

Paul's Encounters and Interactions with Representatives of Rome According to the Book of Acts

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Abstract

This article examines how Paul, as portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles, interacts with the various representatives of Roman power during his ministry in the ancient Mediterranean world. In encountering these representatives, Paul faces a variety of opportunities and challenges. He meets men ready to listen and respond to the Gospel, officials disregarding Roman law, but ready to apologise, people who quickly realise Paul's innocence, corrupt officials, and people who co-operate with Paul for the better of a large group of people. Paul is portrayed as an evangelist, as one who ably defends himself and knows his rights and insists on proper legal procedure, refuses to pay a bribe and willing to co-operate for the sake of all. In all this, he is not only circumspect of his fellow Christ-believers but also of the unbelieving Jews.

After a survey and analysis of these instances, this portrayal is related to the theme of this issue. In closing, there is a reflection on the hermeneutical challenges which need to be kept in mind in such an application and a discussion of its possible relevance for today.

1. Introduction

When Christians think of biblical statements on politics, the state and how to relate to it, Paul's relative comprehensive reflections in Romans 13:1–7 quickly come to mind, perhaps also other statements of Paul (Gl 4:26; Phlp 3:20; see also 1Tm 2:2).¹ In addition, there are several passages in the Book of Acts on Paul's encounters and interactions with representatives of the Roman Empire during his mission in the Eastern Mediterranean world. The final quarter of the book accounts in detail Paul's arrest by Roman authorities and his fate as a Roman prisoner during what became an exceptionally long imprisonment.² How are these accounts related to Paul's own statements in the speeches which are included in the narrative? What light does the narrative portrayal of Paul shed on his words and the other way round? While Paul was not involved in "politics" in the modern sense of the term he encountered representatives of the Roman empire and interacted with people who determined "politics" in different ways and to a different extent. While many important decisions regarding policy were taken in Rome by imperial legislation, the local representatives of Roman power had some freedom in the application of these policies. In addition, these local representatives had to choose how they would wield the power entrusted to them. Would they act like Felix who ruthlessly pursued his own interests (Ac 24:25–27) or like Cornelius who generously shared his resources with the people

(10:2) or like Felix who made an effort to resolve Paul's case (25:1–26:32)?

What can be gleaned from the portrayal of Paul in Acts for a biblical understanding, and inspired by this, for the current interaction of Christians with politics? In this article, I concentrate on the *literary portrayal* of Paul's encounters with Roman authorities in Acts and I do not discuss the historical validity of this portrayal or its contribution to the reconstruction of earliest Christian history. Our focus is to examine this portrayal³ and its implications for the current interaction of Christians with politics.

Paul's direct interactions with the representatives of Rome are one aspect of the portrayal of Paul's encounters with the authorities in Acts. For a full picture, one would also have to consider Paul's interactions with *Jewish* authorities. He is introduced into the narrative as a member of the Jewish establishment (indirectly involved in the stoning of Stephen, Ac 7:58; 8:1); later he approaches the Jewish high priest for letters to persecute the Christ-believers in Damascus (9:1–3). Acts notes many encounters, debates and conflicts of Paul with leading figures in different synagogues in the Jewish diaspora (9:23–24; 13:45–50, etc.) and also in Jerusalem. Paul is brought before the Jewish Council (23:1–11). This governing body knows of the plans to assassinate Paul (23:14–15) and later on, some of its representatives accuses Paul before the Roman governors Felix and Festus (24:1–9; 25:2–3, 7, 15, 18–19).

In these encounters, the focus of Acts clearly is on Paul, not on the Roman magistrates and their behaviour and deliberations. Their rhetorical function in the narrative is to attest to Paul's innocence and to explain his fate as a Roman prisoner. In addition, we need to remember the selective nature of Luke's account (a selection of programmatic events from a period of over thirty years) and its brevity. Many details which might help us to assess Paul's interactions with Roman authorities are simply not provided. This is so because the author might not have been informed about them, had to omit them for lack of space or did not consider them significant for his overall purpose of providing an apology for Paul and his disputed ministry among Jews and non-Jews. Thus, our conclusions (in particular, when arguing from silence) have to be based on what is provided and may not be as sure or instructive as we wish them to be for Christian reflections on the state.

