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CONFLICT BETWEEN THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS OF JERUSALEM AND THE APOSTLES IN ACTS 4-5 AND THE ENABLING CONDITIONS AVAILABLE TO BOTH PARTIES

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Abstract

It is possible to identify a number of contested domains in the religious conflicts of Acts 4–5, namely the heritage of Israel; the identity, fate and significance of Jesus of Nazareth; the privilege and duty of instructing the people of God; authority in other spiritual matters; legitimate leadership of the people of God; and public recognition/honour. But there are also a number of political, social, economic, cultural, psychological and transcendent *enabling conditions* on both sides of this conflict which made its course possible and shaped its nature. An examination of these enabling conditions sheds light on the complexities of religious conflicts in both that context and the present.

Keywords: Contested Domains in Conflicts; Early Christianity; Early Judaism; Enabling Factors in Conflicts; Religious Conflict; Wendy Mayer

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Introduction

Wendy Mayer observes that “religious conflict is a complex phenomenon that engages a combination of contested domains (ideology/morality, power, personality, space/place, and group identity), in turn enabled by a range of other conditions (political, social, economic, cultural and psychological).”¹ Based on this observation, the focus in a previous article in this journal was on the contested domains between the parties to the conflicts in Acts 1-5.² The contested issue in these chapters appears to be the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth—clearly a religious issue. However, it became evident that other contested issues are also involved which are closely linked to the differing evaluations of the identity and significance of Jesus. As these contested domains are often closely linked with the enabling conditions in conflicts, necessarily brief reference is made to them where appropriate.

The contested domains often also constitute enabling conditions. Enabling conditions can be conflictual in themselves and become contested domains, as we will see below.³ For a contest of domains to develop into open conflict, one or more enabling conditions need to be available to at least one party to the conflict. That is to say that while enabling conditions are not necessary for the initiation of conflict (as rash emotional reactions and responses to perceived contests of one or more domains amply indicate), they are required to sustain conflict over a longer period of time against the enabling conditions available to the other party or parties and to eventually prevail in conflict. If the enabling conditions available to one party are inferior to those of the other party or parties to the conflict, the party with inferior enabling conditions must either seek compromise, give in, or eventually be defeated.

On this basis, the present article examines the enabling conditions available to the parties to the conflict in Acts 4-5 in order to place these conflict accounts in a broader context. In order to shed light on the conflict in these accounts, this article applies a number of the insights of recent theorising on religious conflict to Acts 4-5.

¹ “Religious Conflict: Definitions, Problems and Theoretical Approaches,” in *Religious Conflict from Early Christianity to the Rise of Islam*, W. Mayer et al., ed., AKG 121, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013, 3.

² Christoph Stenschke, “‘Contested Domains’ in Religious Conflict: A Case Study of Acts 1-5,” *Asian Horizons: Dharmaram Journal of Theology* 11, 3 (2017): 504-520.

³ One may also ask how enabling conditions relate to the rise of contested domains: What developments are necessary, for, or lead to, certain domains becoming contested?

The “Enabling Conditions” in the Conflicts of Acts 4-5

In examining the enabling conditions prevailing during conflict in Acts 4-5, we employ Mayer’s categories of political (1), social (2), economic (3), cultural (4) and psychological (5) enabling conditions.⁴ It will become clear that these five categories are helpful for recognising and understanding the enabling conditions on both sides of these conflicts, which may pass unnoticed if these categories are not applied to the text. These enabling conditions are nevertheless a decisive component of these conflicts.

However, these five categories are not sufficient for an account such as Acts, because its author leaves no doubt that there is a further, *transcendent enabling condition* (6) involved. While this condition appears only indirectly on the side of their opponents (see below), it is generously available to the apostles: They have been called and commissioned by Jesus, God’s supreme agent, to be his witnesses. They have been anointed with the Holy Spirit and are affirmed by their bold proclamation and the miracles which they perform in the name of Jesus. The message and function of this transcendent enabling condition is clear: God is fully on the side of the apostles, although this does not mean at all that they emerge unharmed (the apostles are harassed and beaten).

At first sight, the introduction of this transcendent enabling condition privileges the Christian party to this conflict. However, for Luke-Acts, with its strong intertextual links to the Old Testament, the office of the religious leaders and the significance of Jerusalem and its temple are not mere human convention, but based on the Old Testament. Thus, there is a transcendent element to them. It is interesting to note that these aspects are not questioned by the apostles. While the notion of God working in history is not a disputed issue in early Judaism and early Christianity, the contested domain is whether God was and is at work in the recent events involving Jesus and the apostles (as was claimed by the apostles). In his counsel in Acts 5:35-39, Gamaliel twice refers to God’s working in history. He points out that apparently God was not at work in movements of the past (Theudas, Judas the Galilean), otherwise they would not have come to nothing. At the same time, Gamaliel does not exclude the possibility that God may be at work in current events: “but if it is of God [i.e., if God is at work in these events], you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” (5:39). While the opponents may not now be able or willing to

⁴Mayer, “Religious Conflict,” 3.

recognise God's working in history in the current events, they will eventually be able to recognise God's working in history in their inability to prevail in this conflict. In this way, they will find themselves opposing God's working in history. The ability to recognise God's working in history is not an enabling condition which is ascribed exclusively to the Christian party.

