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# The Conflicts of Acts 1–8:3 in View of Recent Research on Religious Conflicts in Antiquity

## Part One: Theoretical Issues and Contested Domains

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### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In ihrem Bericht über die Ausbreitung der frühchristlichen Bewegung von Jerusalem nach Rom beinhaltet die Apostelgeschichte auch etliche Konflikte. Auf den ersten Blick scheinen diese religiöser Natur zu sein, da ja die christliche Botschaft auf die Religionen und Kulturen der jüdisch-hellenistischen römischen Welt trifft. Allerdings legen diese Konflikterzählungen nahe, dass auch andere Faktoren eine Rolle spielen. So stoßen wir in Apostelgeschichte 1–8:3 auf Themen

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### RÉSUMÉ

Dans son récit de l’essor du christianisme primitif de Jérusalem à Rome, le livre des Actes mentionne plusieurs cas de conflits. À première vue, ces conflits semblent avoir des motifs religieux, le message chrétien rencontrant les religions et les cultures du monde juif et du monde gréco-romain. Cependant, les récits de ces conflits suggèrent que d’autres facteurs étaient en cause. En Actes 1.1–8.3 apparaissent des questions d’autorité, d’influence et de contrôle concernant l’identité juive.

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### SUMMARY

In its account of the expansion of the early Christian movement from Jerusalem to Rome, the Book of Acts includes several instances of conflict. At first glance these conflicts appear to be 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. In Acts 1-8:3 we encounter issues of author-

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wie Autorität, Einfluss und Kontrolle über Identität. Der vorliegende Aufsatz folgt einer Tendenz in der jüngeren Forschung, die anerkennt, dass ein als inter-religiös bezeichneter Konflikt oft im Grunde innerreligiös ist und dass die auftretende Gewalt in vielen Fällen auf nicht-religiöse Faktoren zurückzuführen ist. Nach einer kurzen Vorstellung der jüngeren Ansätze, vor allem der Position von Wendy Mayer, bietet Teil Eins eine detaillierte Analyse der strittigen Punkte zwischen den Parteien in den beiden Konflikten von Apostelgeschichte 1–8:3, und zwar in Apg. 1–5 und 6–7.

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Cet ouvrage suit la tendance dans la recherche récente à considérer que ce qui se présente comme conflit inter-religieux est souvent, au fond, un conflit interne à une même religion et que les actes de violence perpétrés sont souvent dus à des facteurs non religieux. Après une brève présentation de la théorie récente, en particulier les thèses de Wendy Mayer, une première partie analyse dans le détail les points de désaccord entre les parties dans les deux conflits relatés au début des Actes, l’un en Actes 1-5 et l’autre en Actes 6-7.

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ity, influence and control over identity. This essay follows a trend in recent research to appreciate that conflict expressed 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, in particular the views of Wendy Mayer, Part One offers a detailed analysis of the contested domains between the parties in the two conflicts of Acts 1–8:3, namely, Acts 1–5 and Acts 6–7.

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## 1. Introduction: recent study of religious conflict in antiquity

### 1.1 Wendy Mayer

The Gospels describe conflicts of a varied nature between Jesus and various groups in his world – between his followers and between the Romans and various Jews.<sup>1</sup> The portrayal of conflict becomes even more prominent in the fifth narrative account in the New Testament, the Book of Acts. Many of its chapters contain all sorts of conflicts. Due to the purpose and focus of Acts, few of these conflicts are, at first glance, ‘non-religious’.<sup>2</sup> Acts offers a multifactorial portrayal of religious conflict of different types. Before we analyse the religious conflicts in Acts 1–8:3, several methodological issues require attention.

This essay is in two parts and is an exercise in applying recent theorising on religious conflict to the conflicts in Acts 1–8:3. What new aspects emerge when this conflict account is read from that perspective? For a number of reasons, most of them sad and disturbing, religious conflict has become a dominant theme in religious studies in the past decade.<sup>3</sup> This quest for religious conflict is part of a larger interdisciplinary interest in violence.<sup>4</sup>

To begin we turn for methodological clarification to the survey of the current discussion of religious conflict by Wendy Mayer in ‘Religious Conflict: Definitions, Problems and Theoretical Approaches’.<sup>5</sup> Concerning the range of issues involved, she argues that religious conflict

encompasses not just the physical domain (violent acts), but also the discursive (violent, i.e., hostile/hate-filled speech), raising questions about the precise relationship between these two forms, how each should be addressed, and the degree to which each is harmful to society. 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>6</sup>

Mayer emphasises the need for a correct definition of the concept of religious conflict<sup>7</sup> and she points out that

religious conflict is best described as a more

complex phenomenon that engages a combination of contested domains, including power, personality, space or place, and group identity. These contested domains should not be confused with enabling factors or conditions, which ... can be political, social, economic, cultural, and psychological. When both of these aspects are taken into consideration, we should be open to the possibility that, as a religion develops over time and/or as different enabling conditions come into play, different contested domains are accorded priority. A distinction should also be drawn between the root cause/s of the religious conflict (what is contested) and the way in which the conflict is discursively or narratively framed. That is, what a conflict is said to be about may differ significantly from what is actually being contested. We should be similarly open to the possibility that what is contested may be reframed retrospectively, just as it is also possible that what is not a conflict becomes viewed or framed as a conflict in hindsight and vice versa.<sup>8</sup>

Mayer goes on to note that *competition* between religions in the same environment ‘turns into *conflict* at the point when a particular domain/s become/s contested’.<sup>9</sup> The question of what identifies a conflict as *religious* depends on the definition of religion and determines how broadly or narrowly the investigation is focused. Mayer argues for a definition that is not restrictive. In this understanding, a 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>10</sup>

Mayer also observes that at the forefront of studies of religious conflict there is

a natural preoccupation with its most visual, newsworthy, and disruptive aspect – its expression in physical violence. Religious conflict is a much larger phenomenon, however, than religiously motivated violence, while even religious violence itself is not simple. The latter encompasses not just the physical domain (violent acts), but also the discursive (violent, i.e., hostile/hate-filled speech), raising questions about the precise relationship between these two forms, how each should be addressed, and the degree to which each is harmful to society.<sup>11</sup>

Later she adds that the *focus on violence* (one extreme form of religious conflict) often obscures broader questions about what occurs *before or apart from violence*, namely

the mechanisms at play in how conflict originates in the first instance, how it manifests in its early stages, the phenomenon of splintering into sub-groups (sectarianism) within a religion, and precisely what factors are operative in conflict escalation and de-escalation.<sup>12</sup>

We will include these broader questions and also examine what occurs before or apart from *violence* so that a comprehensive portrait of the conflicts of Acts 1–8:3 emerges.<sup>13</sup> Following Mayer’s observation, we will also examine *verbal* violence/conflict in these chapters.

