PAUL, ANANIAS, AND AUTHORITY:
AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF ACTS 22:30-23:5

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This study considers what the confrontation between the apostle Paul and the Jewish high priest Ananias narrated in Acts 22:30-23:5 might contribute to a Christian understanding of submission to religious authority. Consideration is given to how this passage both informs and is informed by its compositional and canonical context, how it dialogues with the rest of the two-testament story of the one people of God where the requisite ethics for both the citizens of the kingdom of God and their rulers repeatedly come to the fore. The question of how ethical guidance can be drawn from a story or narrative is also examined, as are the challenges posed by the scriptural story's presentation of an overlap of the new covenant, the new Israel, and the new creation in Christ with the old covenant, the old Israel, and the old creation. The conclusion reached is that Paul's interaction with the Jewish high priest forms one scriptural component of Paul's imitation of Christ which Paul elsewhere charges his readers to imitate and so serves as a paradigm for how Christians are to submit to their spiritual leaders. Neither spiritual superiors nor self is to be exempted from scripturally grounded critique when exegetical and/or ethical concerns arise, yet the commitment to unity in Christ must override the temptation either to deride the divinely appointed authorities, whatever their faults and weaknesses may be, or to divide the glorious, if at times distorted,
body of Christ. Longsuffering patience must be exhibited amid respectful dialogue in pursuit
of the embodiment of truth and godliness, yet with the recognition that the Lord alone is able
to and will, in his mysterious sovereignty, act to fully and finally deliver his people from all
misinterpretation and misapplication of his divine program.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to discern what, if anything, can be learned about Christian submission to religious authority from the confrontation between the apostle Paul and the Jewish high priest Ananias narrated in Acts 22:30-23:5. The significance of the question derives from the presence of this episode within the Church’s Scripture and from the ongoing need of the Church for a theology of ecclesial authority from which to operate faithfully as the people of God. Although there are several other passages which rightly have been utilized to address the matter, the story of Paul and Ananias in Acts perhaps represents a neglected scriptural voice in the conversation.

The book of Acts is rightly viewed as a font in the ongoing discussions concerning ecclesiology. Whatever the Church is, it is something whose early history is scripturally narrated in a distinctive way in Acts. Rather than include multiple accounts of the life of the early Church as appear for the life of Christ Jesus, the account of Acts is complemented in Scripture with two letter collections and a revelatory vision-report. Through these genres the story rehearsed in Acts is revisited and developed without a repetition of the overarching historical context. At the same time, Acts assumes and advances the history narrated by the Gospels, not to mention the story of Israel told through the Old Testament. Therefore, to discern properly the habits and practices of the Church as uniquely narrated in Acts necessitates a reading in dialogue with the rest of Scripture.
The role of submission to human authorities over the people of God is one important theme that appears in Acts and throughout the scriptural story. These rulers to whom obedience is due are elders, judges, kings, priests, and prophets. However, a question arises concerning the form such compliance now assumes given the establishment of a new Israel and a new covenant in the blood of Jesus of Nazareth. Specifically, how does the uniqueness of Jesus as the divine embodiment of prophet, priest, and king of the people of God affect the role of human occupants of these and similar offices? Several passages in Acts speak to this (cf. e.g., 4:1-31; 5:17-42; 6:8-7:60; 13:14-52; 28:17-31), including the exchange between the apostle Paul and the high priest Ananias.

The Church throughout its history has wrestled with who should be its human authorities and what should be the extent of their rule. The followers of Jesus mentioned in the Gospels and Acts regularly worshiped in the temple in Jerusalem where Jewish priests officiated (cf. e.g., Acts 2:46; 3:1-4:3; 5:17-42; 21:26-30; 24:12, 17-18; 26:20-21), yet the practices and proclamations of the disciples elicited increasingly fierce opposition from Jewish leaders.\(^1\) Elders and deacons are recognized and esteemed in the Letters of Paul, although not without requisite qualifications and the possibility of disqualifications (cf. 1 Tim 3:1-13; Tit 1:5-9). The role of bishops and the primacy of the bishop of Rome quickly rose to prominence in the early centuries of the Church, yet the former sometimes abused their role which brought varied responses from the Church while the latter divided the Church between the East who rejected this primacy and the West who supported it. Moving to the present, the emphasis on a personal relationship with God in Christ, sometimes

coupled with an overzealous accent on the priesthood of all believers, has in some instances rendered the office of priest or pastor null and void or relegated the corporate connection with Christ to an otherworldly reality. Although Christian readers are not the characters referenced in Acts, perhaps their story can inform the discussion about whom Christians owe allegiance to and what shape that allegiance should take.

The direction of this study is as follows. Chapter two will consider the placement of Acts within the canon of Scripture and how this informs our understanding of the book of Acts, followed by an investigation of the location of the Paul-Ananias passage within the composition of Acts and how this compositional-canonical context affects our interpretation of that episode. Chapter three will offer an exegetical examination of the story of Paul’s encounter with Ananias. Chapter four will then consider what from the scriptural report of this event might be normative for the church today. A concluding chapter will then briefly summarize the insights drawn from the Paul-Ananias episode which might inform the ethics of Christian submission to ecclesial leaders today.
CHAPTER 2