A few methodological reflections are necessary:

- We will first consider the enabling conditions available to the religious leaders and then the conditions available to the apostles.⁵
- We will discuss only what becomes apparent from the text of Luke's Gospel and Acts itself. Other available historical information about the authority, status, financial means, and so on of the religious leaders of Jerusalem, their assessment by the population and related aspects will not be included.⁶ For information about the apostles we are in any event limited to the account in Acts. At the literary level, this restriction raises the question of the extent to which the narrator or the narrative can rely on other background knowledge on the part of readers. We will limit readers' background knowledge to what would have been known the people familiar with the Old Testament.⁷
- We concentrate on the enabling conditions as they appear in the text: Obviously the religious leaders also know the Scriptures and can quote from them, independent of the fact that they are not portrayed as doing so in Acts. The apostles probably also knew of the fate of Theudas and Judas the Galilean (5:36-37), although they do not refer to these or other historical events to support their case.

⁵For full treatment of the accounts, see the commentaries by C.K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles 1. Preliminary Introduction and Commentary on Acts 1-XIV*, ICC, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994; R.I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, Hermeneia, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009; E.J. Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012; and Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 1, *Introduction and Acts 1:1-2:47*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012, and vol. 2, *Acts 3:1-14:28*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013.

⁶For a survey of the sources on the Sanhedrin, the priesthood and the Sadducees see E. Schürer, trans., rev. and ed. G. Vermes *et al.*, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 BC-AD135)*, vol. 2, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979, 199-308, 404-414. See also the following entries in J.J. Collins *et al.*, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010; J.C. Vanderkam, "High Priests," 739-42; R.A. Kugler, "Priests," 1096-99; G. Stemmerger, "Sadducees," 1179-81; C.A. Evans, "Sanhedrin," 1193-94 and L.I. Levine, "Temple, Jerusalem," 1281-91.

⁷The Old Testament plays a significant role in the composition and understanding of Acts; for a survey see I.H. Marshall, "Acts," in *Commentary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G.K. Beale *et al.*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007, 513-606; see Marshall's detailed introduction, 513-27.

- The six enabling conditions often overlap; a clear distinction is not possible.

As is the case with the passion account of Luke's Gospel, the focus of Acts lies on the Christian community and its presence and ministry in Jerusalem; there is more detail to them. The religious leaders remain flat characters⁸ and appear only to the extent that this is necessary to understand the behaviour and responses of the Christian community. Owing to this emphasis in the only extant source (and its clearly biased nature), care is needed in this enquiry not to privilege the Christians involved in these conflicts above the other parties.

There is a negative correspondence between the conditions that enable the religious leaders and those that enable the apostles. A clear enabling condition on the one side is often matched by its absence on the other side: What the religious leaders have, the apostles lack, and vice versa.

Conditions Enabling the Religious Leaders

Political Enabling Conditions

As portrayed in Acts, the leaders certainly benefit from political enabling conditions. They have their power base in Jerusalem. They are the established authority in religious matters and constitute a formidable group: "On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high priestly family" (4:5-6).⁹ Acts 5:21 lists the high priest, those who were with him and the council, "all the Senate of the people of Israel."

Readers know from Luke's Gospel that the leaders have direct access to the representatives of Rome in Jerusalem and have their own means of getting their way against them. Although they do not make use of their established connections to their Roman overlords in this conflict (as they had done in the case of Jesus), this is an option always available to them, but not to others (see Acts 23:16-22). With the exception of the power to impose a death sentence (Luke 23:1-25), their power is unlimited and not challenged by either the Roman overlords or the population of Jerusalem (in the early stages of the conflict). They are in charge of the temple premises and all activities

⁸For studies of literary characterisation in Acts see F. Dicken *et al.*, ed., *Characters and Characterization in Luke-Acts*, LiNTS 548, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark. 2016.

⁹For their identity, see Barrett, *Acts*, 222-225 and Schnabel, *Acts*, 235-237.

there (see, however, Luke 19:45-48).¹⁰ They have their own personnel, the captain of the temple and his policing force, and a public prison at their disposal. They are able to summon or arrest the apostles at any time and imprison them (4:3). They have the authority to warn, threaten and to command (4:17-18, 21). They can arrest the apostles once more and put them into prison (5:18). When the apostles are again brought before the council, the high priest takes the initiative and leads the official trial against them (5:27-28). Even after the counsel of Gamaliel, the apostles are beaten and again charged not to speak in the name of Jesus. The leaders are able and ready to assert their authority to the end, even though it becomes clear that they cannot do so against the apostles, owing to their popularity with the people and their transcendent enabling conditions.¹¹

However, they are able to enforce their decisions only up to a certain point (up to 5:18; from 5:26 onwards the leaders and their emissaries need to be careful), after which their authority is limited; they need to take account of the popular esteem of the apostles: “and they let the apostles go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people” (4:21); “The captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people” (5:26). The people of Jerusalem are clearly on the apostles’ side.

