are in the narrative portrayal of this conflict closely related elements.

### 2.1. Claiming and Appropriating the Heritage of Israel

This contested authority concerns the ability and authority to interpret the current events in view of the Scriptures of Israel. In Acts 2 the apostles refute slander and claim the correct interpretation of the publicly audible, Spirit-induced *glossolalia* of the followers of Jesus. The event is a fulfilment of the prophecy in Joel 2:28-32. A large part of the speeches of Acts 2 and 3 consist of direct quotations from the Old Testament in order to prove that this Jesus, his death and resurrection are the fulfilment of Scripture. These and other speeches also include a number of allusions to the Old Testament. When the apostles refer to the Scriptures and claim their fulfilment, they follow the example of Jesus and pass on to others what he had taught them.

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<sup>3</sup>Mayer (2013, 15) rightly points to the “perennial issue of the bias of the surviving sources, and the historical forces that led to the transmission of some and the suppression or dwindling into obscurity of others.” Mayer, “*Religious Conflict...*,” 15.

<sup>4</sup>For their identity see Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012, 236f.

## 2.2. Interpreting the Identity, Fate and Significance of Jesus of Nazareth

Contested authority also concerns the proper interpretation of the identity, fate and significance of Jesus and the conclusions which should be drawn from it. A brief summary must suffice: according to the apostles, Jesus was attested by God with deeds of power, wonders and signs which God did through him. When he was killed, God raised him from the dead. To this the apostles are witnesses. Jesus was exalted to the right hand of God, received the Holy Spirit and bestowed the Spirit on his followers. God has made him both Lord and Messiah (2:22–36). God has glorified his Servant Jesus and raised the author of life from the dead. Jesus is still working miracles. As the Messiah he had to suffer. Now he is in heaven until the time of universal restoration. He is *the* prophet foretold by Moses. He was sent first to Israel to bless and induce repentance. Those who reject him will be cut off from the people of God (3:13–26). Jesus is the Christ, whom God raised from the dead. Salvation is to be found only in him (4:10–12). God raised up Jesus and exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sin (5:31). He is the ultimate leader. In the proper estimation of Jesus, the interpretation of Scripture plays a crucial role.

Particularly contested is the *resurrection* of Jesus and – closely related to it – the question of whether there is a resurrection at all. According to Acts 4:2, resistance arises because the apostles proclaim "in Jesus the resurrection from the dead." This ambiguous summary of the disputed content suggests that the resurrection *per se* is disputed, not necessarily or only the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> In Acts 1–5, this is the only direct reference to specifically religious content of this conflict. According to Schnabel,<sup>6</sup> Peter's proclamation of the resurrection of the dead "annoys the Sadducees, who denied a future resurrection of the body. Moreover, Peter argues that Jesus' resurrection from the dead<sup>7</sup> took place recently and thus before the

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<sup>5</sup>Elsewhere Luke-Acts indicates that the resurrection of the dead is not a specifically Christian conviction but one shared by other groups, e.g. the Pharisees (Lk 14:14; 20:35f; Acts 23:8f; 24:15,21). Only the Sadducees are said to reject a resurrection (Lk 20:27; Acts 23:8). Specifically Christian is the notion that before the general eschatological resurrection at the end of the age, God has raised Jesus from the dead in the midst of time (see George W.E. Nickelsburg, "Resurrection," in J.J. Collins, D.C. Harlow, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, Grand Rapids, Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2010, 1142–1144.).

<sup>6</sup>Schnabel, *Acts*, 234.

<sup>7</sup>Schnabel notes: The phrase *in Jesus* can be interpreted as (1) "in the case of Jesus," i.e., the apostles proclaim that "in the case of Jesus, *the* (ultimate) resurrection – the resurrection expected by Pharisaic faith at the end of history – had taken place"; (2)

day of general resurrection of the dead; as a result, the Pharisees would have been annoyed also.” Peter ends with an exclusive claim for this Jesus who was rejected but divinely affirmed by his resurrection (4:12). The present miracle is understood as proof of the resurrection of Jesus and his present authority and power (so already in Acts 3:16).