ACTS IN SCRIPTURE AND THE PAUL-ANANIAS PASSAGE IN ACTS

A Christian reading of any passage in Acts inevitably engages at least the fourfold context of composition (Acts), canon (the Bible), creed (the Church’s understanding of its Scripture and Tradition), and community (the Church), where the voice of the Holy Spirit who is ultimately the source, shaper, and sustainer of each may be heard.¹ Many today appreciate the interpretive significance of the compositional context for a pericope in Acts, yet often distort or disregard the remaining three contexts. Therefore, it is helpful to briefly consider the role of each of these three, which will here be presented in reverse order.²

First, the Christian is a sibling in God’s family, whose dialogue around the Lord’s Table centers in the saving work of Christ. The reading and the interpretation of Scripture in the context of this community both shape, and to some extent are shaped by, the individuals who perform these habits. Through the experience of the actions and the addresses in both the assembly and in the personal relationships between believers dispersed in the world, the

¹ These four interpretive contexts find slightly different expression in the “Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture” proposed by The Scripture Project; cf. The Art of Reading Scripture, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1-5. On the role of the Holy Spirit in these contexts of Scriptural interpretation, cf. Joel B. Green, Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 94-100.

² A similar but more expansive treatment of these three interrelated contexts appears in a chapter entitled “The Confluence of the Bible, the Tradition, and the Church” in D. H. Williams, Evangelicals and Tradition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 85-113.
Christian becomes equipped with the lenses through which to see Scripture more clearly.\(^3\) Put simply, how God’s family operates affects how each brother and sister reads God’s Word.

Second, the Christian is a member of Christ’s Body, whose mission was taught through the Apostolic Tradition prior to the formation of the New Testament (cf. e.g., 1 Cor 11:23-26; 15:3-7) in which the Tradition now finds expression alongside the catholic creeds and confessions of the early Church and beyond (e.g., The Apostles’ Creed and The Nicene Creed).\(^4\) When Scripture is read and interpreted in the context of the Church’s dialogue with its heritage, readers learn how Jesus, the apostles, the early Church, and Christians communities ever since have read and thought about Scripture and so came to understand their own identity and mission.\(^5\) Put simply, how God’s family observes its Tradition affects how each member reads God’s Word.

Third, the Christian is a disciple of Jesus Christ, whose story is told in the Scriptures of Israel and the Church. When passages are read and interpreted in the context of the Church’s two-testament canon, readers listen in on a conversation between the books of the Old

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\(^3\) To this could surely be added the Lord’s providential use of dialogue with the unbelieving world in the complex development of the proper interpretation of Scripture.

\(^4\) The role of tradition in the formation and the interpretation of Scripture is summarized well in Williams, *Evangelicals*, 32-46. A helpful annotated anthology of early sources which indicate the origin and the employment of early Christian Tradition appears in his *Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation: A Sourcebook of the Ancient Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006). These supply the foundational resources used in his earlier volume *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

\(^5\) Cf. David Paul Parris, *Reading the Bible with Giants: How 2000 Years of Biblical Interpretation Can Shed New Light on Old Texts* (Atlanta: Paternoster, 2006), 107, “The tradition of biblical interpretation is similar in many respects to a road map. Instead of merely displaying the terrain and various routes this map is a record of the interpretive dialogue and debate over the meaning of the scriptures.” On pages 121-46, he provides a fascinating study of the shifting understanding of the Great Commission passage in Matthew with regard to ecclesial mission.
Testament and the New Testament (intertestamental dialogue), as well as between books within each testament (intratestamental dialogue). The learner who engages Scripture as two testaments should find the mission and the message of God, Israel, and the Church to be embodied in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, whose person sums up the meaning of all of Scripture (cf. Luke 24:44). Put simply, how God’s family officiates the intertestamental and intratestamental dialogue as apprehended in Christ affects how each disciple reads God’s Word.

Each of these four interrelated contexts warrants an entire study in itself. However, the focus of this thesis will be on the how the canonical and the compositional contexts can be brought to bear on the reading of the trial of Paul before Ananias narrated in Acts 22:30-23:5. Two questions will be in view. First, how does the book of Acts both draw on and contribute to the intertestamental and intratestamental dialogue of Christian Scripture through which the voice and the vocation of Christ might be discerned so as to be embodied by his followers? Second, how does the overall narrative of Acts shape the interpretation of the Paul-Ananias passage and how do the latter verses serve the composition as a whole?

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6 A brief but penetrating reflection on interpreting each testament in dialogue with the other as Christian Scripture appears in Christopher R. Seitz, “History, Figural History, and Providence in the Dual Witness of Prophet and Apostle” in Go Figure!: Figuration in Biblical Interpretation, ed. Stanley D. Walters (Eugene, Oreg.: Pickwick, 2008), 1-6.

7 The significance of Luke 24:44 is expressed well by Joel B. Green, The Gospel of Luke (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 857, “The point of Jesus’ words is not that such-and-such a verse has now come true, but that the truth to which all of the Scriptures point has now been realized!”
Acts in Dialogue with the Canon of Scripture

The book of Acts appears within the New Testament of the Christian Bible. Since the New Testament both offers a continuation of the story of Israel told through the Old Testament and presents this development as the fulfillment of the plan of their God, it is essential to view Acts in dialogue with the Old Testament, as well as in dialogue with its fellow volumes in the New. What follows will consider each of these two dialogues in summary fashion.

Acts in the Intertestamental Dialogue

“Acts” translates an abbreviation of the title found in the Greek manuscripts. The complete title is translated “Acts of the Apostles.” Since early Christian tradition bequeathed this scriptural text to the Church with this name, consideration should be given to how this label orients readers to the material they will encounter. Specifically, as part of the two-testament canon, how does the title locate this text within the larger biblical story? Although no other canonical book bears a title which resembles that of the Acts of the Apostles, similar designations appear for some extra-biblical volumes which are referenced.