The political enabling conditions are also limited by the fact that the angel of the Lord liberates the apostles from the leaders’ own prison in a way that is not even noticed (5:19-26, v. 23: “We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside”).

The leaders’ authority is challenged and eventually rejected outright by the apostles. The leaders must judge for themselves whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to them rather than to God (4:19). Obviously, it would be wrong to do so. The apostles will obey God above men (5:29).

Social Enabling Conditions

The religious leaders have high social status and are well networked. The council is a well-established body of influential

¹⁰However, even in their actions against Jesus, they had to take his popularity among the people of Jerusalem into account (see Luke 19:48; 22:3-6; 23:27). They did not dare use their full means against him in public.

¹¹Acts 5:36-37 suggests that the authority and claim to leadership of the council is not unchallenged: although their movements eventually came to nothing, other figures of the past managed to attract followers and in this way presented a challenge to the established leaders.

people who can take decisions, have crucial means available to them, and have access to the representatives of the empire. However, their influence on the population is limited (Lk 19:48; 22:6; 23:27). The people of Jerusalem follow the apostles—as their adherents (see the large numbers of people joining the apostles) or as benevolent observers—not the religious leaders, who appear to be acting in isolation. The religious leaders do not have and do not need popular support in order to take action against the apostles. They can call the council together and act whenever they wish. They have enough enabling conditions of their own. However, a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, is held in honour by all the people (5:34). He is exceptional among the group of opponents.¹²

Economic Enabling Conditions¹³

The religious leaders have the material resources to enforce their authority. They are able to fund their own police force and public prison. The priests among them receive their income from the temple; other income comes from dubious activities on the temple premises (Lk 19:45-46). During these conflicts they need not worry about their income (they can act at any time) or loss thereof. However, superior material resources do not play a role in the conflict. The leaders do not try to pay a traitor or assassin or gather a larger force of mercenaries against the apostles and their sympathisers in Jerusalem (see Josephus' account of later conflicts in Jerusalem).

Cultural Enabling Conditions

“Cultural” enabling conditions are a wide field, for which Mayer does not offer a precise definition. We will treat under this heading references to religion and education/knowledge. The religious leaders are indeed the religious leaders of Jerusalem. They are well trained and knowledgeable—in comparison with them, the apostles are uneducated, common men (Acts 4:13). Apart from the apostles, no one challenges their status directly. As members of the council and as office bearers in the temple of Jerusalem they have a significant function in Jerusalem and beyond. As priests/high priests they serve as mediators of divine forgiveness and presence. As councillors they have far-reaching powers in religious, legal and

¹²For the Pharisees see R. Deines, “Pharisees,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. J.J. Collins et al., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010, 1061-1063. On Gamaliel see O. Padilla, *The Speeches of Outsiders in Acts: Poetics, Theology and Historiography*, SNTS.MS 144, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 106-34.

¹³See L.R. Iannaccone and W.S. Bainbridge, “Economics of Religion,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. J. Hinnells, 2. ed., London, New York: Routledge, 2010, 461-75.

administrative matters. Some of the religious leaders have been appointed to their offices and can claim the authority of Scripture for their offices and/or come from the Judean elite.

In the account of Acts, the leaders are not portrayed as using the *religious* conditions available to them. In contrast to the apostles (see below), they do not quote from the Scriptures in their interactions with the apostles, neither do they resort to prayer as the Christian community does (4:24-30). While they fail to recognise divine affirmation for Jesus in his resurrection or for the apostles (through their miracles), they do not want to be found opposing God, and they therefore agree with Gamaliel's advice (5:39-40).

In his speech, Gamaliel refers to events from the past (Theudas and Judas the Galilean, 5:36-37).¹⁴ He is aware of past events and their outcome, and can presuppose this knowledge also on the side of his fellow leaders and draw conclusions from it. Gamaliel reckons with the possibility of this plan or undertaking (i.e. the apostles and their claims) not being of merely human origin (5:38-39). If it should be of God, then the opponents will not be able to overthrow the apostles, and they may even be found opposing God (5:39).

Psychological Enabling Conditions

The category of psychological enabling conditions is also a wide field and closely related to the previous ones. At least in the initial phases of this conflict, the leaders respond in an orderly and composed way. They know how to employ the enabling conditions available to them and do so calmly. They demonstrate no fear or helplessness. Only later do they lose their composure and start to react to the apostles, rather than acting on their own volition and at their own pace.