There is diametric opposition between the evaluation of Jesus by the leaders and by the apostles. The apostles explicitly address the false assessment of Jesus by the leaders. They not only charge the people with the rejection and murder of Jesus (3:13–16) but also explicitly include “the rulers” (3:17) in this outrageous spiritual failure. Their call to repent (3:19) and the announcement of stern consequences should they fail to do so also includes the leaders (3:26) and calls them to a radical revision of this assessment. Jesus is the Christ “whom you crucified,” “the stone that was rejected by you, the builders” (4:10f). The leaders had killed Jesus by hanging him on a tree (5:30). Their rejection of Jesus and their on-going failure to radically revise their false assessment of him discredit the leaders.<sup>8</sup>

The apostles witness to Jesus and his significance as they had been commissioned (1:8). On the part of the leaders there is no interaction with the claims of the apostles regarding Jesus or an attempt to defend their actions. For them, Jesus was and continues to be merely “this man” (5:28), not worthy of particular attention.

### 2.3. The Privilege and Duty of Instructing the People of God

Related to the contested domain of Jesus is the contested authority and duty of instructing the people. The spectacular healing of Acts 3:7–9 is followed by Peter’s speech “to the people” (πρὸς τὸν λαόν, 3:12, the speech in 3:12–26) and by “Peter and John speaking to the people” (πρὸς τὸν λαόν, 4:1). Λαός is not only the word for a people or a crowd of people but – in particular in Luke-Acts – also the technical term for *the people of God*. Addressing this people in spiritual and other matters and explaining authoritatively to them what happened is the duty and privilege of the religious leaders, not of unlearned lay-people from Galilee. Schnabel writes: “The followers of Jesus are teaching the people in Solomon’s Portico complex without authorisation.”<sup>9</sup>

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“by means of,” i.e. the apostles proclaim the resurrection of the dead by means of the story of Jesus. These are not mutually exclusive alternatives. Schnabel, *Acts*, 234, n. 6.

<sup>8</sup>The leaders are not explicitly mentioned in Peter’s speech in Acts 2.

<sup>9</sup>Schnabel, *Acts*, 234. They do so without authorisation by the religious leaders who formally are in charge of the temple. The readers know of the apostles’

Later an angel commands them: "Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life" (5:20). As publicly as they were imprisoned before, they are to enter the temple precincts and do the opposite of what they had been instructed by the leaders (4:18). This divine order to continue to proclaim leaves no room for a change in behaviour, location, audience or message, and thus no room for compromise or de-escalation of this mounting conflict. The apostles obey promptly (5:21) and the conflict escalates. While there are attempts at de-escalation on the part of the leaders (4:18,21; 5:39f), the apostles cannot budge. They take this course of action because they have been commissioned by Jesus to be his witnesses in Jerusalem and beyond (1:8). They obediently fulfil this commission, regardless of human authority and of the consequences. When ordered not to teach at all in the name of Jesus (4:17f), they declare that they will listen to God rather than to the leaders. With this distinction they declare that they do not consider the leaders as divinely appointed and in concord with the will of God (4:19f). They cannot be kept from speaking about what they have seen and heard (4:20) and will continue as they had been commissioned (5:20).

The people listen to the apostles and many repent and join the church. Those responsible for the temple and for instructing the people intervene because they were "much annoyed because they were *teaching the people*" (4:2). Not only is the content of their proclamation offensive (the resurrection), but so is the very fact that *the apostle* "are teaching the people" publicly, thus claiming for themselves the duties and prerogatives of the religious establishment.<sup>10</sup> This reference to their emotions (being annoyed) and their occasion opens the account of the clash between the apostles and the leaders in Acts 4f. When the leaders are later informed that the men whom they imprisoned are standing in the temple and *teaching the people* (5:25), immediate intervention follows: the apostles are again brought before the leaders. The leaders repeatedly try to silence the apostles so that the news of the miracle – which affirms their authority and calls the authority of the religious leaders into question<sup>11</sup> – and the

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commission by the risen Christ (Acts 1:8). The apostles obey him. Their bold ministry is enabled through the coming of the Holy Spirit and a further experience of the Spirit in the midst of conflict (4:31).