In section two, we survey the accounts in Acts of Paul's encounters with the representatives of Rome and analyse them. In closing, we relate this portrayal to the theme of this issue of the *SABJT*, that is Evangelicalism and Politics – Friend or Foe?, reflect on the hermeneutical challenges which need to be kept in mind and offer some possible applications.

2. Paul's Encounters with the Representatives of Rome According to Acts

The portrayal of these encounters is quite nuanced. While Paul is summoned by Roman authorities or, in most cases, brought before them and accused by his opponents, these authorities do not actively persecute Paul or seek to arrest him. For them, this eloquent Jew who claims that some particular (and for them, rather peculiar) Jewish eschatological expectation had been fulfilled in a certain Jesus of Nazareth somewhere on the fringes of the empire and that allegedly the Jewish God had raised this Jesus from the dead, is of no political concern. The Roman responses vary from accepting Paul and his message, over affirming that they are neither responsible nor interested in dealing with Paul, expecting a bribe from him, questioning his sanity, to declaring him to be harmless in their estimate and innocent of the accusations levelled against him. There is little doubt that Luke had a particular interest in these encounters (spread out over a period of some 15–20 years) and that they make an important contribution to the overall purpose of Acts in that they contribute to the apology for Paul the missionary and Roman prisoner.⁴ Throughout Paul's career, Roman officials, insofar as they took notice of Paul and had to inquire his case, found him to be harmless and innocent.

3. The encounter with Sergius Paulus (Ac 13:6–12)

The first encounter of Paul in Acts with a Roman official occurs in Paphos.⁵ The Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus, characterised as a man of intelligence (Ac 13:7), summons Barnabas and Paul (presumably to his residence) and seeks to hear the word of the Lord (13:7). He must have heard about their ministry in Paphos or elsewhere on Cyprus. The text does not indicate whether the Jewish magician in his service, Elymas, played a role in this process. Sergius Paulus witnesses Elymas' opposition to the missionaries, his intention to turn the governor away from (accepting) the Christian faith, and their response in a short invective and punitive miracle against the magician.⁶ As the punishment sets in immediately ("Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand", 13:12), Sergius Paulus believed, "when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished *at the teaching of the Lord*" (13:12). This suggests that the missionaries must have proclaimed the Gospel to the proconsul before the magician sought to intervene.

The first representative of the Roman empire, whom Paul encounters, is portrayed entirely positive.⁷ He not only has a Jewish magician in his entourage (that is, he was not anti-Jewish) but is also interested in the message of the Jewish missionaries; he is intelligent. As he sees the power of the Gospel displayed, he is astonished and comes to faith. While other representatives of Rome will be portrayed negatively, people like Sergius Paulus are among them. Paul uses the opportunity to proclaim the Gospel when summoned to give an account and meets genuine interest and the readiness to believe: "The word of God is also for the powerful and the highly intelligent".⁸ The emphasis elsewhere in Acts on

teaching/instruction (see Stenschke 1999:335–347) and Peter's stay at the house of Cornelius for some days (Acts 10:48) suggests that the proclamation of the Gospel would have been followed by systematic instruction, perhaps including ethical principles for good governance (see Lk 22:24–30).

4. A Very Physical Encounter and Rehabilitation in Philippi (Ac 16:19–40)

In the Roman town of Philippi, Paul and Silas' non-Jewish opponents brought them before the Roman magistrates by force. The opponents do not mention the actual occasion or accusation against the missionaries ("seen that their hope of gain was gone", Ac 16:19), but present a carefully orchestrated charge which plays on the latent anti-Judaism of the Roman world: "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice" (16:21). In their accusations, they are joined by the crowds.