## 1.2 Further observations

Three further observations are in order.

a. The conflicts in Acts 1–8:3 consist of two ‘rounds’ with different protagonists on both sides. The conflicts of Acts 1–5 involve the larger group of apostles (with their representatives, Peter and John) and the established Jewish aristocratic-priestly leadership. The conflict between Stephen and his fellow Diaspora Jewish Christians and the Jerusalem Hellenists, narrated in Acts 6–7, is located in the Diaspora Jewish community of Jerusalem (6:9). It focuses almost exclusively on Stephen and the leading people of a synagogue or synagogues of Diaspora Jews.<sup>14</sup> The general

Christian community and the broader population of Jerusalem are largely absent. Acts 6:8–8:3 is the most violent conflict account in the first half of Acts.<sup>15</sup> Like few other accounts in Acts, it addresses the

broader questions about what occurs before or apart from violence: the mechanisms at play in how conflict originates in the first instance, how it manifests in its early stages, the phenomenon of splintering into sub-groups (sectarianism) within a religion, and precisely what factors are operative in conflict escalation.<sup>16</sup>

In what follows we will distinguish between these rounds of conflict. Section A under each heading analyses Acts 1–5 whereas section B refers to Acts 6–8:3 in order to allow for comparison.

b. We need to keep in mind that Acts is the sequel to Luke’s Gospel. A number of the conflict accounts in Acts resemble those of the Gospel, and 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, endured and mastered by the main protagonists of Luke-Acts contribute to the overall purpose of Acts.<sup>17</sup>

c. We concentrate on the *literary portrayal* in Acts and do not discuss the historical validity of this portrayal or its contribution to the reconstruction of early Christian history.<sup>18</sup> Mayer rightly emphasises the usefulness of comparing literary sources with archaeological evidence,<sup>19</sup> but such a comparison is impossible for the conflict narrative of Acts 1–8:3.<sup>20</sup> At the most one could examine how *plausible* the portrayal of Acts is in view of the historical situation in Jerusalem in the 30s of the first century AD. One can also compare the accounts of Acts with the several other conflicts involving the religious leaders in Jerusalem of that time, which are mainly described by Flavius Josephus in *Bellum Judaicum*, written between AD 75 and 79.<sup>21</sup> However, Josephus has to be read with care, as he clearly pursues his own agendas in his reconstruction of the pre-history and the actual course of the war.

Building on Mayer’s observation 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),’<sup>22</sup> Part One of this essay

focuses on the *contested domains* between the parties of the conflicts in Acts 1–8:3. On the surface, *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 the identity and significance of Jesus. As these contested domains are often closely linked with the enabling conditions in conflicts – the contested domains are often also the enabling conditions, and the enabling conditions are (also) the contested domains – brief reference is made to them where appropriate.

On this basis, Part Two will analyse the enabling conditions in these conflicts in detail and will examine the traces of peaceful *co-existence* and *co-operation* as well as *transition* and *assimilation* between the conflicting parties in Acts 1–8:3 in order to achieve a complete picture and to place these conflict accounts in a broader context. Mayer rightly cautions that the focus on religious *conflict and violence* must not detract from issues such as conflict de-escalation and conflict resolution, peaceful co-existence and co-operation, and transition and assimilation.<sup>23</sup> Part Two also relates Acts to some insights of social identity and group theory. As ancient historiography not only intends to inform the readers about the past, but also wants to provide instructive examples and guidance for the present and the future, Part Two closes with some suggestions of how the conflicts of Acts 1–8:3 could be related to today’s religious conflicts.

## 2. ‘Contested domains’ in the conflict of Acts 1–8:3

According to Acts 4:5-6, the rulers, elders and scribes assemble in Jerusalem, along with Annas, the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander and other members 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>24</sup> They question the apostles standing in their midst and inquire directly what the origin and nature of their *authority* is: ‘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. Almost all of the contested domains in Acts 1–5 fall into the category of *authority*. In what follows, for the sake of

clarity, we separate closely related elements in the narrative portrayal of this conflict.

### 2.1 The heritage of Israel

A. The heritage of Israel as a contested domain concerns the ability and authority to claim this heritage for one’s own cause and to interpret the current events in view of the Scriptures. Those who do so and can do so gain credibility and legitimacy as they act in accordance with the heritage of Israel. In Acts 2 the apostles refute the slander of some and claim the correct interpretation of the publicly audible, Spirit-induced *glossolalia* of the followers of Jesus.<sup>25</sup> The event is a fulfilment of the prophecy in Joel 2:28-32. The Holy Spirit has come upon them and their followers. Large sections of the speeches of Acts 2 and 3 consist of direct quotations from the Old Testament in order to prove that Jesus, his death and his resurrection are a fulfilment of the Scriptures. These and other speeches also include allusions to the Old Testament.<sup>26</sup> 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.

B. The opponents of Stephen accuse him of identifying with and promoting the Jesus who is falsely charged with literally intending to destroy the temple and to change the customs of Moses. The Mosaic customs indicate the contested domain of interpreting and defining the heritage and identity of Israel. Of this sacred heritage Stephen’s opponents claim to be the true guardians, who will resist its destruction or modification. This concern gives them credibility and adds weight to their cause.

In his apology, Stephen provides his own selective and nuanced version of the history of Israel as one of failure and the rejection of God’s salvific purposes for his people. His speech is an interesting combination of claiming and appropriating the heritage of Israel for his own cause on the one hand, and of distancing himself from its problematic aspects, which are clearly addressed, on the other. Stephen claims the authority to interpret the present events in view of the history of Israel with its long established problematic patterns of responding to God. Stephen’s speech is not an exercise in history or rhetoric as he draws the implications from this reading of the past for the present audience (7:51-53): they better not repeat the mistakes of the past, but repent and accept God’s envoys.

Recalling the reaction of the council in Acts 5:33, Stephen's interpretation of the past and present of Israel prompts a strong reaction: when his opponents 'heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him' (7:54). They vigorously disagree with and reject Stephen's presentation and interpretation of the contested domain of the heritage of Israel and his application to the present audience in verses 51-53. However, the interruption of his speech comes only after Stephen shares his vision.<sup>27</sup>

In the portrayal of Acts, the opponents of the apostles and of Stephen do not explicitly claim or attempt to re-claim the heritage of Israel for their cause. Their lack of concern or sheer inability to do so legitimately and persuasively disqualifies them as leaders. The one exception is the Pharisee Gamaliel whose counsel for moderation ends the first round of conflict (5:34-39). Like Stephen, Gamaliel interprets the present conflict in view of the past (the fate of Theudas and Judas the Galilean and their followers allows for calmness in the present, Acts 5:36-37). Stephen refers to biblical history up to Solomon; Gamaliel to events of recent decades. Both refer to leading figures of the past.

## 2.2 The identity, fate and significance of Jesus of Nazareth

A. Contested authority also concerns the proper interpretation of the contested domain of the identity, fate and significance of Jesus and the conclusions that should be drawn from it, that is, repentance and faith.<sup>28</sup> 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 were witnesses. Jesus was exalted to the right hand of God, received the Holy Spirit and bestowed the Spirit on his followers. God made him both Lord and Messiah (2:22-36). God glorified his Servant Jesus and raised the author of life from the dead. Jesus still works miracles, which is proof of his resurrection and exaltation. 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 assessment of Jesus, the interpretation of Scripture plays a crucial role (see above).

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 from the religious leaders 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>29</sup> According to Schnabel, 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>30</sup> took place recently and thus before the day of general resurrection of the dead; as a result, the Pharisees would have been annoyed also'.<sup>31</sup> In Acts 1–8:3, this is the only direct authorial reference to a specifically religious or doctrinal content of the conflicts. Peter ends with an exclusive claim for the Jesus who was rejected but divinely affirmed by his resurrection (4:12). The apostles' miracles are understood to be proof of the resurrection of Jesus and his *present* authority and power and claim to leadership and veneration (so already in Acts 3:16)! The apostles are faithful witnesses to Jesus and his significance as they had been commissioned (1:8).<sup>32</sup> This faithfulness indicates their credibility and loyalty.