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8 A basic observation to be made with respect to this literary location is that the book of Acts is not to be read and interpreted as if it were an independent volume, but as a contributor to the multi-volume work which the Church recognizes as Scripture.
10 Much of what follows is adapted from my “Reading Acts: The Book and Its Messages,” MIQRA 3.4 (Fall 2004): 4-8.
12 Robert W. Wall, “Canonical Criticism,” in A Handbook to the Exegesis of the New Testament, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Boston: Brill, 2002), 311-12, briefly answers this question in a way that is different from though complementary with what follows.
in 1-2 Kings and 1-2 Chronicles. For example, these narratives repeatedly mention other volumes about *the activities of the kings of Israel and Judah* (e.g. 1 Kgs 14:19, 29; 15:23, 31; 2 Chron 12:15; 13:22; 16:11) for readers who might wish to supplement the selective scriptural accounts of those kings and kingdoms. More specific volumes are noted for King David (1 Chron 29:29-30) and his heir Solomon (1 Kgs 11:41). Interestingly, the name of the supplemental work on Solomon is often translated as “the Book of the Acts of Solomon,” which is a very close parallel to the title the Acts of the Apostles. All of these texts share a common emphasis on the activities of influential individuals, but could there be a significant connection between a book about apostles and those about kings?

Since the supplemental books cited above are no longer extant, the examination of a meaningful relationship to Acts must be limited to their canonical counterparts. First and Second Samuel are joined by First and Second Kings in a continuous narrative that encompasses the historical sweep of the ancient Israelite monarchy. This story is rehearsed again in Chronicles, where there appears a greater selectivity and a stronger emphasis on the line of David. When viewed together and as part of the larger story of Scripture, these books challenge the competing assertions of other ancient (and modern) records of kings relative to their nations and deities and concerning the trajectory of world history. More than merely reporting facts about an otherwise obscure country of long ago, these texts, along with the rest of Scripture, claim to narrate the power and purpose which directs the course of the universe. What is their story that purports to set all others straight?

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The biblical story identifies the creator and sustainer of the earth to whom all kings, nations, and individuals owe their allegiance as YHWH, the God of Israel, who alone exists in the category of deity. He formed a good creation that has since gone awry through kings, nations, and peoples who rebelliously serve gods of their own making. Rather than halt his plan for a blessed and glorious cosmos or rubbish the present one and start over, this deity had pre-determined to restore the now-fallen universe. To do so, YHWH selected a people whom he brought out from the midst of the nations in the exodus to be his holy nation through whom the fullness of his blessing will be restored to all the families of the earth. God covenanted his presence and power to the people Israel as his sanctified servant in this cosmic program. The maintenance of this relationship would be through the priests whom YHWH appointed to serve in his chosen sanctuary, as well as through other leaders such as judges and his chosen king, who is referred to as the “messiah” or “anointed one” on whom the Spirit of God rests (1 Sam 2:10; 10:1-13; 2 Sam 22:51-23:1). Unfortunately, complete compliance with this arrangement is always a hoped-for future in the story of God’s people as narrated in the Old Testament.

Israel was far from realizing its elect purpose even in its “glory days” under Kings David and Solomon. David typically sought first the kingdom of God and was promised an eternally reigning son who would fulfill the desire of David to build a house for the God of Israel (2 Sam 7; cf. Luke 1:32-33). Solomon then succeeded David and ruled with such wisdom that the nations poured into Jerusalem to receive his instruction (1 Kgs 4:34; 10:1-13, 24; 2 Chron 9:1-12), to be taught the proper ways of this world by him who constructed the temple wherein Creator God dwelt with humanity (1 Kgs 6-8; 2 Chron 3-6; Acts 7:47).
Although this appeared to approach the fulfillment of Israel’s mission, they soon abandoned YHWH for the gods of the nations around them. This resulted in the division of the kingdom of Israel and ultimately its total disintegration, when the house of God was burned (2 Kgs 25:9) and the people of God were exiled among the surrounding nations (2 Kgs 17:6-23; 24:10-25:26).

The people of YHWH were not dispersed among oppressive countries because those nations had kings and gods who were more powerful than Israel’s. Instead, Israel was delivered by YHWH himself into the “care” of those powers after whom they whored. The intention was that the dreadful experience might bring Israel to its senses. What this means in terms of the larger plan of God is that the restoration of the earth will have to be preceded by the restoration of the elect people and the arrival of the Davidic king and builder of God’s house (cf. Amos 9:11-12; Acts 15:16-17). This amounts to a new exodus which establishes a renewed people through whom the nations will come to experience the divine and his blessings under the earthly rule of the Messiah-King of Israel (cf. John 19:12; Acts 17:7). Such anticipation forms the eschatological hope of the earth according to the Scriptures of Israel, but its fulfillment lies yet in the future. The question to which we now turn is: How does the New Testament, particularly Acts of the Apostles, meaningfully advance this story?

Acts in the Intratestamental Dialogue

The New Testament consists of selected texts which have been arranged according to genre and common title-form, such as the four Gospel accounts, the Pauline Letters, and the General Letters. Only Acts of the Apostles and the Revelation of John are included as
singular examples of their respective genre and title-form. The focus of this thesis is on the former, which is an anonymous work like the Gospels and bears a named addressee like most of the Letter collection, hereafter, the Letters.