However, up to the end of the conflict, they also have a person like Gamaliel among them, who keeps calm and presents his proposal once the apostles are taken outside the room. He is able to accurately analyse the current situation and the options available to the leaders, gives wise counsel and convinces others in the group. Gamaliel surveys past and recent events, their unsuccessful attempts to silence the apostles, and the means available to the religious leaders. Based on this sober analysis, he gives wise counsel. Gamaliel is the only person identified as a Pharisee among the opponents; only he is identified as a teacher of the law (5:34-39).¹⁵ In his reference to

¹⁴For their identity see Barrett, *Acts*, 293-96 and Schnabel, *Acts*, 314-16.

¹⁵See Padilla, *Speeches*, 106-34.

Theudas and Judas, Gamaliel does not equate the apostles with earlier insurrectionists against Roman rule; the point of comparison is the unpredictable outcome of different movements.

The benefits derived by the leaders from the psychological enabling conditions is limited by their characterisation as morally flawed: they are greatly annoyed because the apostles were teaching the people (4:2), they are filled with jealousy at the success and public recognition achieved by the apostles (5:17) and they are enraged at the apostles' response to their charge and want to kill them (5:33). They are unable to control themselves. None of this casts them in a positive light.

Enabled by these five human conditions, the leaders appear to be well equipped and seem to be the candidates likely to prevail. However, as noted above, there is a further element in these conflicts, namely *transcendent* enabling conditions. While the religious leaders are the official leaders in political and religious matters and maintain positions described and instituted by the Mosaic Law (priests, sacrifices, temple, etc.), they do not seek or receive any divine or popular affirmation of their status or in their course of action.

Conditions Enabling the Apostles

The conditions enabling the apostles are rather different: While they score low on most of the five enabling conditions mentioned by Mayer, they score high on the transcendent enabling conditions, which their opponents lack completely. The enabling conditions available to them also are closely interrelated.

Political Enabling Conditions

The apostles have no political enabling conditions available to them. They lack formal status or recognition. They come from Galilee and are looked down upon as common and uneducated amateurs (4:13) without any means available to them.¹⁶

¹⁶On Galilee see S. Freyne. "Galilee", in *Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. J. J. Collins et al., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010, 653-57. Schnabel, *Acts*, 243 comments: "the members of the Sanhedrin realize that these two men are not priests trained to use the law in the context of their ritual duties in the temple, or wealthy aristocrats who have enjoyed the privileges of primary and perhaps secondary education, or law experts schooled in interpreting the Torah in all its minute details. They are 'uneducated' ..., a term that here does not mean 'illiterate' but 'uneducated' in terms of scribal education. It is also possible that this evaluation reports the opinion of those who interrogate Peter and John and does not reflect their actual educational background, which must have been rather modest in comparison with the Sanhedrin's own level of education. The Jewish elite here regard them as 'amateurs' ..., as people who have no standing as priestly, political, or scribal experts."

Social Enabling Conditions

While the apostles have no established social relations (kin, trade, etc.) in Jerusalem, they have the strong social enabling conditions of unity among themselves and the loyal support of their own community, which gathers behind them and prays with and for them: “All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers” (1:14). The Christian community is characterised as a brotherhood (1:15: “among the brothers”) and Peter addresses his fellow Christians as brothers (1:16).¹⁷ The community adheres to the apostles’ teaching (2:42). Once released from prison, the apostles go to their community and find support in prayer there (4:23-31). In the midst of conflict, the believers are said to be of one heart and soul (4:32).¹⁸ The community acknowledges and trusts the apostles: Those who sell land or houses bring the proceeds of what was sold and leave it at the apostles’ feet, in other words, they entrust it to them and place it at their disposal; it is then taken and distributed to any as have need (4:25, 37). The authority of the apostles is even acknowledged by a Levite from Cyprus (4:36-37). In the midst of conflict, the whole Christian community “was together in Solomon’s Portico” (5:12).

The very existence of a supportive, divinely-initiated community, and its exemplary unity (“fellowship,” emphasised in 2:42-47, and also expressed in the sharing of goods, as described in detail in 4:32-37) and great power and grace (4:33) are resources for the apostles.

There is also the intra-community affirmation of their spokesman, Peter, through the death of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11 (“And great fear came upon the whole church,” 5:11). Peter is able to uncover and confront hypocrisy, and the Christian community is united through this experience.

Unlike the religious leaders, the apostles receive repeated public acknowledgement from the crowds.¹⁹ This is evident from a number of statements (“and awe came upon every soul,” 2:43, “and having

¹⁷For the kinship language of earliest Christianity see P. Trebilco, *Self-Designations and Group Identity in the New Testament*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 16-67, on Acts see pp. 50-53.

¹⁸For the characterisation of the community see D.A. Hume, *The Early Christian Community: A Narrative Analysis of Acts 2:41-47 and 4:32-35*, WUNT II.298, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011.