There is diametric opposition between the evaluation of Jesus by the leaders and by the apostles; the apostles explicitly address and criticise the leaders' false assessment of Jesus. They not only charge the people with the rejection and murder of Jesus (second person plural in 3:13-16), but also explicitly include 'the rulers' (3:17, although ignorance is conceded) in this outrageous spiritual failure. Their call to repent (3:19) and warning of stern consequences of failing to do so also includes the leaders (3:26; 'by turning each of you from your wicked ways') 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' (4:10-11). The leaders had killed Jesus by hanging him on a tree (5:30). Schnabel notes that the words of Peter and John imply 'that the Jewish authorities had made a serious mistake and would have provoked the Jewish authorities, irrespective of their theological orientation'.<sup>33</sup> The leaders are discredited by their misjudgement and

rejection of Jesus and their failure to revise this false assessment and to believe in him in view of God's affirmation of Jesus.<sup>34</sup>

The leaders neither interact with the claims of the apostles regarding Jesus nor attempt to defend their past actions. For them, Jesus was and continues to be merely 'this man' (5:28), whom they rightly put to death and who is not worthy of particular attention or re-consideration. What annoys them is the fact that the apostles proclaim that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead (4:2).

B. The contested domain of the identity and significance of Jesus is not prominent in the Stephen episode. On the surface, the contested domain comprises the great wonders and signs of Stephen among the people and (presumably) their implications for his status in the Diaspora Jewish community (see below). The readers will assume that – similar to the apostles – Stephen's miracles are closely linked to Jesus and that Stephen would make this link as the apostles do either in the actual miracle or in its explanation (Acts 3:6, 11-16). Acts 6:9 does not mention that the dispute is because of the contested domain of Jesus. When his opponents from the synagogue(s) of Diaspora Jews (6:10) cannot prevail against Stephen's wisdom and the Spirit in which he was speaking (these qualities only become manifest in the controversy), they instigate false witnesses who charge Stephen with speaking against Moses, God, the temple and the law. In contrast to the earlier conflict, the initial charges levelled against him (6:11) have nothing to do with Jesus or Stephen's testimony to him. Only when the people, the elders and the scribes accuse Stephen before the council, is Jesus mentioned directly: '... for we heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us' (6:14, both clear misunderstandings of the real intentions of Jesus). This – at best – neutral and probably derogatory way of referring to Jesus ('this Jesus') indicates that the speakers do not share the high regard of Jesus of the Christian community, which refers to him differently. Jesus is charged not only with claiming, but also intending to destroy the domain of space/place (the temple), which was hitherto uncontested (see below). With this charge (and that of changing the law), the opponents present themselves as the legitimate guardians of the heritage of Israel. They do so when it suits their own agenda and rhetorical needs.

At the end of his speech, Stephen briefly refers to Jesus as 'the Righteous One' (7:52). In doing so he repeats the earlier accusation by the apostles: the leaders (the council is addressed) have betrayed and murdered this *righteous* person (see 3:14; this way of referring to Jesus indicates continuity between Stephen and the apostles, as do his miracles). The leaders not only failed to administer justice to an innocent person (although *righteous* here means more than innocent<sup>35</sup>), but also completely misjudged Jesus as a further envoy of God to his people. In this way, they once more resisted the Holy Spirit (7:51). Through this misjudgement and its consequences (culminating in the betrayal and murder of Jesus) the leaders stand in the long tradition of resistance to God's purposes for his people and Israel's rejection of the envoys of God, including the apostles and other Christians. Because of their failure and their refusal to repent, they relinquish their legitimacy as leaders. Stephen's vision of heaven opened testifies that Jesus is risen and exalted to the highest conceivable position of honour, 'standing at the right hand of God' (7:55).<sup>36</sup> This vision in the fullness of the Holy Spirit proves the contested resurrection. The story of Jesus – and of his followers – is far from over.

Stephen is able to properly assess and testify to the identity and real intentions of Jesus, not his opponents. He can genuinely relate Jesus to Israel's past, its sacred tradition and to God's purposes for his people.

### 2.3 The privilege and duty of instructing the people of God

A. Closely related to the contested domain of Jesus is the contested authority to instruct 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 a general word for a people or a crowd of people, but – in particular in Luke-Acts – it is the technical term for the people of God.<sup>37</sup> Addressing this people in spiritual and other matters and explaining authoritatively current events 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>38</sup>

Later an angel commands the apostles: '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 now to re-enter the temple precincts and do the opposite of what they had been instructed to do by the leaders (4:18). This divine order leaves no room for a change in behaviour, location, audience or message, and thus no room for compromise or a de-escalation of this mounting conflict. The apostles obey promptly ('When they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and went on with their *teaching*', 5:21) and the conflict escalates.<sup>39</sup> While there are attempts at de-escalation on the part of the leaders (4:18, 21; 5:39-40), the apostles are unwilling and unable to budge. Their behaviour is presented as exemplary.

The apostles take this course of action because they were commissioned by Jesus to be his witnesses (1:8). They obediently fulfil this commission, regardless of human authority and of consequences. When ordered not to teach at all in the name of Jesus (4:17-18), 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 are in concord with the will of God (4:19-20). They fundamentally question the leaders' authority. They cannot be prevented from speaking about what they have seen and heard (4:20) and will continue as they were commissioned (5:20).

The people listen to the apostles and many repent and join the Christian community. 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 the proclamation offensive (resurrection), but also the very fact that *they* 'are teaching the people', thus claiming for themselves the prerogatives and duties of the religious establishment.<sup>40</sup> This reference to emotions (*διαπονέομαι*) and their occasion opens the account of the clash between the apostles and the leaders in Acts 4–5. 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 once again brought before the leaders, who 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>41</sup> – and the proclamation regarding Jesus does not spread further among the people (4:17; however, others also spread the news; see also 5:28-29). The 'enabling conditions' on the side of

the leaders (warning, orders, arrest and imprisonment) are of no avail.

B. In Stephen's case, the privilege and duty of instruction is not a contested domain between the parties to this conflict. Stephen is portrayed as an office-bearer *within* the Christian community (chosen to serve at the tables) and not as instructing others. The disputes with his opponents arise due to his great wonders and signs *among the people* (emphasising their public nature), not due to public instruction of the people. It does not become clear whether and to what extent these miracles are related to instruction (see below). In these disputes Stephen is superior to his opponents due to his wisdom and the Spirit in which he was speaking (6:3, 10). The opponents charge him before the council not with his miracles (cf. the charge against Jesus of co-operating with Beelzebul; Luke 11:14–23), but with *speaking* blasphemously (6:11; 'we had heard him say ...', v. 14). It is difficult to assess whether this false charge refers to the allegedly blasphemous content only or also extends to the mere fact of speaking. Stephen's *speech of defence* is addressed to the council (7:1), not the people at large. It is not clear from Acts 6:15 ('all who sat in the council') and 7:1 whether the accusers of Stephen and the people whom they succeed in instigating ('the people and the elders and the scribes', including the false witnesses, 7:12-13) are among the audience of Stephen's apology.

## 2.4 Authority in other spiritual matters

A. Also contested is authority in other spiritual matters. The miracle of Pentecost, the reception of the eschatological divine Spirit, indicates the identity of the true people of God.<sup>42</sup> The Holy Spirit is given to those who obey God (5:32). The apostles can claim the Spirit for themselves and their followers.