Acts begins with a summary reference to the author’s preceding book (Acts 1:1), the end of which is briefly rehearsed to open this account of what later came of that story (cf. Luke 24:36-53; Acts 1:1-14). Since these two volumes never appear consecutively in the manuscripts or in modern versions, such explicit reference and literary overlap alerts readers to the return of a Lukan style in the continued narration of the biblical story. This then encourages a reading of Acts especially, although by no means exclusively, in the light of

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Luke’s particular contribution to the fourfold Gospel. As such, we must avoid reducing interpretive attention simply to a consideration of what might otherwise be labeled Luke-Acts.\(^\text{15}\)

How well the intervening book of John prepares readers for Acts is often overlooked. John expands the Synoptic emphasis on the coming Holy Spirit (John 14-16), whose crucial role in mediating the presence of the ascended Jesus is explicitly and repeatedly highlighted throughout Acts (e.g. 1:8; 2:4; 4:8-12; 10:44-48). No other Gospel likely prepares as well for the leading role Peter exhibits in Acts among the followers of Jesus at Pentecost and beyond as does John through its record of Peter’s threefold restoration and pastoral commission by the risen Jesus (John 21:15-19). Finally, John appears to close off the need to proliferate Gospels about all that Jesus did (John 21:25; cf. Acts 1:1).\(^\text{16}\) This perhaps serves to indicate the shift in the scriptural canon to books that advance the story beyond the life,


death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. This is precisely where Acts picks up and what it proceeds to narrate.

Acts continues the story told by the fourfold Gospel and is followed by the Letters, which offer a parallel articulation and advancement of the story narrated in Acts. This resembles something that appears in the Hebrew Bible, whose books were somewhat rearranged in what became the Old Testament of the Church. In the Hebrew Bible, the Former Prophets (the Old Testament “Historical Books” of Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings) advance the Pentateuch’s narrative, but are then followed by the largely poetic declaration and development of their message in the Latter Prophets (the Old Testament “Prophetic Books”). The presentation is basically a continuous narrative from Genesis through 2 Kings that is broken by what most English readers know as the Major Prophets and the Minor Prophets, which return readers to the period narrated by the final chapters of 2 Kings. This revisit of earlier history is to emphasize and to rehearse the messages of prophets who served during the reigns of the final Israelite kings. Since the history of God’s people under these kings has already been scripturally narrated, the books of prophetic messages are historically contexted merely by references to the reigns of the kings during which the prophets ministered. Therefore, a story that proceeds directly from the Pentateuch to the Latter Prophets would create an obvious gap in historical understanding. Readers would wonder who these kings are and where they fit in Israel’s history. In the same way, traveling from the Gospels to the Letters without crossing the bridge of Acts would leave readers swimming in the confusion of numerous historical deficiencies: Where did Paul come from? How did the assemblies of Jews and Gentiles, Israelites and people from other
nations, appear and come to be addressed in Paul’s letters as the people of God who are ruled by his son Jesus? As the literary bridge between the Gospels and the Epistles, Acts narrates a story both informing and informed historically and theologically by its neighbors on either side. Thus, more should be said concerning how the Gospels prepare readers for a book entitled Acts of the Apostles?

The fourfold Gospel identified the apostles as the selected twelve to whom Jesus of Nazareth, the son of David and the Messiah-King of the Jews, had given power and authority over demons, disease, and distress in the preaching of the kingdom of God (Luke 9:1-2). The restoration of the kingdom of Israel, the kingdom of God, was at hand. Jesus assured the twelve that their sacrificial kingdom service would be richly rewarded in the new heavens and the new earth, the renewed creation, where Jesus will sit on a throne joined by the apostles seated on twelve thrones from which they will judge, or rule, the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt 19:28; Luke 22:28-30). However, not every apostle embraced this royal vision.

Judas, one of the twelve, was a double agent utilized by Jewish leaders who contested Jesus and his kingdom. They falsely charged Jesus with violating the Law and blaspheming the God of Israel whose man-made temple Jesus claimed he would destroy and replace with another that was not built by human hands (Mark 14:53-65; cf. Matt 24:1-2//Mark 13:1-2//Luke 21:5-6; Acts 6:11-14; Matt 16:16-18; John 14:2-3). Amid a series of legal proceedings at the hands of first Jewish and then Gentile rulers, the apostle Peter denied Jesus and Judas departed through suicide (Matt 27:3-10; Acts 1:16-19), while the rest of the

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apostles simply deserted him. The accusing voices condemned the supposed king of the Jews to death-by-execution at the hands of the Roman Empire. This raised the question of the veracity of the bold claims made by Jesus of Nazareth. Was he just another pseudo-messiah (cf. Acts 5:33-42)?

Jews knew all too well of the death of false messiahs, which was accompanied by the dispersion of their followers (cf. Acts 5:34-39). This initially appeared to be the case with Jesus and his apostles, too. However, Jesus rose victorious over death, which validates his claim as the Messiah, or Christ, who would bring forth the deliverance of Israel and the nations from death and its source – sin. The time for renewing creation, beginning with a renewed humanity, had come. The risen Jesus then appeared to the remaining eleven apostles, among others, and announced this universal authority which was granted to him as the Son of David and the Son of God (Matt 28:18; cf. Dan 7:13-14).