¹⁹For the significance of the crowds in Luke-Acts see Richard S. Ascough, “Narrative Technique and Generic Designation: Crowd Scenes in Luke-Acts and in Chariton,” *CBQ* 58 (1996) 69-81.

favour with all the people," 2:47; "And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him," 3:10) and their actions (5:16). The people of Jerusalem—unlike the leaders—respond to the apostles' proclamation and join the Christian community in great numbers (2:37, 41; 4:4). The apostles are portrayed as teaching the people (4:1-2). The leaders' options (in terms of meeting out punishment) are limited because of the people (4:21). Great fear comes upon all who hear of the failure and fate of Ananias and Sapphira (5:11). The people of Jerusalem hold the Christian community in high esteem (5:13). Even the people from the towns around Jerusalem acknowledge the apostles' miraculous powers and bring their sick to the city in order to receive healing for them (5:16). This response and loyalty of the people is an enabling condition for the apostles, which their opponents need to take into consideration, as it places a limitation on them.

Economic Enabling Conditions

The apostles' economic enabling conditions are limited. They came to Jerusalem with limited resources, depended for a long while on a number of generous women (Lk 8:1-3), have no means of production in Jerusalem, and do not benefit from the religious establishment (e.g., the temple) in any way. However, owing to the community of goods and mutual sharing, emphasised in Acts 2:44-47 ("And all who believed were together and had all things in common," v. 44) and 4:32-37 ("and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ... there was not a needy person among them," v. 32, 34), the apostles suffer no immediate material need and can concentrate on their task of proclaiming the Gospel as they have been commissioned by Jesus.²⁰ Lack of material resources does not limit their activities, options or behaviour in this conflict in any way. The availability of more material means would not make any difference.

Cultural Enabling Conditions

The apostles also score highly on cultural enabling conditions in the above sense of religious qualification and knowledge. Although

²⁰Although Acts 6:1 suggests that the sharing of the proceeds of sold property was limited to the Christian community, Acts 2:45 on its own does not limit this activity to the believers ("as any had need"): See Barrett, *Acts*, 169: "In the present passage it is not clear whether the charitable distribution was confined to Christians or not; 6:1 suggests that it was." See also Schnabel, *Acts*, 182 who comments on 2:45: "were distributed among needy believers." If such sharing included non-Christians, it would also have enhanced the status of the apostles in the wider community and added to their power.

they do not have the formal status and training of their opponents, they are obedient to Jesus and devote themselves to prayer (1:12-14, 2:42, 46; 4:23-30). They are Jews; their Jewishness and right to be in Jerusalem and on the temple premises is not questioned. As pious Jews, they go there to pray. In the initial stages of the conflict, they do not question the authority of the established religious leaders.

The apostles know and quote the Scriptures of Israel and interpret them repeatedly, in a creative way²¹: “For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel” (2:15-16). A detailed analysis of the speeches in Acts 1:16-22; 2:14-36; 3:11-26; 4:8-12 and 5:29-32, with their extensive quotations from the Scriptures and conclusions drawn from them is not relevant to the present discussion, however. The apostles lay claim to the heritage of Israel: “Jesus was raised from the dead by none other than the God of our fathers” (5:30).

When faced with a decision (two men fulfil the requirements listed in 1:21-22 to succeed Judas), the Christian community knows how to receive divine guidance by prayer and casting lots.²² This is not said of its opponents.

The apostles are portrayed as exemplary Jews. They go up to the temple at the hour of prayer (3:1). Together with their adherents, they go to the temple (they perform their devotions in the temple) and praise God (2:46-47). They readily give honour and glory to God; they deny acting by their own power and piety (3:12-16). They affirm the priority of Israel in God’s purposes (3:26). The community responds to opposition with prayer (4:24-30). Their prayer quotes directly from the Old Testament (4:25-26) or is strongly coloured by it. The community as a whole receives great grace from God (4:33).

The apostles obey divine instruction in an exemplary manner: Despite the danger it involves, they readily follow the angel’s instruction and continue with the ministry on the temple premises at the earliest opportunity at daybreak (5:21). This is acknowledged by their opponents: “Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people” (5:25). The apostles

²¹This happens both before and after Pentecost; see 1:20 and 2:14-41. On the use of the Old Testament in Acts see the survey by Marshall, “Acts.”

²²The religious leaders have according to tradition—at least in theory—the breastplate and pouch of the high priest with the lots of Urim and Thummim. When proceeding against the apostles, they do not seek divine guidance in prayer and/or through lots.

leave no doubt that they want to obey God, even if it means defying the orders of the human powers that be: "We must obey God rather than men" (5:29; see also 4:19).

The apostles rejoice at being counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name of Jesus (5:41). They deal with the suffering which their commission and ministry entails in an admirable way.²³

Through the election of Matthias in the place of Judas, the number of the twelve is completed (1:15-26).²⁴ As a group they represent Israel re-gathered and restored, and (although this is not made explicit anywhere) they are concerned with Israel and her fate.