In the abbreviated account (the focus lies on the ensuing events), the Roman magistrates do not give the missionaries an occasion to defend themselves (the usual procedure according to Roman law), neither do they bother to ascertain the missionaries' identity and find out that both men actually are Roman citizens. The Roman "customs", allegedly so cherished, are not followed. In the enigmatic account, it is unclear whether the missionaries even had the opportunity to disclose their Roman citizenship (see Ac 22:24–29 for the difference which such disclosure can make) or whether they chose not to do so for several reasons. It might have led to a more extended stay (in prison) for the authorities to ascertain their claim (see Keener 2014:2480–2482). Did the missionaries not want to deny their Jewish identity and their message? If they refrain from doing so deliberately, it is all the more striking that they disclose this privileged legal status on the following day and insist on its implications. The missionaries are beaten severely and imprisoned (see Schellenberg 2022:123–129).

After the earthquake at midnight which liberates all prisoners (Ac 16:26), the missionaries stay behind as do all other prisoners (probably deeply impressed by the miracle). Whether the missionaries' example or admonishment led to this behaviour of the others is not indicated. The missionaries also save the jailor's life under dramatic circumstances (by preventing his suicide) and proclaim the gospel to him and his household. He is told that he cannot *do* anything to be saved (from the wrath of the missionaries' God, now surely upon him; 16:30), but is called to *believe* in the Lord Jesus (16:31). The jailor comes to faith and immediately hosts his prisoners and provides hospitality: "... and washed their wounds; ... then he brought them up into his house and set food before them" (16:33–34). Against legal stipulations, the jailor fraternizes with his prisoners. Here we find a representative of Roman power whose conversion (the second conversion, see 13:12) leads to immediate ethical consequences and to a new allegiance with his new Jewish brothers in Christ.

The next day, the magistrates of Philippi send their officers with the order to release the prisoners. This is reported to Paul, and he is told to come out and to go in peace (Ac 16:36). Paul speaks to the *lictores* and points out the mistakes which were made in the legal process the previous day and proposes a way forward for solving the problem: “They have beaten us publicly (and thus humiliated and insulted the missionaries), without proper condemnation, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out” (16:37). The magistrates failed to follow the proper legal procedure: there was an illegal public punishment (see also 22:24–25), no official verdict, the missionaries’ privileged legal status as Roman citizens was not established and respected by the magistrates, the missionaries were imprisoned without a proper trial and are now to be dismissed secretly. Paul, here portrayed for the first time as a champion of Roman law and “customs”, suggests that as an act of public rehabilitation, the magistrates come themselves and lead the missionaries out of prison (16:37). How this act would benefit the missionaries is not clear (apparently, they can leave at their convenience, 16:40; possibly also on their return to Philippi some day). The act will probably also be beneficial for the local Christ-believers. It becomes clear that the missionaries who are disturbing the city and advocating customs that are not lawful for Romans to accept or practice are not Jews (16:20–21). Rather, they are respectable Roman citizens who insist on the strict observance of Roman law. They and what they proclaim is thus fully acceptable; those who follow them have a space in Roman Philippi.

Once the magistrates hear of their mistakes, they get afraid, in particular, “when they heard that the missionaries were Roman citizens” (Ac 16:38). The magistrates come, apologise, lead the missionaries out of prison (as demanded) and ask them to leave. After a brief visit to Lydia and the other Christ-followers, the missionaries depart from Philippi (16:40).

In this detailed interaction with Roman representatives, Paul is portrayed as knowing proper legal procedure and his rights as a Roman citizen. He points to mistakes in the legal procedure and demands that the laws be observed. However, Paul is also not one to escalate the conflict. The rehabilitation measures which he proposes are moderate. He neither publicly intervenes against the magistrates or accuse them before higher powers for their failure, nor does he threaten to do so. The missionaries leave Philippi as they have been ordered. There is no public show-down or punitive miracle or the like. It seems that with his response to the initial arrest and in dealing with the injustice later on, Paul also has the concerns and well-being of the local Christ-believers in mind who stay behind.