As the long-awaited Messiah-King, Jesus had come to deliver Israel from its oppressive exile, so that a restored people of God might finally bring forth the promised Abrahamic blessing to all nations (Gen 12:1-3; 18:17-18; 22:15-18; 26:4-5; 28:13-15). But to do so, Israel and the nations must repent of their sins, not least the shared rejection and execution of the Christ, and receive forgiveness from his hands (cf. Paul’s perhaps-paradigmatic repentance and forgiveness in Acts). As the way forward, the resurrected Jesus commissioned the remaining eleven apostles, whom he had already promised royal power, to fill Jerusalem and all the nations with this scriptural message and monarchy (Luke 24:44-48) by the power of the Holy Spirit (John 20:19-23; cf. Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8).
Jesus went so far as to promise to the eleven, as representatives of his name, accompanying signs of deliverance from demons, disease, and death, as well as the ability to declare this message in different languages (Mark 16:15-18, 20). Jesus then ascended to the right hand of God in heaven. Thereafter, the followers of Jesus praised God continually in the temple and began to preach and to perform miracles (Mark 16:19-20/Luke 24:50-51). However, the two Gospel summaries of the ascension of Christ and the activity of his royal servants do not narrate what ultimately came of Israel and the nations through the activity of the eleven apostles. This then anticipates the continuation of the story in a book fittingly entitled Acts of the Apostles.

The Paul-Ananias Passage in Dialogue with the Remainder of Acts

As Acts contributes to the overarching story of the canon of Scripture, from which Acts derives some of its meaning, so too the Paul-Ananias episode serves the Acts narrative, which then informs the meaning of this passage. Therefore, a consideration of the narrative shape of Acts, as well as of how the selected section both influences and is influenced by that shape is essential to a proper interpretation. The next two sections will address each of these concerns.

The Narrative Shape of Acts

As the name Acts of the Apostles indicates, the activities of the remaining eleven apostles of Jesus Christ (and their associates) and of the replacement for Judas are selectively summarized and shaped in this narrative which continues to emphasize the arrival of the
divine kingdom. The book opens with Jesus speaking about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3), the restoration of the kingdom of Israel, near its royal city of Jerusalem (1:6; cf. Luke 17:20-21), and closes with Paul boldly announcing the divine kingdom in the royal city of the Roman Empire (Acts 28:30). In between, the faithful God of Israel who had begun to restore his faithless people and his fallen creation through the work of his suffering servant Jesus pours out his Spirit to continue that mission through his renewed people of suffering servants, led by the apostles and their associates. However, this is but the beginning of the fulfillment of the plan of God since the complete deliverance of his servants awaits the final judgment of both Israel and the nations. As a whole, the narrative dramatically advances the biblical story toward the realization of the kingdom of the new heavens and the new earth, which is ruled by the Davidic king in the new Jerusalem (cf. Rev 21). Acts 1:8 can, as many have observed, be understood to encapsulate the concentric expansion of this restorative mission of God, as well as to supply an inspired outline of its narration in Acts. The annotated outline which follows draws on this tradition.

The Prologue (1:1-11)

The narrative opens with a reference to the author’s previous volume, the closing of which is alluded to through several verbal and thematic parallels. This textual linkage both identifies Acts as the continuation of that story—indeed of the fourfold story of Jesus—and establishes the emphasis of this continuation. Before ascending to heaven, the resurrected suffering servant of the Lord, the King of God’s people, had commissioned his apostles to usher in his universal rule throughout the earth as his authoritative kingdom representatives.
Their signal to begin would be the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, whose presence had previously marked divine representatives in Israel such as judges, prophets, and kings. By his power the apostles would then fill the world with the knowledge of the Davidic King who has finally arrived to deliver the people of Israel from their exilic bondage so that they might serve as God’s restored servants through whom blessing now comes to the nations. Jesus had taught the apostles to pray for the Father’s kingdom to come on earth (Matt 6:9ff./Luke 11:2ff.). Now that it had, the apostles (and their associates) were to announce it in Jerusalem, throughout what were once the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, and to the ends of the earth.

The Kingdom has Come, O Jerusalem! (1:12-5:42)

In preparation for the coming of the Spirit and the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God, a replacement for Judas was necessary both to fulfill Scripture and to fill his vacated role as a royal representative of Israel who will apparently one day sit on one of the twelve promised apostolic thrones. The apostles and those gathered with them prayed for the divine selection to come through lots, which fell to Matthias. With the full complement of the twelve once again in place, the public ministry of the apostles then began with the descent of the Holy Spirit.

This outpouring of the Holy Spirit marked the firstfruits of the prophesied restoration of Israel in which God promised again to call them out from among the nations in the new exodus. They would be the new people of God under the new covenant, worshiping him in Jerusalem on his holy mountain Zion where they are to be led by a Davidic King (cf. Deut
30:1ff.; Isa 11:11-16; 27; Jer 30-31; Ezek 36-37).

This would begin the vindication of the name of God, which had been profaned by his chosen people among the nations and their gods (cf. Ezek 36). YHWH had remained faithful to his people and to his cosmic purposes. He does what he says. Readers know this because the story of Acts and of the entire New Testament happens precisely in accordance with the Israelite Scriptures, which Christians call the Old Testament. Although the people in the scriptural narrative and beyond may misinterpret or marginalize the message about the activity of God in Jesus and his followers, the day is coming when all people must give account for their recognition or rejection of the king and his kingdom. Jesus was not simply another claimant to the office of messiah, which perhaps seemed to have become a hopeless hope given the failures of those who preceded him. As Peter declared, God vindicated the identity of Jesus as the true Messiah-King through his resurrection from the dead. The kingdom conferred on him and his apostles was validated both through its accordance with the Old Testament and by the signs of divine power and presence evinced in the activity of Jesus and his followers.