The miracles of the apostles are in themselves a strong claim to authority and to divine authentication and 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>43</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). They heal a man lame from birth in the temple precinct (3:2-7). Many further public miracles, some of them spectacular (5:15-16), not



limited to the community of the followers of Jesus, affirm the divine commission of the apostles. (Cf. 5:12: ‘many signs and wonders ... done among *the people*’, again allowing the apostles to lay claim to *the people*.) The people benefit from the apostles, not the established leaders.

The conflict also gains momentum as more and more people join the Christian community, thereby increasing the status and influence of the apostles as leaders of this community at the expense of the established 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 (‘day by day the Lord added’, 2:47).<sup>44</sup> The growth of the community is presented as divine affirmation and approval, and as authorisation of its leaders.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit and by the miracles in the name of Jesus, the apostles challenge the religious leaders who cannot claim audible possession of the Spirit or any miracles for themselves: for many years they were unable to help the lame man in the temple precinct (3:2). The people and the direct beneficiaries are impressed, bring sick and possessed people to the apostles (5:15-16), and understand the miracles as affirmation (3:8-11; 5:11, 13). The leaders cannot but acknowledge the miracles of the apostles: ‘they had nothing to say in opposition’ (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 who observe this show-down (4:16, 21). The established leaders’ attempt to keep the news of the miracle of Acts 3 from spreading is futile (4:17, 21).

B. Stephen is portrayed as a public miracle worker equal to the apostles. No details regarding the nature of his ‘great wonders and signs among the people’ (6:8) are given (as e.g. in Acts 3 or 5:12-16).<sup>45</sup> These miracles bring his opponents onto the scene. The context does not indicate why such miracles constitute a contested domain. According to Acts 2:22, the performance of mighty works, wonders and signs constitutes divine attestation: ‘Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst ...’ (see also 4:14: ‘But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in oppo-

sition’, also v. 21-22). Did Stephen’s miracles affirm the validity of his own proclamation and that of his community? Did these miracles lead to a position in the Diaspora Jewish community of Jerusalem (and perhaps beyond?) which his opponents were unwilling to concede to him? Was he seen as a competitor?

Stephen’s interaction with his opponents is characterised by wisdom and guidance by the Holy Spirit (6:3, 10). These qualities, both Old Testament motifs, further affirm him and enhance his authority in spiritual matters, including his interpretation of Israel’s past and present failures. His opponents cannot withstand these qualities.

Divine approval of Stephen for all to perceive becomes apparent in two details that frame his speech: as he stands on trial and is falsely accused, his face is like the face of an angel (6:15), recalling the shining face of Moses who plays a significant role in the speech (Ex 34:29-35; 2 Cor 3). This appearance is noted by ‘all who sat in the council’, but not challenged.

At the end of his speech, Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, is granted a vision of heaven and of the glory of God: ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God’ (7:56). This declaration is highly contested and meets with immediate fierce resistance: ‘But they cried out with a loud voice [so that Stephen could not continue] and stopped their ears [so that they would not hear his words] and rushed together at him [so that he could not continue to speak]’ (7:57). His opponents forcefully reject Stephen’s claim and the divine approval that he receives for his ministry, his interpretation of the history of Israel, and his scathing analysis of the audience: somebody like him will definitely not see heavens opened, and will not see the Son of Man and most certainly not God. This is so obvious to them that no further explanation is needed. For his opponents, Stephen’s claim is blasphemy. They do not engage in an objective and factual dispute or attempt to refute his presentation and analysis of the past and present situation. Unable to oppose him, they immediately resort to violence.

## 2.5 Contested leadership of the people of God

A. All of these contested domains are related to *legitimate leadership*. Through their obedience to the commission of Jesus, their faithful ministry and the divine affirmation and legitimisation that they receive repeatedly, the apostles are inaugurated and affirmed as the new and legitimate lead-

ers of the people of God.<sup>46</sup> This applies not only to the Christian community as the people of God restored through the ministry of Jesus and of the apostles, but also to other Jews whom the apostles address, teach, call to repentance, heal, initiate and include in the community. The apostles claim the contested domain of defining the identity of the people of God and its embodiment in their community.

While the apostles act (teaching, leading, performing miracles) with authority and claim leadership, they deny that they do so on their *own* authority and readily acknowledge their dependence on God and Jesus: it was not their authority that healed the man, but the name/authority of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ (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*'. Although Peter formally acknowledges the authority of the leaders ('Rulers of the people and elders', 4:8), the apostles refuse to follow their orders. Through their proclamation, the apostles subvert the authority of the leaders who had disqualified themselves by crucifying Jesus, God's Messiah (3:17; 4:10). They had rejected the stone that has become the corner stone by divine appointment although God undid their murder by raising Jesus from the dead (4:10). As they refuse to repent, the leaders are under condemnation and await divine judgement (see the different reaction in Acts 2:36-37).

The apostles refuse to be silenced by the leaders' explicit charge (4:18) and leave no doubt about their rejection of the leaders' authority (4:19; 5:29: 'We must obey God rather than any human authority').

The apostles as legitimate leaders receive recognition and the 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 (not for delivery, 4:29) and for further divine affirmation through signs and wonders (4:30). In response, there is the assurance 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. All these characteristics and events reflect positively on the apostles as

leaders of this community.

In addition, impressive miraculous powers in healing and in judgement are available to them. They are miraculously liberated from the stronghold of their opponents (5:18-19). Even the temple police become reluctant to use violence against the apostles (5:26; intertextually recalling the Elijah episode in 2 Kings 1:9-15).<sup>47</sup>

The people of Jerusalem outside the Christian community join it 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).

The priests, the captain of the temple and the Sadducees arrest Peter and John (4:3).<sup>48</sup> 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).<sup>49</sup> They cannot deny the miracles performed by the apostles. They react with jealousy: 'Then the high priest took action; he and all who were with him (that is, the sect of the Sadducees),<sup>50</sup> being filled with jealousy' regarding the authority, miraculous powers and popular esteem of the apostles (5:17). This is the only instance in Acts 1-8:3 where a *non-religious motive* behind what is a *religious* conflict on the front stage is directly revealed.

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 a *public* prison (5:18, ἐν τηρήσει δημοσίᾳ) and thus humiliated. Acts 5:21-26 describe 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 to do by the leaders (5:25). They enjoy such popular support that the captain and the temple police (the executive power of the leaders) are afraid of being stoned by the people (5:26). Their choice of options on their own premises becomes restricted: using violence is no longer feasible. The account stresses the public nature of this conflict (so already in Acts 4:16: that a notable sign has been done through the apostles, not through the established leaders, is obvious to 'all who live in Jerusalem').

The authority of the religious leaders is profoundly challenged and eventually destroyed: again they reject the men who act in God's name and receive his affirmation (miraculous liberation

and angelic commission). The apostles are again brought before the authorities. The high priest's brief summary of the development is sobering (5:28): 'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to bring this man's blood on us.' The leaders are forced to acknowledge the achievements and determination of the apostles. They have no means left to enforce their orders.

In response, the apostles reject the authority of the leaders outright: to obey them would mean to disobey God, which is not an option (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 their spiritual qualification and discredit them as leaders of God's people.<sup>51</sup> However, repentance and forgiveness can still be expected from this rejected Jesus (5:31, an indirect critique of remission of sins through the temple cult and those working there?). The apostles have the Holy Spirit (5:32), which is given only to those who obey God; the religious leaders are not in this category. The apostles' critique of their opponents is devastating.