Peter knows of Judas' end and is able to give good advice on the basis of this knowledge (1:16-19). There is a similarity between this and Gamaliel's references to past events (5:34-39).

Psychological Enabling Conditions

There are also some psychological enabling conditions: The apostles appear calm and fearless, despite the massive resistance that they face. However, this is not their natural state of mind, but is instead due to the reception of the Holy Spirit (2:1-11). They are aware of, request, and count on divine support. Even when their opponents are enraged and at their wits' end, the apostles remain calm. They are always able to answer and know what to do even though they are inferior when it comes to origin, social status and training. Whatever they lack in human qualification is compensated for by the transcendent enabling condition.

Transcendent Enabling Conditions

Transcendent enabling conditions constitute the apostles' most important asset in this conflict. While they are not without enabling human conditions in these conflicts, their *main* enabling condition is transcendent. Their strong conviction and boldness derive from their extended period of intimate fellowship with Jesus (Lk 5:1-24:53): they were called by him (Acts 1:2), witnessed his miracles and his resurrection, received many convincing proofs of his resurrection (1:4: "He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs"), and received his extended post-resurrection instructions (Acts 1:3). They were commissioned by Jesus to remain in Jerusalem (1:4) and were witnesses to Jesus' ascension and its explanation by angels (1:9-11).

²³See S. Cunningham, *"Through Many Tribulations": The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts*, JSNT.S 142, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997.

²⁴See A.W. Zwiép, *Judas and the Choice of Matthias: A Study on Context and Concern of Acts 1:15-25*, WUNT II.187, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004.

Readers know of the apostles' commission by the risen Christ to be his witnesses.²⁵ He constitutes the highest authority in Luke-Acts. They obey Jesus' instruction (1:12-14) and are characterised as obedient and faithful witnesses ("This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses," 2:32; see also 2:40). As Jesus' witnesses, they cannot but speak of what they have seen and heard (4:20). Their ministry and its content are not negotiable: "And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (4:33). This happens in direct contrast to what their opponents demand of them (4:17-18) and what annoys the opponents ("greatly annoyed because the apostles were ... proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead," 4:2). The opponents acknowledge that the apostles have filled Jerusalem with their teaching (5:28): "And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him" (5:32). Despite repeated warnings and the punishment of beating (5:40), the apostles continue faithfully the task to which they have been called: "And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus" (5:42).

Their bold ministry within the community and in public is further enabled through the very public coming of the Holy Spirit upon all of them at Pentecost (announced in 1:4-5, 8; fulfilled in 2:1-12; this is the origin of their proclamation of the mighty works of God, 2:11). When Peter responds to a group of formidable opponents, he is characterised as being filled with the Holy Spirit (4:8). The apostles and their adherents undergo a further pneumatic experience in the midst of the conflict (4:31, "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit"). Even their opponents recognise the boldness with which the apostles act, and are astonished (4:13). Strengthened by the Spirit, the Christian community can pray not for relief or deliverance, but for more boldness and continued miraculous affirmation: "and grant your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus" (4:29-30). The prayer is answered: They "continued to speak the word of God with boldness" (4:31). The Spirit is given to those who obey God (5:32). Therefore, having the Spirit and acting in its authority and power is a clear sign that the apostles obey God.

²⁵ Acts 1:8: for witness in Acts, see A.A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness*, SNTS.MS 31, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

The apostles receive continued divine affirmation before all the people through the miracle of Pentecost (they are the bearers of the eschatological Spirit) and spectacular signs and wonders.²⁶ The apostles work these miracles without fail (“and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles,” 2:43; 3:1-10; 5:12-16; there is not a single instance where they fail to perform a miracle; cf. Lk 9:40) and also experience miracles wrought by God on their behalf. One of their miracles becomes the point of departure for the clash with the religious leaders in Acts 4-5. The miracle is acknowledged by the opponents and silences them (4:14, 16-17: “For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But in order that it may spread no further among the people ...”). In the midst of the account of conflict appears the following summary note: “Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles” (5:12), and a more detailed account of extraordinary miracles: “so that they [probably the Christians] even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed” (5:15-16). Through an angel of the Lord the apostles are liberated from prison and receive direct instruction: They are to continue with the proclamation in public (5:20).²⁷

The communal prayer after the apostles’ release in Acts 4:24-30 receives divine affirmation through an earthquake (“and when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken,” 4:31)²⁸; later they are liberated from prison by an angel of the Lord (5:19-20). As divine confirmation of the apostles’ ministry, God himself adds people to their community: “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” 2:47); “And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women” (5:14).

Guided by the Spirit, the apostles offer an astute spiritual analysis of past failures and the current situation (2:38, 40) know how to answer in spiritual matters and readily give the right instructions on

²⁶See S.S. Liggins, *Many Convincing Proofs: Persuasive Phenomena Associated with Gospel Proclamation in Acts*, BZNW 221, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016.