The Kingdom has Come, O Judah and Israel! (6:1-12:25)

This kingdom pronouncement received a mixed response from the Jews as is narrated throughout Acts. Some believed, while others burned with anger. Such radically different responses are perhaps not surprising, given that what the Jews saw to be at issue was the hope of Israel and the world. If this Jesus movement was discovered to be out of biblical bounds, it must be declared foul. Was God with this movement or not? Surely the Scriptures

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must serve as the guide to the answer. Throughout the history of Israel the Lord’s presence with humanity could be accessed via the Ark of the Covenant, the Tabernacle, and the First and the Second Temple. Nevertheless, the power of this deity extends over the whole earth, as was indicated in the covenant terms (or Torah) which were housed in these places and which Israel failed to uphold in any of these locales. Therefore, as books such as Nehemiah and the Gospels indicate, the goal of intimacy between this deity and humanity could only be realized through the reform of Second-Temple worship. Indeed, was it not the task of the coming Davidic King to restore the pure worship of YHWH, which was connected in the minds of Jews with the Temple and the Torah? Since Jesus claimed he would destroy the Temple and declared things that appeared to violate the Torah (cf. 6:13-14), it was understandably difficult to see how Jesus could be construed as the coming King.

No wonder evangelists such as Stephen carefully expounded the story of Israel (and the nations) to show how Jesus and his followers do not forsake their God but represent the fulfillment of his good news. This meant that the Jewish leaders, by rejecting Jesus as the Messiah, were unwittingly rejecting the exegesis and experience of God’s servants throughout history. Those who opposed the apostles and their co-laborers were rejecting the Lord’s messengers and their prophetic message as their forefathers had done, and were bringing great suffering upon the servants of God’s Anointed One. However, God in his sovereignty used this opposition to spread his gospel throughout Judah and Israel and to expand his people, similar to how he had operated before and during the exodus (cf. Exod 1:12).
In the process, a zealous Jew named Saul (later referred to as Paul), who violently confronted this sect for what he saw to be violations against the Torah and the Temple, was himself confronted by the risen Jesus. In a dramatic reversal, Paul was there commissioned by Jesus to be his chosen servant in taking the good news to the Gentiles. God also sent the apostle Peter and other circumcised believers to witness the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon Gentiles, which was much like what was experienced at Pentecost and so confirmed that Gentiles too can freely enter the community of faith. In close narrative proximity, the two most emphasized apostles of Acts, both of whom questioned how the Gentiles could be welcomed into the people of God, had come to understand God’s program.

The Kingdom has Come, O Ends of the Earth! (13:1-28:31)

While the Christians worshiped and served God, the Spirit sent some forth throughout the earth to proclaim that the God of Israel reigns and to receive into the community of faith both Jews and Gentiles who repent. As with the Jews, so the Gentile response is mixed. However, the large number of Gentiles who poured into the Jewish church caused it to clarify what the qualifications for membership among the people of God are for Gentiles (ch. 15). The official letter which was sent to communicate the verdict of the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem on this matter not only paves the way for a continuous Gentile mission, but also sets a significant precedent for readers of the letters which are associated with many such individuals in the books following Acts. The remainder of Acts then recounts the growing Gentile mission as it was advanced through Paul and his associates. Led by the Spirit, Paul everywhere declared to both Jews and Gentiles that through Jesus and his followers the
f fulfillment of Scripture is taking place. The expositions by Paul identify Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, announce the coming of the kingdom of God, and call all to repentance in recognition of the one true God. Acts then closes without ending the story of Paul and of the expanding mission of Christ through his followers. Whatever else it might mean, such an open-ended conclusion likely points to the fact that the mission of the word of God will continue until the final chapter is written in which the kingdom of God appears in full.

The Paul-Ananias Passage and the Acts Narrative

The experience of Paul with Ananias appears in the section of Acts that emphasizes the proclamation of the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth (chs. 13-28). The key messenger of this section is Paul, the former persecutor of Christians who here joins them in their mission, in which he even takes a lead role. What is perhaps more jolting is that the narrative basically leaves behind the original apostles and focuses on the ministry of this latecomer to the kingdom. This raises the question, what was it about Paul that the early Church saw as so essential for the narration of its story in much of Acts and many of the Letters? The short response might be that the story of Paul encaptulates the story of a new Israel, a new humanity, and a new creation that comes through the Suffering Servant Jesus and his suffering servants.19

It is important to remember that Paul is a Jew who devoutly worshiped the God of Israel. Paul had studied under the famous rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) and had quickly advanced beyond his peers in the practice and the proclamation of the texts and the traditions

19 I develop this theme in my “Suffering Servants of the Suffering Servant: The Mission of Messiah’s People,” MIQRA 3.4 (Fall 2004): 8-10.
of God’s people Israel (Gal 1:14). So concerned was Paul for the holiness of God and his people that he had zealously sought to enforce the penalties established for those whose beliefs and behaviors violate the instruction given through Moses. Scripture had to be upheld and sin had to be punished. However, some strange things happened around this time in human history that altered Paul’s understanding of Israel’s texts and traditions, without lessening his commitment to Israel and their God.