The conflict escalates further and threatens to become physically violent again: 'And when the leaders heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them' (5:33). Further action and the intended execution of the apostles are prevented only by Gamaliel's intervention.<sup>52</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>53</sup> He cools down tempers, pleads for caution (5:35) and refers to two conflicts of the past. In view of the outcomes of these events, Gamaliel recommends keeping away from the apostles, as their movement will fail if merely 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.

Gamaliel's counsel reveals wisdom and tolerance, but also a measure of frustration: none of the means available to the leaders – the 'enabling conditions' on their side in this conflict (other than killing without involving the Romans) – can be and has been employed successfully so far. Following Gamaliel's speech the apostles are flogged (a means still available to the leaders, at least when not done in public) and then again ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus (5:40

– the contested domain of instruction). The flogging is a demonstration of the power of the leaders, punishment for repeatedly defying the leaders' authority and an act of humiliation. This decision and action brings the 'first round' of religious conflict in Acts to an end. Although they suffered verbal and physical violence, the apostles continue undisturbed with what they have been commissioned to do: 'And every day in the temple and at home [i.e. throughout the city] they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah' (5:42). The conflict ends in a stalemate: neither side is able to persuade or prevail against the other.

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: 'Did we not sternly command you to stop teaching in this name?' With respect to action, the deeds of the authorities are pregnant with meaning. Thus in vv. 17-18 they imprisoned 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. Another means of indirect presentation is the spatial environment of the Jerusalem leaders. 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>54</sup>

Without success, the religious leaders attempt to defend and regain their position of leadership. They appear separated from the majority of 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, for example by defending their decision regarding Jesus, by denying his resurrection or by referring to the apostles' questionable origin (Galileans), lack of proper training (4:13) or

stubbornness. While the leaders do not seriously defend other contested domains in this conflict, they are determined to defend their leadership role. They come across as more concerned with regaining and maintaining their power than with the contents of this role or of the claims of the apostles.

B. At first glance, leadership is not a contested domain in the Stephen episode. Stephen is portrayed as an office-bearer *within* the Christian community (serving at the tables) and not in a position of leadership for the fraction of Diaspora Jewish Christians, for the whole Christian community or for the general populace of Jerusalem. Resistance arises due to Stephen's miracles, not due to his prominence or claims to leadership. His opponents charge him before the council not for claiming leadership, but for *speaking* blasphemously (6:11, 14). Acts does not mention followers of Stephen or public recognition.

However, there are some links. Stephen's great signs and wonders among *the people* (not only within the Christian community) affirm him, indicate divine approval of him (see above) and qualify him as a leader. His opponents in the Diaspora synagogues of Jerusalem were probably less concerned with his miracles as such (see 4:14-22) than with the status which accrued to him and perhaps other Diaspora Jewish Christians because of them. That status implied a leadership role in the Diaspora Jewish community. Not sharing the experiences of the leaders in the first round of conflict and not bound to the earlier decision reached by the council at the end of chapter 5, this perceived claim to status is what they confront. In his apology, Stephen appears as a person fully cognisant of the heritage of Israel and able to interpret the present in the light of it. He would be able to give guidance as to the proper reaction in the present.

That Stephen was not lonesome but rather a prominent figure in the Christian community is also implied by the measures taken after his death. The conflict is extended to all Christians except the apostles in Acts 8:1: all suffer under a great persecution and are scattered.<sup>55</sup> Those who try to remain behind end up in prison. His opponents cast Stephen out of the city and stone him (7:58); devout men come and bury his body and lament over him (8:2).

## 2.6 Public recognition/honour

A. There are no leaders without followers. Hand in hand with the contested domain of leadership goes public recognition/honour as a final contested domain. The apostles are recognised as leaders within their own community and by the broader public, which holds them in high esteem or openly sides with them. They can claim a large and ever increasing following. Because of their miracles and the popular support they receive (4:21, 'finding no way to punish them *because of the people, for all of them ...*'), the conflict does not escalate at this point. The people realise that the apostles – rather than their opponents – are divinely appointed, affirmed and working on God's behalf. Despite officially holding positions of power, the religious leaders lack public support in their assessment of the apostles and for their interventions against the apostles. Their choice of means becomes limited as they need to consider the public view (5:26).<sup>56</sup>

The apostles continue to receive recognition by their adherents and the broader public ('the people held *them* in high esteem', not the established leaders!, 5:13) in Jerusalem and also from the surrounding areas (5:16). Even there, their authority and supernatural abilities are recognised. There is even a 'holy fear' of them (5:13, a familiar reaction in Old Testament and early Jewish accounts of encounters with the divine).

The community led by the apostles even receives affirmation through an earthquake. In this way God indicates that he hears their prayer and is on their side (4:31). The resolution of the inner-community conflict of Acts 5:1-11 (the supernatural death of Ananias and Sapphira) becomes publicly known and contributes to the reputation of the apostles. They receive further affirmation as a result of their miraculous liberation from the public stronghold of their opponents by an angel from the Lord who intervenes on their behalf, not on the side of their opponents (5:19). The apostles have their own way of coping with the dishonour which they experience (5:41).

With the exception of the Pharisee Gamaliel, who is described as 'held in honour by all the people' (5:34) and who calls for moderation, the opponents do not receive human or divine recognition/honour. According to Padilla, the main 'cultural script' influencing the narrative is that of honour/shame. He argues that the social setting 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>57</sup>

B. Although Stephen was of great renown in the Christian community (6:3–6), Acts does not mention followers of Stephen or public recognition/honour. His great wonders and signs *among the people* will have led to such recognition. His opponents challenge his miracles and/or the status (claims) arising from them. Unable to win the dispute, they resort to secret instigation and false charges, bringing him before the council. Stephen's miracles *among the people* stand in contrast to the *secret* instigation of his opponents.

While in the previous episode the people are without wavering on the side of the apostles (an enabling condition on their side which limits the options available to the religious leaders), *the people* (or at least some of the people, possibly the or some of the Diaspora Jewish community of Jerusalem) follow Stephen's opponents who 'stir up the people and the elders and the scribes and they [including the people?] came upon Stephen and seized him and brought him before the council' (6:12). The instigation of the opponents and/or concern for the allegedly threatened space/place of the temple and the law (domains which were not contested earlier on) outweigh admiration and gratitude for Stephen's miracles. In Stephen's death popular recognition is no limiting factor that his opponents have to take into consideration.<sup>58</sup>

Up to his martyrdom, Stephen appears as a solitary figure, yet the great persecution against the church which arises after his death (8:1) suggests that he was well grounded in the Christian community (this is clear from 6:1–7) and seen as its representative, not as an exceptional figure. That the apostles can stay behind in Jerusalem (8:1)

suggests that the primary focus of the persecution were the Diaspora Jewish members of the Christian community. The 'devout men' who buried Stephen (8:2) are not explicitly identified as belonging to the Christian community. If they did, the Christian community fully identifies with Stephen and honours him with a proper burial. If not, the note indicates that not all the people approved of Stephen's death.