<sup>10</sup>Kugler's description of the priestly tasks in Jerusalem does not include *teaching*. However, he notes: "In their towns and villages, they probably served as teachers, Torah interpreters, scribes, magistrates, and judges." Robert A. Kugler, "Priests," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, J.J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow, ed. Grand Rapids, Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2010, 1098f.

<sup>11</sup>The lame man had for a long time been in public view at a prominent place on their very premises and had not been healed by the leaders.

proclamation regarding Jesus does not spread further. The means available to the leaders are of no avail.

#### **2.4. Public Authority in Other Public Spiritual Matters**

Also contested is public authority in other spiritual matters. The miracle of Pentecost indicates the identity of the true people of God.<sup>12</sup> The Holy Spirit is given to those who obey God (5:32). The miracles of the apostles are a strong claim to authority and to divine affirmation. Peter argues that Jesus was “attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you” (2:22).<sup>13</sup> The same attestation is given to the apostles by Jesus, the highest authority next to God in Luke-Acts, who works through them (3:16). The apostles perform many wonders and signs (2:43), heal a lame man from birth in the temple precinct (3:2–7). Many further public miracles through the apostles, not limited to the community of the followers of Jesus (5:12: “... done among *the people*,” again laying claim to *the people*; the people benefit from the apostles, not the established leaders), some of them spectacular (5:15f), affirm the divine commission of the apostles. Great numbers of people are added by God to the community (5:14), which is further affirmation.

The conflict also gains momentum as people keep joining the church, thereby increasing the status and influence of the apostles at the expense of the leaders. More than human recognition of the apostolic leaders is involved: “Yet more than ever believers *were added by the Lord*, great numbers of both men and women” (5:14). According to Acts, God himself works on behalf of this community and adds people to it, not to other groups (2:47).<sup>14</sup> The growth of the community is presented as divine activity and approval and

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<sup>12</sup>The ability of the Christians to speak in different existing and recognisable languages is questioned by reference to their Galilean origin (2:6f). Obviously, this is not something that Galileans can do.

<sup>13</sup>Before, in the midst, and after this conflict, there are several instances of church-related human and divine affirmation of the apostles. They lead an exemplary community (Acts 2:41–47). Their leadership is acknowledged by, among many others, Barnabas, a Levite. The events surrounding the death of Ananias and Sapphira also add to the apostles’ authority. They carefully guard the purity of the community, can draw on supernatural knowledge, recognise and fight satanic activity, challenge evil in their midst and receive divine affirmation. Their community is well organised and upholds the early Jewish pious concern for burying the dead. Immediately after the conflict in chapters 4f, the apostles see to the proper care of all widows in the community (6:1–6).

<sup>14</sup>The emphasis on divine action behind the developments at the same time *limits* the status of the apostles. They gladly acknowledge this dependence on God and Jesus; see 3:12–16.

authorisation of its leaders. The apostles receive recognition by their adherents and the wider public ("the people held *them* in high esteem," not the established leaders!, 5:13) in Jerusalem and also from the surrounding areas (5:16). There is even a "holy fear" of them (5:13, a familiar reaction in OT and early Jewish accounts of encounters with the divine).