A Jew named Jesus joined the ranks of those who successively claimed to be Israel’s Messiah. For some time, Jews had awaited a promised Messiah who would remove Israel’s sin and shame and restore Israel as God’s special servant in the restoration of the world. Like some of his predecessors who had claimed to be the Messiah, Jesus died for his bold actions and assertions (cf. Acts 5:34-39; 21:38). Unlike his predecessors, Jesus left behind followers who shockingly announced that the Jesus who was crucified as a political criminal had risen from the dead as Israel’s eternally reigning Messiah. The King and Kingdom of Israel had come, but not as Paul and the other Jews had expected. Paul did not recognize in Jesus the activity of God, let alone the person of deity himself. Would not God, through his Messiah, deliver Israel from her true enemy within and without, which Paul like most devout Jews of his day believed to be the rebellious Israelites and the Gentiles who oppressed Israel? Thus, the Jewish rulers denied the messianic claim and the resurrection of Jesus, yet they could not deny that Jews were being delivered from disability, disease, and demons through the hands of the apostles of Jesus (Acts 3-5). Could it possibly be that God was restoring Israel in a way other than through the violent overthrow of other humans? Blind to what God was doing, the Jewish council wanted to kill the apostles as they had Jesus.
In response to the excitement of many Jews over the restorations performed by the apostles and the communal unity of all those who sought to observe all that Jesus and the Scriptures of Israel had commanded, Paul’s mentor Gamaliel advised the Jewish council about how to handle the apostles. In the past, the movements of messianic pretenders fizzled shortly after their deaths. Perhaps the Jews simply needed to give this movement more time to fade away. However, Gamaliel’s conclusion seems to hint at another possibility, whether or not Gamaliel was sincere in what he said. Gamaliel advised the Jewish council, “Keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” (Acts 5:38-39).\(^\text{20}\) Ironically, it would be Gamaliel’s respected pupil Paul (cf. Gal 1:13-14) who would have an experience that rendered the verdict on the matter.

Paul had committed himself to violently opposing the Jesus movement, which he saw as nothing more than a heretical sect of Judaism. Paul went so far as to get letters from the Jewish high priest to the synagogues, authorizing Paul to take captive men and women who followed the way of Jesus and to bring them to justice before the religious authorities in Jerusalem (Acts 9:1-2). However, those travel plans were altered en route when the risen Jesus confronted Paul (Acts 9:3ff.). Instead of correcting rebellious Jews, Paul was actually persecuting the community of faithful Israelites who were nothing less than the embodiment of God and his Kingdom. Mercifully, Jesus intervened so that Paul would not go the way of wrath. The new course for Paul would be to join Jesus in his suffering through which Israel and the nations would be restored (Acts 9:15-16). This meant nothing less than to join the

\(^{20}\) All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.
Church, which he had previously persecuted, in its suffering through which forgiveness of sin and new life comes to both Jews and Gentiles.

As consumed with zeal as he had ever been, Paul immediately sought to convince Jews of what he had discovered – that the Christ was Jesus, that the anticipated Kingdom of God has finally broken into this world (Acts 9:20-22; 17:1-3; 18:5; cf. 26:22-23; 28:23). Paul found his fellow Jews to be split between the two perspectives once proposed by his teacher Gamaliel. Some saw in Paul’s mission and message nothing but the activity of a sinful compromiser, while others recognized the unstoppable power of God. Repeatedly faced with verbal and physical abuse, which at times approached death, Paul continued unabated (cf. the summaries in 2 Cor 4:8-11; 6:3-10; 11:23-27).

Paul continually declared first to Jews and then to Gentiles that the King over Israel and over all people is Jesus, who has begun to restore the world through his suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension and who will return to consummate his Kingdom. This increasingly elicited the opposition of those Jews who denied the validity of the Messianic claims of Jesus and his followers. Eventually Paul is seized in the Jerusalem Temple by Jewish rioters who drag him out in order to execute him on the basis of the accusation that he teaches blasphemy against their people, law, and Temple (Acts 21:27ff.). However, Roman soldiers arrive to squelch the riot and to restore order.

The Romans quickly halt the beating of Paul, but arrest him as a presumed criminal. When the Roman commander inquires of the charges against Paul, members of the mob shout out conflicting accusations. Unable to identify the reason for the civil dispute, the officer orders that Paul be taken to the barracks. While Paul is being escorted away, the
bloodthirsty mob repeatedly requests capital punishment in the case by shouting “Away with him!” (21:36; cf. 22:22), as had those assembled at the trial of Jesus before Pilate (Luke 23:18; John 19:15). Upon reaching the entry to the barracks, Paul requests and is granted permission to address his fellow Jews. The speech which follows then begins a series of oral defenses in which the prisoner Paul represents himself (and his King Jesus) before Jews and Gentiles, first in Jerusalem and finally in Rome (chs. 22-28).

In the defense before the temple mob in Jerusalem, Paul summarizes his journey from the rejection of Jesus and his followers as violators of the traditions of Israel to the reception of a prophetic call from the risen Jesus through his servant Ananias to serve as a light to the nations, to the Gentiles. This is to indicate the involvement of Paul in the fulfillment of the call of Israel as God’s servant to bring salvation to the ends of the earth (cf. Isa 42:6-7; 49:6; Matt 5:14; Luke 2:29-32; John 8:12; 9:5; Acts 1:8; 2:39; 9:15; 22:21; 26:22-23). Therefore, Paul claims he was not failing but fulfilling the purpose of the people Israel in this world. At this point, the crowd interrupts Paul. But rather than counterarguments, the mob assumes the role of judge and jumps to a guilty verdict through their cries for his execution. Since no reasonable dialogue was possible and no clear civil charge had yet been leveled, the Roman commander prepares to flog Paul in an attempt to elicit information which will clarify what crime Paul may have committed. But when Paul questioned the legality of flogging a Roman citizen, the civil officers halted this mode of interrogation. Paul is then locked in the barracks overnight.