5. Lack of Roman Interference in Corinth (Ac 18:12–18)

Acts 18:12–18 tells how some Jews try to accuse Paul. Paul’s opponents, who could not prevail against him otherwise (see the previous conflict Ac 18:6–10),

probably use the fact that Gallio had just arrived and was not yet familiar with the situation in Corinth (see Yoder 2014:258–277). The opponents bring Paul (presumably by force) before the Roman proconsul of Achaia and accuse Paul of persuading people to worship God contrary to the law (18:13). We need not treat this passage in detail as it does not focus on Paul's response/interaction, he does not get a chance to respond. As he is about to make his defence, Gallio dismisses the case (18:14–15) and drives the accusers away from the tribunal (probably by force). When some in the crowd seize Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in public, Gallio does not intervene. He is portrayed as realising that this charge is irrelevant to Roman legal concerns and is not interested in inner-Jewish religious debates about adherence to Jewish tradition. Paul is portrayed as ready to defend himself before the proconsul when brought to him by his opponents. After the incident, Paul “stayed many days longer” (18:18).

6. Keeping a Low Profile in Ephesus (Ac 19:30–31)

During the riot caused by the silversmith guild of Ephesus, Paul is ready to address the enraged crowds which have gathered at the theatre. In this way Paul probably also wants to assist his Macedonian co-workers Gaius and Aristarchus, who had been dragged along to the theatre. However, he is prevented from doing so by his followers (Ac 19:30); also, the Asiarchs, members of the local elite, who were friends of Paul, “sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theatre” (19:31). It is interesting to note that during his long ministry in Ephesus, Paul also got to know these men and befriended them. His missionary focus also included people from the local elites.⁹ Although no doubt courageous, Paul accepts this interference with his intentions and stays clear of the theatre. The following incident with Alexander, a representative of the local Jewish community (19:33–34), indicates that this was the right choice. Here it is the advice of others (Christ-believers and others) which prevents an escalation of the situation by Paul.

The Ephesian town clerk is not portrayed as a representative of Roman power (local power under Roman power). Like Paul had done on a previous occasion (Ac 16:37–38), the clerk acquits the missionaries of the alleged charges (19:17) and insists on proper legal procedure (19:38–40). Demetrius' speech led to a commotion and an illegal meeting; the clerk insists that proper legal procedure be followed and shames the silversmiths for not abiding by the rules (19:36–39).

7. The Roman Interventions in Jerusalem (Ac 21:31–23:38)

By using false charges some Jews from Asia Minor stir up the crowds against Paul in Jerusalem. When this leads to great confusion and violence against Paul (“They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple”, Ac 21:31), the Romans intervene and arrest Paul. By doing this, they probably saved his life (21:32–36). Paul politely addresses the Roman tribune (21:38) and clarifies a misunderstanding as to his identity (see Kyrychenko 2014:151). He is not the

insurrectionist from Egypt (as thought by the tribune; indicating what kind of people the Romans really are “interested” in), but discloses his real identity as a respectable person (21:39). ¹⁰ Paul asks for the opportunity to address the crowds gathered on the temple premises. This is granted to him (21:40).

At the end of his speech (or when Paul was interrupted), the people react strongly and Paul is brought into the Roman barracks. There the Romans want to flog Paul, that is, torture him, in order “to find out why they were shouting against him like this” (Ac 22:24). As they were about to start, Paul discloses his Roman citizenship, the fact that he had not been condemned and points to the implications (22:25; in contrast to 16:22–23). This leads to a short discussion about Roman citizenship and Paul is spared: “Those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune was also afraid, for he realised that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him” (22:29). Once disclosed, Paul’s rights are respected.

The next day Paul is brought by the tribune before the Jewish Council, as “desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews” (Ac 22:30). The tribune is not said to interrogate Paul himself regarding the tumult in the temple. At the end of this hearing, the Romans intervene once more and rescue Paul (23:10). When Paul later hears through his nephew of a conspiracy by some radical Jews to kill him (23:12–15), he sends this nephew to the Roman tribune and informs him about the plans of the conspirators. Paul passes on important information to the Roman officer who acts accordingly: because of this imminent danger (which the Romans take seriously ¹¹), Paul is escorted to Caesarea by night and rescued in this way.