²⁷See J.B. Weaver, *Plots of Epiphany: Prison-Escape in Acts of the Apostles*, BZNW 131, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004.

²⁸For this function of earthquakes see C. Stenschke, *Luke’s Portrait of Gentiles Prior to Their Coming to Faith*, WUNT II.108, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999, 201.

God's behalf to the people (2:37: "Brothers, what shall we do? Repent and be baptised every one of you," 2:37-38; 3:19) and their opponents (4:8-12).

The prayers of the apostles and their community are answered (1:26; 4:24-31). In this way, they appear as mediators of salvation (2:47).

In the midst of conflict, Peter is also affirmed by his supernatural knowledge of Ananias and Sapphira's secret scheme. He knows of people's secret intentions and confronts them boldly like an Old Testament prophet. The immediate divine judgement on Ananias and on Sapphira indicates that God cannot be fooled, but also affirms the apostles (5.1-11).²⁹

These generous transcendent enabling conditions, unique to the apostles, outweigh all their human disadvantages in this conflict. Owing to the transcendent conditions available to the apostles, the religious leaders, despite the superior political, social, economic, cultural and psychological enabling conditions, cannot prevail against them.

The apostles have what the religious leaders lack, and vice versa. While they contest the same domains, there is little overlap between the political, social, economic, cultural and psychological enabling conditions available to both parties. The main enabling condition applicable to the apostles, that is, the *transcendent* enabling condition, cannot be made available by human means. It is granted by God or Jesus, and can only be requested in prayer. The apostles emphasise that they do not act by their own authority (3:12-16).

Both groups have in common the fact that they make full use of the enabling conditions at their disposal, and are limited only by the circumstances (such as the popular esteem of the apostles). The leaders only once resort to violence as an official punishment decreed by the council (5:40); Gamaliel's intervention prevents the use of lethal violence. As they constitute the formal authority, the leaders need not resort to false witnesses or instigation, as is the case in Acts 6. The apostles do not use their supernatural powers against the leaders (see, e.g., 2 Kgs 1, Lk 9:54), incite the crowds against them (see Acts 6:11-12), or try to harm them otherwise. Neither do the apostles budge by withdrawing from Jerusalem, by limiting their ministry to the Christian community, or by following the leaders' orders.

²⁹See M. Rydryck, "Miracles of Judgement in Luke-Acts," in *Miracles Revisited: New Testament Miracle Stories and Their Concepts of Reality*, ed. S. Alkier et al., SBR 2, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013, 23-32.

Analysis and Assessment

Our analysis of the enabling conditions in the conflict between the apostles and the religious leaders has shown that Wendy Mayer's five categories of political, social, economic, cultural, and psychological enabling conditions are helpful as a heuristic tool for analysing ancient accounts of religious conflict. However, as Acts narrates a story which involves more than human means and enabling conditions, it has been necessary to supplement them with the category of transcendent enabling conditions. These transcendent conditions have the function of affirming the apostles in their faithful fulfilment of their commission. By emphasising this divine affirmation, Acts leaves no doubt that the Christian protagonists act in the right way, and that they do so with divine approval.³⁰ Even their opponents have to recognise and acknowledge the transcendent conditions available to the apostles and their consequences. The message to readers is clear: God is on the apostles' side; their opponents stand in opposition to God (Acts 5:39). What the opponents consider to be a possibility at the climax of this first round of conflict, namely opposing God, becomes a certainty by the end of Acts and after several further rounds of conflict.³¹

The religious conflict of Acts 4–5 is complex. Acts also reports further conflicts in some detail: conflicts in Jerusalem between Stephen and other Jewish Christians and other Jews, conflicts between Jewish Christians and other Jews in different Diaspora settings, conflicts between Jewish Christians and non-Jews³², conflicts between Jewish Christian individuals and/or groups and other Jewish Christians and conflicts between other Jews and non-Jews. For a full picture of conflict in Acts to be obtained, all of these need to be examined.

³⁰Without these transcendent enabling conditions taken into account, the conflict is understandable in its actual course and outcome. The popular esteem of the apostles (which, obviously, was based not only on their bold proclamation) limits the leaders' enabling conditions. The counsel of Gamaliel explains the opponents' eventual decision not to intervene any further, but to count on God's working in history or lack thereof and await the outcome of this new movement.

³¹In this way, the purpose of Acts is served by the antagonistic practice revealed in many works of ancient history. It is disputed whether and to what extent Acts should be seen as ancient historiography or be classified otherwise. The antagonistic nature of the account is a feature which is often neglected in discussions of the genre of Acts. For a recent survey of the issues and debate see Keener, *Acts I*, 51–147.

³²For a survey see C. Stenschke, "Interreligious Encounters in the Book of Acts," in *Interreligious Relations: Biblical Perspectives*, ed. H. Hagelia *et al.*, T&T Clark Biblical Studies, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017, 135–179.