The community led by the apostles even receives affirmation through an earthquake: God hears their prayer and is on their side (4:31). The resolution of the inner-community conflict of Acts 5:1-11 also becomes publicly known and contributes to the reputation of the apostles. They receive further affirmation by being freed miraculously from the stronghold of their opponents by an angel who intervenes on their behalf (5:19). Divine approval accrues to the followers of Jesus.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit and with performing miracles in the name of Jesus, the apostles challenge the religious leaders who cannot claim audible possession of the Spirit and such miracles for themselves: for many years they had been unable to help the lame man in the temple precinct (3:2). The people and those directly benefitting are impressed, bring sick and possessed people to the apostles (5:15f) and understand the miracles as affirmation (3:8-11; 5:11.13). The leaders cannot but acknowledge the fact of the miracles of the apostles (4:14). That a notable sign has been done through the apostles (not through the established leaders) is obvious to "all who live in Jerusalem" and observe this show-down (4:16.21). Their attempt to keep the news of the miracle of Acts 3 from spreading further is futile (4:17.21).

## 2.5. Contested Legitimate Leadership of the People of God

All these contested domains are related to *legitimate leadership*. Through their obedience to the commission of Jesus, their faithful ministry and the divine affirmation which they receive, the apostles are inaugurated and affirmed as the new leaders of the people of God.<sup>15</sup> The apostles have this role not only among the disciples (that is, the people of God restored through the ministry of Jesus and of the apostles), but also function in this role among the wider community: they teach the people, call to repentance, heal, initiate and include into the community. The apostles claim to define the identity of the true people of God and claim to embody it.

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<sup>15</sup>According to Acts 1:12-26, they understand their particular significance for Israel gathered and restored. The necessity and number of *twelve* apostles to serve as witnesses to Israel for the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus (1:21f) is no co-incidence.



While the apostles act with authority, they deny that they do so in their *own* authority and readily acknowledge their dependence on God and Jesus: it was *not* their own authority that healed the man, but the name/authority of Jesus, the Christ of Nazareth (3:16; 4:10). Peter claims for himself (and the apostles) the authority of Israel's Christ to address not only the leaders, but also *all* the people of Israel: "let it be known to all of *you* and to *all the people of Israel*." While Peter formally acknowledges the authority of the leaders (4:8), the apostles refuse to follow their orders. Through their proclamation, the apostles launch a ringing challenge to the authority of the leaders: they *disqualified* themselves in the past by crucifying Jesus, God's Messiah (3:17; 4:10). They rejected the stone that has become the corner stone by divine appointment. God undid their horrendous murder and raised Jesus from the dead (4:10). As they refuse to repent now, the leaders are therefore under condemnation and await divine judgement.

The apostles refuse to be silenced by the leaders' explicit charge (4:18) and leave no doubt about their rejection of the leaders' authority: "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge" (4:19), which is repeated in Acts 5:29.

As leaders, the apostles receive recognition and support of their own community. The Christian community embodies the identity and ethics of the people of God (2:41–47, 4:32–5:11). Acts 4:23–31 describes the inner-community response to this conflict: there is unity, prayer, an attempt to understand the present events in light of Scripture, prayer for continued boldness in view of opposition and for further divine affirmation through signs and wonders (4:30). In response, there is affirmation of God's presence and approval through an earthquake and a renewed filling with the Holy Spirit (4:31). Strengthened in this way, the apostles are ready to face further conflict.

In addition, impressive miraculous powers in healing and in judgement are available to them. They are miraculously liberated from the stronghold of their opponents (5:18f). Even the temple police become reluctant to use violence against the apostles (5:26).<sup>16</sup>

The people of Jerusalem join in great numbers (2:47; 4:4; 5:14; but also see 5:13) and/or hold the community and the apostles in high esteem (2:43; 5:13).

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<sup>16</sup>According to Padilla the *principal point of Acts 5:17–33 is the inability of the authorities to stop the spread of the apostolic message*. Osvaldo Padilla, *The Speeches of Outsiders in Acts: Poetics, Theology and Historiography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 16.