7. The Trials and Hearings of Paul in Caesarea (Ac 24:1–26:32)

In the trial before Roman governor Antonius Felix, Paul defends himself (see Yoder 2014:277–303). His speech does not contain an elaborate introduction in order to gain benevolence (in contrast to those who accuse him, Ac 24:2–3). Paul answers to the charges levelled against him by the high priest and some of the elders (24:5–9). In a to the point and a matter-of-fact manner, he insists that he only came to Jerusalem twelve days ago, a period far too short to stir up a riot. He came with a religious purpose, that is, to worship (God in the temple). Paul did not dispute with anyone and did not stir up a crowd (24:12). The charges brought against him (24:5–6), cannot be proven by his accusers (24:14). Paul insists on proper legal procedure and points out when this is not followed, for instance, when no evidence is presented to substantiate the accusations. Rather than profaning the temple, he is a devout Jew, “worshipping the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets” (23:15). The disputed matter is the resurrection (23:15), which is not a Roman concern (see 18:14–15).

In closing, Paul reports what had happened: after several years away from Jerusalem, he came back to bring alms to his people and present offerings in the temple (Ac 24:17). He was properly purified on the temple premises, without any crowd or tumult. There some Jews from Asia saw Paul (their charge and reasoning from 21:27–29 is not repeated) and accused him of profaning the temple premises. Paul points out that these are the witnesses to his alleged wrongdoing. Therefore, they should be present to accuse him and to be questioned by the governor. The accusers cannot produce witnesses to Paul's "crime". Paul also briefly refers to the embarrassing situation before the Council in Jerusalem (23:1–10). There the opponents could not agree on any wrongdoing of his (in contrast to the fabricated charges which they level against him now) other than his belief in the resurrection of the dead (which some Jews share and which is of no concern to the Romans anyway). This religious content is the real disputed matter.

Paul is kept in custody and is portrayed as a faithful witness. He proclaims to Felix faith in Jesus, the Christ, including righteousness, self-control and the coming judgement (Ac 24:24–25). The governor's initial interest in the Gospel wanes in view of this content and he hopes that Paul would offer him a bribe (24:26; see Stenschke 2021:225–241). With this purpose, Felix often sends for Paul and converses with him. While Paul seems to have had some financial resources at his disposal, he does not pay the bribe but stays in prison in Caesarea. Paul does not perform a punitive miracle; he is not liberated by an angel or an earthquake.

In contrast to Felix, Festus is portrayed positively. He insists that the place of trial is Caesarea, the seat of Roman power in Judea (Ac 25:1–5). This is where Paul is to be accused and tried. In the trial, the Jewish opponents again accuse Paul severely ("bringing against him many and serious charges that they could not prove", 25:7). In response, Paul declares that "neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, not against Caesar have I committed any offence" (25:8, surely a summary of a longer speech). When Festus, "wishing to do the Jews a favour", offers to transfer the trial to Jerusalem (Paul would probably not have arrived alive there but be killed in an ambush during the transport), Paul eventually and, as a last resort, appeals to the imperial court in Rome (25:10–11; see the astute analysis in Yoder 2014:303–332). This appeal is accepted by the governor.

Later on, Festus uses the visit of King Herod Agrippa II and Bernice to get more information regarding this case and to report to the imperial court, "for it seems to me unreasonable, in sending a prisoner, not to indicate the charges against him" (Ac 25:27). In his speech before Festus, the king and the local elite (25:23), Paul gives an extended apology for his life and ministry and interacts with his audience, seeking to convince them to believe: "... I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am – except for

these chains”. The audience concludes that Paul has done nothing to deserve death or imprisonment and “could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar” (26:31–32; there is no effort to talk the matter over with Paul). However, Paul only made this appeal as he had to fear for his life, should the trial be transferred to Jerusalem, as offered by Festus.

Again, we see a Paul who is aware of his legal privileges as a Roman citizen and knows how to use these rights wisely. He is not quarrelsome or a trouble-shooter. He only appeals to the imperial court in Rome when it becomes clear that he cannot rely on Festus’ administration of justice (Ac 25:9). Before his judges, he uses all available opportunities for the proclamation of the Gospel.