## 2.7 Evaluation

How do these contested domains relate to the five domains in religious conflicts listed by Mayer, namely ideology/morality, power, personality, space/place and group identity? While the contested domains of ideology/morality, power and group identity are amply reflected in the above discussion, it is noteworthy that – due to the literary character of Acts – *personality* does not play a role in Acts 1–8:3. The absence of the contested domain of *personality* is due to the portrayal of this conflict as a conflict between groups (with the exception of Stephen) even though groups in narratives can display a nuanced character.<sup>59</sup> In addition, the protagonists of the narrative are so-called 'flat characters'.<sup>60</sup> Flat characters in narratives have few traits and their behaviour is predictable. 'They are "types" and "caricatures" that are constructed around a single trait or idea ... The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way.'<sup>61</sup> With his surprising and convincing counsel in Acts 5:35–39, Gamaliel comes close to being a 'round' character. Due to the focus on Stephen in Acts 6–7, some aspects of his personality emerge. He also 'surprises' to some extent: elected and ordained to serve at the tables in Acts 6:1–7, he emerges in the remainder of the episode as a miracle worker, an expert in the history of Israel and a bold preacher. No details are given of his ministry 'at the tables'. The relationship between the apostles' and the religious leaders' words and deeds and their personality is not addressed and does not play a role.

The contested domains of *space/place* play a role both in Acts 1–5 and in Acts 6–7, but to a varying extent. The city of Jerusalem and, in particular, the temple precinct in themselves are *not* among the contested domains in Acts 1–5, because the apostles as Jews have every right to be in Jerusalem and to access the temple precincts. Like other Jews, the apostles go there to pray (3:1) and this right is not questioned by their opponents. The leaders do not order the apostles to leave Jerusalem, scatter

them or deport them from there. (This may be due to their popularity or a lack of power on the side of the leaders.) 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 (e.g., by public teaching or performing miracles) poses a direct challenge to the leaders.

Whereas the Christian community gathers there and the apostles teach the people (a task and privilege of the leaders) and perform miracles, they do not claim the priestly prerogatives and duties of the religious leaders, that is, they do not cleanse the temple as Jesus did (Luke 19:45–48) or interfere with the cult, for example by entering the court of the priests. Neither do the apostles claim direct political power over the established Jewish leadership, as was the case with various zealots during the first Jewish war of AD 66–73.<sup>62</sup>

The opponents of Stephen *falsely* charge him with speaking against the temple. They link this charge with Jesus' announcement of the destruction of the temple. When understood literally (as the charge implies),<sup>63</sup> such an intention constitutes an extreme position regarding the sanctuary. They associate Stephen with the intentions of Jesus: Stephen not only refers to the words of Jesus but apparently favours such intentions himself and offers verbal support: 'This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place' (6:14). By making this space/place (together with God, Moses and the Law) the contested domain between Stephen (and other followers of Jesus who then have to be and are persecuted and removed) on one side and themselves and the broader population of Jerusalem on the other, his opponents manage to rally popular support against him. Stephen addresses the significance, legitimacy, proper use and limits of the temple in his apology. The apostles were not commanded to leave Jerusalem or driven out by their opponents, but after Stephen's death, the right of Christians to the temple and the city is violently repudiated by their opponents (the active agents behind this passive verb form): 'and they were all scattered throughout the regions Judea and Samaria'. Acts 9 indicates that this persecution extends beyond the Jewish heartland to the Diaspora. The apostles are no longer seen as a threat and can stay behind in Jerusalem.

This is not the place for a detailed comparison between the two 'rounds' of conflict in Acts 1–8:3. Any comparison needs to take into account that

the author of Acts may not repeat in later chapters what was said earlier, but will simply presuppose the same concerns and contents for other people and places. For example, the typical life of the Christian community is described in Acts 2:42–47; what is said there may be assumed for other places. Or, as Paul's speech in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia is presented in detail (13:16–41), short summaries suffice regarding his synagogue preaching at other places (e.g., 17:1–3; 18:4). At least some of what is said about the apostles and their ministry in Jerusalem will also apply to Stephen and other Christians in Jerusalem.

Here our focus is on the *contested domains*. There are different ways of claiming the heritage of Israel by the Christian protagonists; both the apostles and Stephen do so in detail. Their opponents neither present nor defend their claims. Only when they cannot prevail against Stephen in dispute, they falsely charge him with threatening the position of God, Moses and the temple. The proper interpretation of the identity and significance of Jesus is a major contested domain in Acts 1–5; it is less so in Acts 6–7. What is contested there are the alleged intentions of Jesus regarding the temple and the Mosaic Law. Stephen does not directly address these charges. Other than this false charge, the opponents in both rounds do not present or defend their understanding of Jesus. The privilege and duty of instructing the people is contested by the apostles and the religious leaders. It does not directly appear in the Stephen episode; neither he nor his opponents are explicitly portrayed as instructing the people or intending to do so. The domain of other spiritual qualifications is disputed in both rounds. While the qualifications of the Christian protagonists are lavishly described and divinely affirmed, the opponents lack wisdom, the Holy Spirit and the ability to perform miracles, and they reject the apostles and Stephen. They have to resort to other means (false charges). The claims to leadership of God's people and public recognition/honour play a major role in Acts 1–5 and are virtually absent from Acts 6–7.

The above brief comparison of the contested domains in both rounds of conflict indicates that in religious conflicts, even at the same place and involving people/representatives from the same communities, different domains can be contested. The overtly and distinctive *religious* element is the conflicting assessment of Jesus, mainly his resurrection. Otherwise and closely related to it, the conflicts of Acts 1–8:3 concern various aspects of

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 popular recognition and divine affirmation. They refuse to submit to the authority of the religious leaders. In Luke’s portrayal of this conflict the religious leaders increasingly de-construct themselves and become the negative backdrop for the apostles, who emerge as the divinely affirmed new leaders of Israel. At least some of what is said here regarding the first ‘round’ also applies to the Stephen episode.

In the portrayal of Acts, the actual content of Christian identity and proclamation is only one of several factors. Acts 1–8:3 paints a nuanced picture of religious conflict, indicating directly and indirectly that in these conflicts non-religious factors 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 (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 of the leaders. In the context of this conflict, Luke also mentions jealousy as a motive on the part of the leaders (4:17).

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>64</sup>

Other aspects of the conflicts of Acts 1–8:3 will be examined in Part Two of this essay. For a comprehensive portrayal and a proper assessment of religious conflict in the Book of Acts, the other conflicts in Acts – several of them extended conflicts – would also need to be considered. While there is continuity in Acts 8–28, other domains also become contested as the parties and places of conflict change.

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## Endnotes

- 1 An early narrative study of the Gospel of Mark was Jack D. Kingsbury’s *Conflict in Mark. Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989).
- 2 See Robert Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts* (FRLANT 126; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982).
- 3 For a convenient survey of recent contributions see Wendy Mayer, ‘Religious Conflict. Definitions, Problems and Theoretical Approaches’ in W. Mayer and B. Neil (eds), *Religious Conflict from Early Christianity to the Rise of Islam* (AKG 121; Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 2013) 1-19; on religion and violence in general see Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts and Michael Jerryson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- 4 For a survey see Christian Gudehus and Michaela Christ (eds), *Gewalt. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch* (Stuttgart, Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2013).
- 5 Cf. note 3.
- 6 Mayer, ‘Religious Conflict’, 1-2.
- 7 Mayer, ‘Religious Conflict’, 2.
- 8 Mayer, ‘Religious Conflict’, 3.
- 9 Mayer, ‘Religious Conflict’, 4, italics CS. She continues: ‘Where this becomes complicated is that the two categories are not necessarily exclusive. If we consider the case of two religions competing for converts in the religious market place, two groups can be focused toward each other in conflict, while simultaneously maintaining an outward focus towards potential converts as competitive rivals’ (4).
- 10 Mayer, ‘Religious Conflict’, 5.
- 11 Mayer, ‘Religious Conflict’, 1.
- 12 Mayer, ‘Religious Conflict’, 19, italics CS.
- 13 Physical violence occurs in Acts 5:40. Once the leaders’ intention of killing the apostles is thwarted by Gamaliel’s counsel, the apostles are released after being flogged. It also appears in the seizure and stoning of Stephen (6:12; 7:57-58) and in the subsequent broader persecution (8:1-3).
- 14 On Stephen see Klaus Haacker, *Stephanus. Verleumdeter, verehrt, verkannt* (Biblische Gestalten 28; Leipzig: EVA, 2014). Other Christians appear only in 8:1-3.
- 15 In the second half of Acts, the account of the cir-

circumstances of Paul's arrest, the actual arrest and the ensuing narrative of various trials is the longest conflict account (depending on the definition of conflict).