The religious leaders acknowledge the apostles' boldness, realise that they are only "uneducated and ordinary men," are amazed and recognise that they were companions of Jesus (4:13). They cannot deny the miracles performed by the apostles. "The priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees" arrest Peter and John (4:3).<sup>17</sup> They react with jealousy to the developments: "Then the high priest took action; he and all who were with him (that is, the sect of the Sadducees),<sup>18</sup> being filled with jealousy" regarding the authority, miraculous powers, success and popular esteem of the apostles (5:17). This is the only instance in Acts 1–5 where a *non-religious motive* behind what is a *religious* conflict on the front stage is directly addressed.

Acts 5:17–42 traces the conflict over authority between the leaders and the apostles. As a demonstration of the power of the leaders and of their ability and determination to enforce their orders, the unruly apostles are arrested once more and are put in public prison (5:18). Acts 5:21–26 describe the development of the display of the leaders' lack of power and authority: the apostles are no longer in prison, there is all evidence of a miraculous escape and public defiance of the leaders' orders: the apostles do the opposite of what they had been ordered (5:25). They enjoy such popular support that the captain and the temple police are afraid of being stoned by the people (5:26). Their choice of operation on their own premises become restricted: the use of violence is no longer feasible. The account stresses the public nature of this conflict.

The authority of the religious leaders is profoundly challenged and eventually destroyed: again they reject people who act in God's name and receive his affirmation. The apostles are brought again before the authorities. The High Priest's summary of the development is sobering (5:28). The leaders have to acknowledge the achievement of the apostles and have no means left to enforce their orders.

In response, the apostles reject the authority of the leaders outright: to obey them would mean disobeying God (5:29). The ignominious actions of the leaders against Jesus, God's anointed saviour, in contrast with God's unique affirmation of him (5:30) fully discredit

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<sup>17</sup>On the priests see Kugler and Stemberger on the Sadducees. Kugler, "Priests"; Günther Stemberger, "Sadducees," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*. Edited by J.J. Collins, Daniel C. Harlow, Grand Rapids, Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2010, 1179–1181.

<sup>18</sup>This is already mentioned in Acts 4:1. The Pharisees, the main opponents of Jesus throughout Luke's Gospel, are notably absent in the Lukan passion account and in Acts.

their spiritual qualification and disqualify them as leaders of God's people. From this rejected Jesus repentance and forgiveness may now be expected (5:31). The apostles have the Holy Spirit (5:32), which is given only to those who obey God – and clearly the religious leaders are not in this category. The apostles' critique of their opponents is devastating.

Upon these charges the conflict escalates further and threatens to become physically violent again (5:33). The leaders are at the end of their means and wits. Further action and the intended execution of the apostles are prevented only by Gamaliel's counsel.<sup>19</sup> He is described as a Pharisee in the council, a teacher of the law and respected by all the people (he is the only leader of whom this is said).<sup>20</sup> He cools down tempers, pleads for caution (5:35) and refers to two conflicts of the past in which their leadership role was also challenged. In view of the outcomes of these events, Gamaliel recommends keeping away from the apostles, as their movement will fail if it is of human origin or cannot be stopped anyway, and the leaders might find themselves fighting against God (5:39). As only time will tell, there is no need to proceed further against these men. According to Padilla, the main "cultural script" influencing the narrative is that of honour/shame. He argues that the social setting of this event plays an important part in the developing conflict between the apostles and the leaders:

The council, having authority to judge the Judean population in religious matters, finds itself in a position of honour. The apostles, on the other hand, sit very low on the social pyramid of Israel. Not only are they followers of a crucified man, but they are also Galileans, who are seen as ἄνθρωποι ἀγγράμματοί εἰσιν καὶ ἰδιῶται (Acts 4:13). Further, they have already violated the honour of the leadership by refusing to obey their previous command (4:18). It should not be surprising, therefore, that upon their further defiance the Jerusalem authorities wanted to murder them (5:29–32). It is only by the intervention of another character who was held in great honour, Gamaliel, that the apostles escaped death.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, closely related to legitimate authority, honour is another contested domain in this conflict. The apostles have their own way of coping with the dishonour which they experience (5:41).