8. The Roman Prisoner on the Way to Rome and in Rome (Ac 27:1–28:16)

During the sea voyage to Rome, Paul befriends Julius, the centurion in charge of bringing Paul and other prisoners from Caesarea to Rome (see Kyrychenko 2014:152–153). Julius treats Paul kindly and allows him to visit friends in Sidon during a stop-over; he considers him to be harmless (Ac 27:3). Paul returns to the ship. Later Julius pays more attention to the pilot and the owner of the ship than to Paul, an experienced sea-traveller and prophet (27:12). Paul is not in a huff because of this, but takes the initiative later on during the raging storm to encourage all the people on board. When he realises that the sailors are trying to escape from the ship and thus render a planned and controlled running ashore impossible, Paul informs Julius of their intentions. Julius then prevents the sailors from leaving (27:30–32). Later the soldiers plan to kill the prisoners to prevent their escape (27:42). Julius, wishing to save Paul’s life, “kept them from carrying out their plan” (27:43). In this way not only Paul, but also the other prisoners are spared. On the island of Malta, Paul heals the father of Publius, the chief man of the island (28:8). No details are given of their interaction. Other people on the island come to be cured and, as they leave, honour the travelling group greatly.

On the way from Puteoli to Rome, Paul and his companions are allowed to visit fellow believers for seven days (Ac 28:14). Other than the fact that Paul is guarded by a Roman soldier (28:16), no details are provided for Paul’s interactions with Roman representatives during his stay in the city.¹²

In this last encounter with the representatives of Rome, Paul is treated well and co-operates with Julius in saving all the people on board. Paul does what he, and only he, can do, and Julius does his part. Also on Malta, Paul helps through miraculous healing and in this way contributes to the well-being of the exceptionally friendly islanders and a bearable stay for all the shipwrecked passengers.

8. Summary and Reflection

Summary. While the Paul of Acts is moving in and impacting on public space, he surely is no politician in the modern sense of the word¹³ or involved in the politics

and policy-making of his day, he is portrayed as interacting in different places with different representatives of Rome and in different ways. The portrayal of these encounters is nuanced, spanning from missionary encounters over various trial scenes to close co-operation on an ill-fated sea-journey and the healing of family members of those in charge. The Lukan Paul fares well in the direct, orderly interactions with Roman officials when he gets the opportunity to state his case properly, apply his familiarity with proper legal procedure and use his rhetorical skills. The picture changes when crowds are involved in these encounters who have an impact on the officials, as is the case in Philippi, Ephesus and Jerusalem. Acts is sceptical with regard to non-Christ-believing crowds (see the survey in Ascough 1996: 69–81). While Paul's direct Jewish and non-Jewish opponents can pose a real danger and the crowds fickle and threatening, the Roman officials portrayed in Acts are by and large following proper legal procedure, assess Paul's case in a sober-minded manner and recognise his innocence of the false charges levelled against him.

In the “legal” encounters with the representatives of Rome, Paul provides precise, matter-of-fact answers to the questions posed to him and charges brought against him. He insists that Roman law and proper legal procedure be followed (including respecting the particular rights of Roman citizens or the need for witnesses to be present at the trial) and points out when this is not the case (for instance, when there are no witnesses). Paul is aware of his own civil rights and knows when and how to refer to them and insists that they be followed. Paul does not flatter the officials (see, in contrast, Ac 24:2–4), he speaks to them respectfully and honours their office and jurisdiction. Paul refuses to meet the expectations of a bribe by the corrupt Governor Felix.

It is also noteworthy that even in these encounters, Paul is circumspect of his opponents. Paul does not counter accuse or discredit his non-Jewish (e.g., by disclosing the real motivation of the Philippian slave-owners) and Jewish opponents before the authorities.¹⁴ Paul does not attack his Jewish adversaries before Roman authorities and endanger them in this way. In this manner, Paul contributes to a de-escalation of the situation (see Mayer 2013:18–19). There is only one punitive miracle (Acts 13:10–11).

In addition, Paul uses these opportunities to proclaim the Gospel, which is so closely intertwined with his person and ministry. Before Felix, Paul boldly addresses the governor's ethical shortcomings as part of the proclamation of faith in Christ Jesus. Although not explicitly noted, in all of this, Paul experiences the assistance of the Holy Spirit, promised by Jesus to his followers in distressing circumstances (Lk 12:11–12).