Our analysis raises the question of what the author's interests are in presenting the conflicts of Acts 4–5 and the parties to them in this way. How do these conflicts function in the narrative of Acts? As we have seen, the portrayal of the conflicts in this way serves the author's overall purpose well: The apostles faithfully do as they are commissioned by Jesus despite suffering and resistance (in parallel to the portrayal of Jesus in Luke's Gospel), they emerge as the new leaders of the people, receive divine affirmation, and are recognised by the community of the believers and the people at large.³³ Israel continues to be gathered and restored as a prerequisite and in preparation for the coming influx of non-Jews into the people of God. By contrast, the established leaders fail to respond to the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus. They lose their credibility and status, and, with the enabling conditions available to them, they cannot prevail against the apostles. They are indeed fighting against God! Acts emphasises that the leaders, not the people of Israel as such, oppose the proclamation of the Gospel in Jerusalem. Their response to the Gospel is divided.

With the function of this portrayal made clear, the traditional further endeavour of much critical research on Acts was to go behind the text and speculate about what "really happened" (in essence, a "hermeneutic of suspicion"): what the *actual* conflicts were that are concealed or covered up behind the literary portrayal.³⁴ Are the conflicts simply a construction by the author in order to enhance his purposes?³⁵ However, such questions, first raised by the *Tendenzkritik* of the Tübingen School in the 19th century, are notoriously difficult to answer, as we have no other sources. They concern the wider question of the historical reliability of Acts, which has been discussed extensively.³⁶

This is not the place to raise and to solve in passing the major question of research on Luke-Acts over the past two centuries, so a few comments will have to suffice. For the Lukan intention of providing certainty about the things that readers have been taught

³³As ancient historiography intends not only to inform the readers about the past, but also to provide instructive examples and guidance for the behaviour of the readers, the author probably presents the apostles as models for his readers, although he ascribes a unique status to them.

³⁴The potential for contemporary application of the portrayal of Acts is not dependent on a by-and-large hypothetical reconstruction of what the actual conflicts were. The portrayal of Acts as well as any reconstructions have the ability to enhance our understanding of religious conflict, past and present.

³⁵For a discussion of the purpose of Acts see Keener, *Acts I*, 435–458.

³⁶For a survey on Acts and historicity see Keener, *Acts I*, 166–220.

(Luke 1:4) to materialise, what is portrayed in Acts must not be too far removed from the facts. According to the criterion of plausibility, one can conclude that what is presented in Acts is historically plausible, at least as far as the five enabling conditions identified by Mayer are concerned. With the *transcendent* enabling condition, we enter an area where major issues are involved.³⁷ When the presentation of the conflict in Acts 4-5 is compared with other ancient accounts of conflict, some striking differences emerge. The relatively plain account in Acts contains only a few dramatic elements. There are no lengthy speeches, no detailed or embellished accounts of miracles, no extended characterisations of the opponents as malicious, or accounts of exemplary suffering by the protagonists. Combined with what is coming to be recognised as the historical genre of Acts, this suggests that the literary portrayal must resemble the actual events to some degree, although the extent and nature of this resemblance is difficult to determine.

Any assessment of the conflicts in Acts also has to take the rhetorical conventions and antagonistic practice of ancient historiography and its reflection in the Book of Acts into account. To what extent is conflict simply part and parcel of a “good story”, or a means of enhancing its drama? To what extent is conflict embellished or exaggerated to match the requirements of the literary genre and meet the expectations of ancient readers? To what extent do these practices also apply to Acts?

Although the author of Acts did not set out to tell a tale of conflicts, the account still offers valuable insights into these conflicts and into religious conflict—past and present—in general.³⁸ The conflicts of Acts involve a number of contested domains and political, social, economic, cultural, psychological, and transcendent enabling conditions on both sides. While the conflicts become increasingly fierce and include verbal and physical violence, there are also some traces of the de-escalation and resolution of conflict, of co-existence and co-operation and of transition and assimilation. These aspects and the significance of these and other conflict accounts in the book to the overall purpose of Luke-Acts merit further attention.

These conflict accounts and their careful analysis will help those who find the Book of Acts in their canonical Scriptures not only to

³⁷See the detailed discussion of “Signs and Historiography,” in Keener, *Acts I*, 320–82. Keener ends with balanced reflections on “Approaching Luke’s miraculous claims” (380–82).

³⁸When looking at the potential of Acts to shed light on other conflicts the antagonistic practice of ancient historians has to be kept in mind.

understand the challenges of earliest Christianity but also the nature of present day religious conflicts, whether the readers are personally involved or not. What are the various contested domains, what the enabling factors on the different sides? How might they behave and respond wisely? A Christian minority might easily be dismayed by the seemingly and actual superior enabling factors on the side of their opponents. However, it is of great comfort to know that the transcendent enabling factors which made all the difference for the apostles back then have not been recalled and are still available to the faithful in their ministry and witness to Jesus, God's Christ for Jews and non-Jews alike, evermore.