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<sup>19</sup>On his speech see in detail: Osvaldo Padilla, *The Speeches of Outsiders in Acts: Poetics, Theology and Historiography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 106–134.

<sup>20</sup>So far no Pharisees were mentioned among the opponents. Like the apostles, Gamaliel teaches and is respected by the people.

<sup>21</sup> Padilla, *The Speeches of Outsiders in Acts*, 109.

Gamaliel's counsel reveals wisdom and tolerance, but also a measure of frustration: none of the means available to the leaders can be employed successfully. Following Gamaliel's speech and the consensus to which it leads, the apostles are flogged (a means still available to the leaders, at least when not applied in public view) and then again ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus (5:40). The flogging demonstrates the power of the religious leaders. It is an act of humiliation and a punishment for repeatedly defying their authority. This decision and action brings the "first round" of religious conflict in Acts to an end. The apostles prevail and faithfully continue with what they had been commissioned to do (5:42).

Padilla observes regarding the characterisation of the leaders in Acts 5:

Indirect presentation of the Jewish authorities occurs through speech (vv. 24, 28), action (vv. 17-18, 40), environment (v. 27), and comparison/contrast (v. 26). In v. 24 we encounter indirect speech by the leaders, where they express bewilderment as to what to do in light of the apostles' unexplained prison escape. In v. 28 the affirmation of the High Priest, once seen in the light of what has transpired, emits an echo of powerlessness... With respect to action, the deeds of the authorities are pregnant with meaning. Thus in vv. 17-18 they imprison the apostles because of their jealousy and their inability to stop them without using force. In v. 40 their anger is visible as they beat the apostles prior to releasing them... The final trait of the authorities to be gleaned from this event is that of cowardice. Through the technique of comparison/contrast, Luke mentions in v. 26 that the authorities were afraid of the people. The apostles, in contrast, exhibited no fear even towards the highest authorities of Israel.<sup>22</sup>

The religious leaders fail to defend and regain their position of leadership. They appear separated from the people who side with the apostles. While they directly confront the apostles with the means available to them, in the account of Acts they do not attempt to address the people and refute the apostles and their proclamation, e.g. by defending their decision regarding Jesus or by denying his resurrection or by referring to the apostles' questionable origin (Galileans), their lack of proper training (4:13) or stubbornness.

## 2.6. Public Recognition

Hand in hand with contested claims to leadership goes public recognition as a final contested domain. The apostles are recognised as leaders within their own community and by the wider public which holds them in high esteem or openly sides with them. They

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<sup>22</sup>Padilla, *The Speeches of Outsiders in Acts*, 112f.

can claim a large and ever increasing following. Because of the miracles and the popular support of the apostles (4:21), the conflict does not escalate at this point. The people realise that the apostles are divinely appointed, affirmed and work on God's behalf. While officially holding positions of power, the religious leaders lack public support for their assessment of them and their interventions against them. Their choice of means becomes limited as they need to take the wider public into consideration (5:26).

In view of these contested domains, it is worth noting that the city of Jerusalem and, in particular, the temple precinct in themselves are *not* among the contested domains, as the apostles as Jews have every right to be in Jerusalem and to access the temple precincts. As other Jews do, the apostles go there to pray (3:1). Their opponents do not order them to leave Jerusalem or deport them from there. However, what is contested is the exercise of authority there, as the temple precincts are the very territory of the religious leaders. Acting there with authority poses a direct challenge to the leaders. While the Christian community gathers there and the apostles readily and repeatedly teach the people and perform miracles, they do not claim the priestly prerogatives and duties of the religious leaders. They do not cleanse the temple as Jesus did (Lk 19:45-48) or interfere with the cult. Neither do the apostles claim direct political power over against the established Jewish leadership as was the case with various zealots before and during the first Jewish war of 66-73 AD. Of the five domains contested in religious conflicts listed by Mayer (ie, ideology/morality, power, personality, space/place, group identity), personality and space/place do not play a role in Acts 1-5. The other contested domains are reflected in our treatment above.