How does this portrayal by a one-time travel-companion (Ac 16:10–17; 20:5–21:18; 27:1–28:16) and ardent admirer of Paul relate to Paul's own statements

in Romans 13:1–7? The Paul of Acts encounters the authorities he meets in accordance with his demand to “respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed” (Rm 13:7). He willingly accepts Roman authority and a verdict, even a death sentence, if it is justified (Ac 25:11): “If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them”. This declaration is similar to his statement in Romans 13:2–5 in which Paul affirms the need and propriety of the authorities’ jurisdiction and the believers’ need to submit to them.

Reflection. What are we to make of this portrayal today? Obviously, as a Roman citizen, the Paul of Acts did have legal privileges which most people of his day and age did not have and which many people do not have today. Paul lived under a regime which had a, by and large, functioning legal system, at least, for those who had the privileged status of Roman citizens. Paul encountered people who respected his rights and sought, at least in some measure, to ensure that he received justice. Others did not. Due to his education and experiences, Paul knew the legal system and procedure and knew how to behave and speak when confronted with the representatives of Rome; he was given a voice and could argue his case and could do so persuasively. He was eloquent and able to defend himself. Any “application” needs to consider these factors.

Therefore, relating this portrayal to the theme of “Evangelicalism and Politics: Friend or Foe?” is not an easy task. The passages from Acts which we have examined do not directly address the question. Paul was, although surely sympathetic to some of its principles, not an “evangelical Christian” in modern terms. The “politics” he knew (the Roman empire, see Strait 2019) was far removed from the context of a democracy and the particular form of democracy which South Africa achieved in a long struggle. While Paul was friendly with some representatives of power (Ac 19:31), others treated him badly, more intent on pursuing their own interests or currying favour with his opponents than administering justice to him.

Therefore, while there is no simple formula to “just do as Paul did”, the portrait of Paul’s encounters and interactions with the representatives of Rome in Acts can still inspire Christians in different circumstances. In a thorough discussion of applying this portrait, our exegetical observations on the Paul of Acts would have to be brought into the conversation with the portrayal of such encounters and interactions in the first half of the Book of Acts (including its conflicts and well-known statements such as in Acts 5:28 “We must obey God rather than men”), other voices in the New Testament, the Old Testament and the rich heritage of Christian ethics, including applications of biblical texts in previous ages and in contexts other than our own.

Acts presents Paul as a model for Christians and others in knowing their own rights, referring to them, defending them and using them wisely, as well as, one must add, knowing the rights of others and respecting and defending them. Kisau's (2006:1330) application with regard to Acts 16:37–39 in the Kenyan context also applies to the entire picture which we examined: "Christian workers should not allow their constitutional rights to be violated without complaint because they are Christians. Although our citizenship is in heaven, we are still living in this world and we do have rights. We must endeavour to know what these rights are and to help others respect them" (see also Kisau's astute reflection on Ac 27:9–12 on p. 1344).

Paul's behaviour in these encounters also encourages Christians to

- insist on proper legal procedures for themselves and others;
- insist on the facts and presenting them readily and fairly (without polemic or counterattacks);
- make wise use of such encounters for the furtherance of the Gospel;
- avoid aggravating situations or escalating conflicts;
- behave politely and respectfully towards others, including state representatives;
- disregard and reject unethical expectations (Ac 24:26);
- avoid abusing the trust of others (Ac 27:3);
- show concern and offering expertise and practical help, even under difficult circumstances;
- keep the well-being of others in mind, as well as their own (Paul showed concern for the entire group of passengers on board the ship); and
- take the initiative for the better, whenever possible.

In displaying such behaviour, Christians can expect to receive a certain amount of respect and recognition from the representatives of the state and from society at large. Christians living and serving in societies with (by and large) properly functioning legal systems can emulate the exemplary behaviour of Paul; in other contexts, further reflection, consultation and guidance by the community of faith are mandatory.