- 16 Mayer, 'Religious Conflict', 19.
- 17 See Walter Radl, *Paulus und Jesus im lukanischen Doppelwerk. Untersuchungen zu Parallelmotiven im Lukasevangelium und in der Apostelgeschichte* (Frankfurt, Bern, New York: Peter Lang, 1975).
- 18 Mayer, 'Religious Conflict', 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 recent surveys of the issues see Knut Backhaus and Gert Häfner (eds), *Historiographie und fiktionales Erzählen. Zu Konstruktivität in Geschichtstheorie und Exegese* (BThSt 86; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2007) and Jörg Frey, Clare K. Rothschild and Jens Schröter (eds), *Die Apostelgeschichte im Kontext antiker und frühchristlicher Historiographie* (BZNW 162; Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 2009). Cf. the approach taken in Christoph Stenschke, "... sandten die Apostel zu ihnen Petrus und Johannes" (Apg 8:10). Überörtliche Verbindungen der urchristlichen Gemeinden in der Darstellung der Apostelgeschichte des Lukas', *ETbL* 87 (2011) (433-453) 449-453 in assessing Acts' portrayal of translocal links in early Christianity.
- 19 Mayer, 'Religious Conflict', 16, who writes:  
Driven by recent archaeological research, scholars now see events that were previously viewed as catastrophic (on the basis of literary sources) as effecting an administrative change in the eastern half of the Mediterranean world that had a relatively soft impact. Economies and trade, for the most part, continued to prosper. This change in the historical view undermines the impression of conflict and apocalypse promoted by the dominant discourse.
- This also applies to the literary portrayal in Acts. Despite massive conflicts in the first half of Acts, most Jewish Christians are able to live in Jerusalem.
- 20 Other information in Acts has been favourably compared with literary and non-literary sources from the ancient world; for a thorough comparison see Colin Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, C.H. Gempf (ed.) (WUNT 49; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1989; also Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990).
- 21 For a survey of other sources see Emil Schürer, Geza Vermes and Fergus Millar, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 BC – AD 135)*, vol. I (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973) 17-122. For Josephus and his works see the entries in John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (eds), *Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2010) 828-841. One

instance is the appearance of the prophet of doom, Jesus son of Hananiah, in the years before AD 70 (see Josephus, *Bell.* 6,300-309). Although he was arrested and severely beaten by the leading citizens, Jesus would not stop. When brought before the Roman governor Albinus and flayed to the bone with scourges, 'he neither sued for mercy nor shed a tear, but, merely introducing the most mournful of variations into his ejaculation, responded to each stroke with "Woe to Jerusalem!". When Albinus ... asked him who and whence he was and why he uttered these cries, he answered him never a word, but unceasingly reiterated his dirge over the city until Albinus pronounced him a maniac and let him go'. Jesus continued without compromise for more than seven years. Despite Albinus' verdict, Jesus was beaten daily (presumably by the leading citizens). Other people offered him food. In contrast to the apostles and other groups, but similar to Stephen, Jesus did not have a following and showed no interest in gathering one. His message was limited to oracles of doom.

- 22 Mayer, 'Religious Conflict', 3, italics CS.
- 23 Mayer, 'Religious Conflict', 17-18.
- 24 For their identity see Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012) 236-237, and C.K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles I* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994) 222-225.
- 25 The slanderers are not identified as the leaders who feature as opponents in Acts 4-5.
- 26 For a survey of the Old Testament in Acts see I. Howard Marshall, 'Acts' in G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson (eds), *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Nottingham: IVP, 2007) 513-607.
- 27 See below; for the significance of interruptions of speeches in Acts see Daniel L. Smith, *The Rhetoric of Interruption. Speech-Making, Turn-Taking, and Rule-Breaking in Luke-Acts and Ancient Greek Narrative* (BZNW 193; Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 2012).
- 28 In this context Acts refers to the conflict regarding the identity and role of Jesus in Luke's Gospel.
- 29 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 (Luke 14:14; 20:35-36; Acts 23:8-9; 24:15, 21). Only the Sadducees are said to reject a resurrection (Luke 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. Nickelsburg, 'Resurrection' in Collins & Harlow, *Dictionary of Early Judaism*, 1142-1144.
- 30 Schnabel, *Acts*, 234, n. 6:  
The phrase *in Jesus* can be interpreted as (1) 'in the case of Jesus', that is, 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) ‘by means of’, that is, the apostles proclaim the resurrection of the dead by means of the story of Jesus. These are not mutually exclusive alternatives.
- 31 Schnabel, *Acts*, 234.
- 32 On the witness motif in Acts see Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (SNTS.MS 31; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 128-153.
- 33 Schnabel, *Acts*, 234.
- 34 The leaders are not explicitly mentioned in Peter’s speech in Acts 2.
- 35 As a man of this quality, Jesus would not speak blasphemously against Moses or God, neither would he destroy the temple nor change the law.
- 36 When sharing the content of his vision with the audience in 7:56, Stephen refers to Jesus as the ‘Son of Man’, an expression deriving from Daniel 7 and the most common designation used by Jesus to refer to himself.
- 37 See Hubert Frankemölle, ‘Λαός’ in Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (eds), *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament 2* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) (339-344) 340: ‘λαός as technical term for Israel as people of God – in dependence on the usage of the LXX, with ἔθνη (Gentiles) as the opposite term’; in more detail on 341-342:  
 Luke has consciously and intentionally inserted λαός into his double work. ... The people, designated by λαός, are mentioned where they have an extremely positive relationship to Jesus (in the Gospel) and to the apostles (in Acts 16). Thus they stand in great tension with the leading circles ...; a deep rift separates the latter from the λαός (... 7:29f; 19:47f; 20:1. 6. 19. 26. 45-47; 22:2; 23:35; 24:19f). The positive attitude ... of all Israel (cf. the frequent plerophoric πᾶς with λαός in 2:10. 31; 7:29; 8:47; 9:13; 18:43; 20:45; 21:38; 24:19; see 1:10; 3:21; 19:48; 20:6; Acts 3:9. 11; 4:10; 5:34; cf. 2:47) as people of God takes a critical turn in Luke with the threefold call for crucifixion by the λαός ..., in Acts the movement of gathering the λαός in its totality is ended with the death of Stephen (6:8ff). Here also (6:12) the λαός can be integrated into the group that rejects the Christian message.
- 38 Schnabel, *Acts*, 234, italics CS. They do so without authorisation by the religious leaders who formally are in charge of the temple. The readers know of the apostles’ commission by the risen Christ (Acts 1:8) who constitutes the highest authority in Acts and to whom the apostles are obedient. Their bold ministry is enabled through the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and a further experience and affirmation of the Spirit in the midst of conflict (4:31).
- 39 The apostles do not withdraw from Jerusalem, as Paul does later in Acts 9:30 and Peter in 12:17.
- 40 Robert A. Kugler’s description of the priestly tasks in Jerusalem does not include *teaching*, ‘Priests’ in Collins & Harlow, *Dictionary of Early Judaism*, (1096-1099) 1098-1099. However, he notes: ‘In their towns and villages, they probably served as teachers, Torah interpreters, scribes, magistrates, and judges.’
- 41 For a long time the lame man had been in public view at a prominent place on their very premises and had not been healed by the religious leaders.
- 42 The ability of the Christians to speak in different existing and recognisable languages is questioned by reference to their Galilean origin (2:6-7). Obviously, this is not something that one would expect Galileans can do.
- 43 Before, in the midst, and after this conflict, there are several instances of human and divine affirmation of the apostles. They lead an exemplary community: Acts 2:41-47 describes the life of this community in ideal terms. Their leadership is acknowledged by, among many others, Barnabas, a Levite from Cyprus. He lays the money he obtained for his field at the apostles’ feet (4:36-37). The events surrounding the death of Ananias and Sapphira also add to their authority. In contrast to the religious leaders, they carefully guard the purity of the community, can draw on supernatural knowledge (Peter knows what the couple had agreed on secretly), recognise and fight satanic activity, challenge evil in their midst and receive divine affirmation (in judgement) for their procedure. Their community is well organised and upholds the early Jewish pious concern for burying the dead (young men come and bury the dead). The events become well known: ‘And great fear seized all who heard of it’ (5:5, repeated in v. 11). Immediately after the conflict in chapters 4-5, the apostles see to the proper care of all widows in the community (6:1-6). They are concerned not only with themselves, their Galilean fellow disciples or the population of Jerusalem, but also feel a duty towards the Hellenistic widows.
- 44 The emphasis on divine action behind the developments at the same time *limits* the status of the apostles, who gladly acknowledge this dependence on God and Jesus (3:12-16).
- 45 It is not clear whether these miracles were explicitly performed in the name of Jesus; see 3:6, 13-16. Would this be assumed by the readers for a man who was appointed by the apostles?
- 46 According to Acts 1:12-26, the apostles understand their particular significance for the gathering and restoration of Israel. The necessity of *twelve* apostles to serve as witnesses to Israel for the whole ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus (1:21-22) is no co-incidence.