The distinctly *religious* elements in this multifaceted conflict are the conflicting assessments of Jesus, including the resurrection. Otherwise and closely related to it, it has become apparent that the conflict of Acts 1-5 is a dispute over authority over the people of God. In addition to their message, the behaviour of the apostles is provocative: as "uneducated and ordinary men" (4:13) of Galilean origin, with no human status or power base in Jerusalem, they speak and teach publicly in the very centre of Judaism, perform signs and wonders, take over leadership functions and receive divine affirmation. They refuse to submit to the established religious leaders. In the portrayal of Acts the religious leaders increasingly deconstruct themselves and become the negative backdrop for the apostles, who emerge as the divinely affirmed new leaders of Israel.

The actual content of Christian identity and proclamation is not the one or the only occasion of conflict, but is one of several factors. Acts 1-5 paint a nuanced picture of the origin of religious conflict. Acts indicates that in these conflicts, non-religious factors also play a significant role and cannot be separated from religious factors. Even in the one instance where a religious motivation for conflicts is *directly* mentioned, other motives appear in the immediate context (Acts 4:2). Not only the content of the apostles' proclamation was offensive, but also the mere fact that *they* were teaching the people, thus claiming for themselves the prerogatives and duties of the leaders. In the context of this conflict, Acts also mentions jealousy as a motive on the part of the leaders (4:17). This note follows the report of "many signs and wonders ... done among the people through the apostles" (5:12-16) and their popularity in Jerusalem and beyond. Our survey of contested domains supports Mayer's conclusion:

The motivation for such violence, moreover, is often complex, leading to the conclusion, on the one hand, that violent "religious" conflicts in late antiquity, for instance, *were rarely purely religiously motivated. On careful examination they can be shown to owe as much, if not more, to political considerations, local conditions, and the personal motives of the chief protagonists.*<sup>23</sup>

For a proper assessment, the remainder of Acts would also need to be considered. In Acts 6-28 other domains are contested between different conflict parties and the Christian protagonists behave differently. Also the enabling conditions of conflict, the portrayal of de-escalation and conflict resolution, of peaceful co-existence and co-operation as well as of transition and assimilation which also appear in Acts 1-5 need to be taken into account. Mayer rightly cautions that the focus on religious *conflict and violence* must not detract from instances of conflict *de-escalation* and conflict *resolution*, peaceful co-existence and co-operation as well as of transition and assimilation.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. Luke's Conflict Accounts and their Present-day Significance

Mayer has rightly drawn attention to the relationship between the religious conflicts of today and those of antiquity. The study of today's religious conflicts and their dynamics provides theoretical frameworks and fresh approaches for studying religious conflicts in antiquity. These perspectives led to a number of insights into the conflicts of Acts 1-5 which had hitherto not been sufficiently observed. This is not the place for further theoretical discussion, but

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<sup>23</sup>Mayer, "Religious Conflict...", 1. Italics by the author.

<sup>24</sup>Mayer, "Religious Conflict...", 18.

rather for considering the present-day implications of this examination.

The community of faith, to whose canon of sacred writings the account of religious conflict in Acts 1-5 belongs, has had different experiences with regard to the nature and intensity of religious conflicts in its history. In the present, Christians in different contexts will read and appreciate this account and its implications in different ways. What they might learn from this account will differ.