When state authorities adhere to the laws/legal procedures and do responsibly what they are supposed to (as in some instances in Acts and as Paul instructs in Rm 13), they can indeed be friends and of great benefit to Christians, as were some of the Roman officials and the Ephesian Asiarchs, who sought to save Paul. However, if they fail in their office, pursue their own interests/agendas

(“wishing to do the Jews a favour”, Ac 24:27; 25:8, enhancing their own status rather than serving justice properly) or are corrupt, as Felix was, they become the foe of Christians and can cause harm (Paul’s long imprisonment in Caesarea and eventually the need to appeal to the imperial court in Rome for attaining justice with all the consequences this had, including an ill-fated sea voyage, a shipwreck and at least two more years in confinement).

Before addressing and actively and critically engaging society at large, Christians seek to maintain a clear conscience before God and people, perform deeds in keeping with their repentance and live accountably before God in view of the resurrection and the coming judgement, as Paul claimed for himself in Acts 24. Such a spirituality and personal integrity makes Christians models of ethical conduct in their own contexts and gives credibility and force to their witness to Christ and their ethical instruction. Their witness to the Gospel of Christ Jesus includes ethical instruction to all people – including, where possible – those in power regarding ethical conduct in office (Ac 24:25: “righteousness [in administering justice], self-control [regarding the manner in which an office and the power and privileges associated with it are to be used] and the coming judgement”, where all people, including politicians and their subjects, will be held accountable by the God who is incorruptible and shows no partiality). All of this requires exemplary Christian leaders, patience, careful preparation, courage, strategic thinking and the willingness to engage society, despite all the challenges this might involve.

9. Notes

¹ For a recent survey see Lopez and Penner (2022:580–597), see also Kim (2008), Staples (2023:242–250) and Reasoner (2023:825–831).

² For a survey see Yoder (2014) who focuses on the characterisation of governors, rather than on Paul’s reaction with them (see his survey of research on Luke’s political views and intentions, pp. 5–41). See also Kyrychenko (2014), whose treatment of the Roman centurions in Acts is all too brief.

³ Meyer (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”. For surveys of the issues and debate, see Keener (2012:90–220).

⁴ For discussions of the purpose of Acts, see Keener (2012:148–165).

⁵ See Yoder (2014:247–257); for detailed treatment of this and the following passages see the commentaries of Holladay (2016), Keener (2013, 2014, 2015), Pervo (2009) and Schnabel (2012), see also Stenschke (1999).

⁶ According to Kenyan scholar Kisau (2006:1323), the designation “son of the

devil” in Ac 13:10, “leaves no doubt that the real opposition to the gospel comes from the devil”. We cannot pursue this aspect further.

7. Representatives of Rome do not play a role in Acts before this encounter. Pilate’s involvement in the death of Jesus is mentioned briefly in Ac 3:13; 4:27 and 13:28.

8. Kisau (2006:1324). Probably the change in name from Saul to Paul at this point in Acts is related to the change of audience. Paul is called by his Roman name from then on. There is no indication that Paul adopted the name from Sergius Paulus.

9. Kisau (2006:1334) notes: “That some of this group are referred to as friends of Paul speaks volumes about his status in the city”.

10. See the survey in Stenschke (2020:391–406); see also Rapske (1994, 2023:866–871).

11. Kisau (2006:1340) notes: “God’s protection of Paul was apparent ... in the willingness of the Roman commander to believe him”.

12. Kisau (2006:1347) suggests that “Julius may have given a good report of Paul to his superiors, and thus he was given the freedom to live in his own accommodation, with only one soldier as his guard”.

13. The political implications of Paul’s proclamation of the reign of God (Ac 28:31) cannot be discussed here.

14. Some of Paul’s behaviour might be related to his Roman citizenship. As such, he can rely on Roman support, see Stenschke (2024:72–87).

15. For general guidance on the application of Scripture see Marshall (2004); for Acts, in particular see Stenschke (2013) and, from a biblical theology perspective, Köstenberger and Goswell (2023:506–512).

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Author's Declaration

The author declares that there is no financial gain or personal relationship(s) that inappropriately influenced him/her in the writing of this article.

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