- 47 According to Osvaldo Padilla, *The Speeches of Outsiders in Acts. Poetics, Theology and Historiography* (SNTS.MS 144; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 16, the principal point of Acts 5:17-33 is the inability of the authorities to stop the spread of the apostolic message. This is emphasised by the miraculous release from prison (17-20), the confusion of the Sanhedrin (22-26) and the boldness of the apostles (27-33).
- 48 On the priests, see Kugler, ‘Priests’ and on the Sadducees Günther Stemberger, ‘Sadducees’ in Collins & Harlow, *Dictionary of Early Judaism*, 1179-1181, including observations regarding the Sadducees’ relationship to the temple.
- 49 In the leaders’ former encounter with Jesus, his followers played no significant role (Luke 19:35-40). The one exception was Judas Iscariot (Luke 22:3-6, 47-48; Acts 1:16-20).
- 50 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; see Hartmut Beyer, *Die Pharisäer in der Darstellung des Lukasevangeliums. Eine Charakterisierung unter Anwendung der Methoden der narrativen Exegese* (MTh dissertation; Pretoria: University of South Africa, 2006).
- 51 Barrett, *Acts*, 288 observes that not only the apostles but also their opponents use biblical language (‘bring this man’s blood on us’). They demonstrate that they also know the Scriptures and how to apply them to the present circumstances. Are they portrayed as fearing that the apostles would invoke divine vengeance (Judges 9:24)? Says Barrett: ‘This may well be what Luke thought that they thought; if the words have a historical basis it is more likely that the Sanhedrin would fear a popular uprising.’
- 52 On his speech see in detail Padilla, *Speeches*, 106-134, who observes regarding the characterisation of the apostles in Acts 5:17-42, that because of their undaunted obedience to God before the authorities, their portrayal is remarkably similar to that of Jesus. ‘In fact, in their previous encounter with the Jewish authorities it is explicitly stated that the authorities recognised that the apostles σύν τῷ Ἰησοῦ ἦσαν (4:13). The reader, by means of *synkrisis*, is expected to reach the same conclusion in this episode’ (112, see his theoretical discussion of matters of characterisation in Luke-Acts on 109-111). He also notes that the characterisation of the authorities in this section is entirely negative, as they exhibit traits that are diametrically opposed to the values of the biblical tradition and of Jesus himself: ‘They are jealous, violent, homicidal, fearful of men rather than God, and oppressive. These traits plunge them into confusion and powerlessness’ (113). Padilla further notes that by way of direct definition, the author makes the following overt descriptions:
- First, we are told in v. 17 that the authorities were “filled with jealousy” at the apostles’ popularity. Secondly, he states that the temple police did not use violence in bringing the apostles back to the Sanhedrin because they were afraid of being stoned by the people (v. 26). Thirdly, he states that after the apostles’ response in vv. 29-32 the authorities wanted to kill them. Through direct definition, therefore, the implied author paints a portrait of the authorities as jealous, fearful, and homicidal (112).
- 53 So far no Pharisees were mentioned among the opponents. Like the apostles, Gamaliel teaches and is respected by the people (see above).
- 54 Padilla, *Speeches*, 112-113.
- 55 For persecution in Luke-Acts, see Scott Cunningham, *Through Many Tribulations. The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts* (LiNTS 142; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).
- 56 Due to the Roman overrule, the religious leaders cannot draw on violent support for their cause against the apostles *from the outside*. This was the case in the spring of AD 69, when the priestly aristocrats let Simon bar Giora and his men from Idumaea into Jerusalem against the zealot party under the leadership of John of Gischala who had taken control over parts of Jerusalem. According to Josephus, the zealots were much divided among themselves, in contrast to the Christian community in Acts 1–8:3; see Josephus, *Bell.* IV-VI; see Bo Reicke, *Neutestamentliche Zeitgeschichte. Die biblische Welt von 500 v. Chr. bis 100 n. Chr.*, third edn (de Gruyter Lehrbuch; Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 1982) 256-266 and Schürer, *History*, 496-508.
- 57 Padilla, *Speeches*, 109.
- 58 It is not clear how this procedure (cf. the intentions of Acts 5:33) relates to the Roman *ius gladii*, which is an issue in the Lukan passion narrative: Jesus is brought to Pilate as only he can pass a death sentence (Lk 23:1-25).
- 59 On characterisation in Luke see John A. Darr, *On Building Character. The Reader and the Rhetoric of Characterisation in Luke-Acts* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992).
- 60 See David E. Aune, *The Westminster Dictionary of New Testament and Early Christian Literature and Rhetoric* (Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox, 2003) 91-92.
- 61 Aune, *Westminster Dictionary*, 92.
- 62 For a brief survey see Schürer, *History*, 496-508.
- 63 See John 2:18-22. Luke 19:45-48 mentions the cleansing of the temple through Jesus. Jesus speaks about the destruction of the temple and of Jerusalem in Luke 21:5-6, 20-24.
- 64 Mayer, ‘Religious Conflict’, 1-2.