Acts 1-5 can alert students of religious conflict, those concerned with it and those involved in religious conflicts of different kinds, to the fact that more than “purely” religious motives can be – and most likely are – involved in religious conflicts. Religious conflict is motivated not only by different strictly religious convictions and practices (intra-religious and inter-religious), but also by other contested domains and factors. Appreciating and recognising these factors and mechanisms helps those involved to understand the origin and ferocity of some religious conflicts. Recognising and understanding these other factors can be of help in analysing and resolving religious conflicts today. While for many Christians Jesus Christ is and remains a non-negotiable contested domain (obviously, this also applies to adherents of other religions and their key convictions), other domains may be negotiable or could even be surrendered for the sake of de-escalation and resolution of conflict. In practice this is difficult, as the key contested domain(s) and other contested domains are often closely inter-related, as in Acts 1-5.

Current readings of religious conflict which dominate the current theoretical reflection *a priori* exclude the reality or otherwise of the divine. They focus on the role attributed to the divine by an individual (in this case the author of Acts) or by a group in the narrative (in this case the Christians) that is crucial in generating, escalating or otherwise affecting conflict. If we assume that religious conflict is a purely human phenomenon, the divine cannot be an agent proper, but is attributed by humans as a cause. However, by definition, religious conflicts involve not only humans with different convictions and practice. As portrayed in Acts, they have their roots in what is perceived to be human resistance against divine purposes and can be influenced in their course by what is perceived to be divine intervention which must be followed without compromise. In such cases human practices and experiences of mediation and conflict resolution, as desirable as they are, will prove to be of limited use. All involved in understanding, addressing and solving such conflicts need to be aware of this dimension – whether they share it or not.

## Conclusion

Any application of our reading of Acts 1-5 to the new (and often ugly) faces of fundamentalism and violence is a precarious matter. Many questions remain which the biblical texts do not answer. The focus of Acts is on the gathering and restoration of Israel, not on providing a detailed conflict account. The opponents remain flat characters. Depending on the definition of fundamentalism (itself a highly problematic modern construct, a vague term, often used polemically with regard to others!), both sides in this conflict could be charged with it in one way or another.

Perhaps one way forward is to note what does *not* happen in the narrative of Acts:

While the apostles surely have strong convictions regarding Jesus and his significance for which they are willing to suffer and where they will not compromise, they do not resort to instigating their followers or the wider populace of Jerusalem against their opponents. Like their Master, they do not use the miraculous powers available to them in this way. The only people to die in the account are Ananias and Sapphira. They die due to divine judgement over their hypocrisy, not by human hands.

The options of the opponents are limited in several ways. They cannot instigate the people who side with the apostles. They do not involve their Roman overlords and perhaps are wise enough not to do so. Eventually, they follow the de-escalating counsel of Gamaliel, if only because they have exhausted their resources. It is noteworthy that in this way the conflict remains all the way through a conflict between the apostles and the religious leaders of Jerusalem. While the religious leaders once use force to affirm their authority (before their release, the apostles are beaten; 4:40), both sides refrain from resorting to violence (this changes later in Acts on the side of the opponents). Many religious conflicts of today would be less fierce and perhaps easier to solve or even soluble, if their proponents would make every effort to confine the conflict to those who really contend with each other rather than taking conflicts to the streets. Once that takes place, they usually are beyond control and solution.

One further observation is also noteworthy. The apostles limit the conflict to the specific issue of the identity and fate of Jesus and his significance. While they emphatically charge their opponents with killing God's Christ and resisting the purposes of God (no compromise in this regard), they do not question the legitimacy of the Council, of the High priestly establishment, the character of



individual representatives or of the temple as some representatives of early Judaism did. One only needs to think of the polemics against the High Priests of Jerusalem in some of the Dead Sea Scrolls. It would help in many religious conflicts of our day and age, if those involved were willing to limit their disagreement and conflict to the specific issue or the issues at stake. This presupposes on the one hand the ability to see what precisely is at stake and to agree on it and, on the other hand, the willingness to concentrate on these issues rather than discussing them with all the burdens of the past or in a broad geographical scope.