The next day the Roman officer makes another attempt to discern the reason for the accusations against Paul. This civil official orders a meeting of the religious officials in
hopes of finding an answer. The story of this gathering is narrated in Acts 22:30-23:11, which includes the defense of Paul before the high priest Ananias (22:30-23:5), the declaration of Paul that stimulates a debate which divides the Jewish council along the party lines of Pharisee and Sadducee (23:6-10), and a vision report that indicates the testimony of Paul will not end in Jerusalem but will continue in Rome (23:11). Here Paul makes statements which again affirm his devotion to his people and their God. Yet the outcome is that Paul’s supposed disregard for the traditions of Israel is now joined by the charge of disrespect for the priesthood. Moreover, his controversial teachings stir up a division that already exists between Jewish leaders. As a result, the Pharisees claim to find nothing wrong in Paul and the divided assembly turns violent as had the mob at the Temple. Once again, the Romans must remove Paul to the barracks to halt the chaos and seek other means to resolve the civil unrest.

Since the Romans are not quick to comply with the request for the execution of Paul, a plot is hatched by some zealous Jews to kill Paul themselves (23:12ff.). Even some of the chief priests and elders are involved in the scheme. Rather than submit to the civil authorities or to the council of Jewish authorities, these vigilantes presume they have been invested with all authority to do whatever is necessary to cleanse the chosen people of this perceived impurity. However, the conspiracy is thwarted through the divine provision of a relative of Paul who overhears their plan and reports it to Paul, who informs the Roman official, who then secretly transfers Paul to Caesarea. A letter accompanies Paul which explains the circumstances and appeals to the higher authority of Governor Felix to resolve the case. This marks the narrative shift from Jerusalem and trial before Jewish powers to a
series of defenses before Roman rulers that will eventually take Paul all the way to the imperial capital as God has already revealed (chs. 24-28).

Set within the larger story of the Gentile mission of Paul, within which it appears in the somewhat narrower story of his trials, the appearance of Paul before the high priest likely serves a variety of narrative purposes and contains multiple levels of meaning. Rather than attempt to exhaust the meaning of this passage, which is always an impossibility when dealing with Scripture, the preceding summary of the canonical and the compositional context will serve as an interpretive backdrop for an exegetical examination of these verses in the next chapter.

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21 The possibility of multiple meaning fits with the fourth interpretive thesis proposed by The Scripture Project. Cf. Davis and Hays, 2, “Texts of Scripture do not have a single meaning limited to the intent of the original author. In accord with Jewish and Christian traditions, we affirm that Scripture has multiple complex senses given by God, the author of the whole drama.”
CHAPTER 3
EXEGESIS OF ACTS 22:30-23:5

With the interpretive foundation of the canonical and the compositional context laid by the preceding chapter, the stage is set for a thoughtful exegesis of the encounter between Paul and Ananias narrated in Acts 22:30-23:5. The passage can be divided into the transition to the scene (22:30), the opening statement by Paul (23:1), the outraged order by Ananias (23:2), the response of Paul (23:3), the question of the onlookers (23:4), and the answer of Paul (23:4-5). Each will be discussed in detail below.

The Sanhedrin Setting (22:30)

This verse serves as a transition from the narration of the life-threatening experience Paul had with the Temple-crowd to the recounting of where that story went the following day. Readers already know that the Roman military officer, who will later be identified as Claudius Lysias (23:26), has been unable to understand what the problem is that the Jews have with Paul. This narrative perspective is now summarized in 22:30 as the motivation for which Claudius orders a meeting of the Sanhedrin.¹ F. F. Bruce likely captures the legal logic employed by Claudius, “Whatever Paul was being charged with, it involved an offense

¹ The emphasis on this determined quest for the truth perhaps even raises Claudius as a model for readers of Acts. Cf. William J. Larkin, Jr., Acts (The IVP New Testament Commentary Series 5; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 326, “Just as he persists in his pursuit to know the certain facts of the case (gnōnai to asphales; compare 21:34), Luke’s readers should study his works to know the certain truth of the gospel (epignōs...tēn asphaleian; Lk 1:4).”
of some kind against Jewish religious custom or sentiment, and the Sanhedrin was the appropriate body to deal with that.”² Answers are needed and the Jewish authorities are called on to supply them.

It is noteworthy that the text neither states where the Sanhedrin met, nor explains how a Gentile like Claudius was able to call and to attend a meeting of sacred Jewish officials. Readers are simply told that it happened. Yet given the circumstances, it is not difficult to imagine that it was far from a normal meeting of the priests and other leaders of the Jews. Justo González captures the uniqueness of this assembly in a careful interpretation and reconstruction that responds to challenges to its historicity which is worth quoting at length:

These difficulties are obviated if one thinks, not in terms of an official session of the Council, but rather of a meeting of the members of that Council, convoked by the tribune, and probably taking place at his own residence or at some other Roman venue. That is why 22:30 really says that he called the members of the Council, not that he called the Council itself, or that he presented himself in one of its sessions. In that case, as it was not a meeting of the Council, but of its members gathering at the invitation of the Roman tribune, it is to be supposed that Ananias would not wear his official vestments, nor would he preside over the session, and that the discussion took place either in Greek or with interpreters, so that the tribune could follow it. After all, that was the purpose of the meeting itself.³

This reconstruction goes beyond what the verse supplies and so could be subject to criticism at a number of points. However, González is surely right to highlight that Jewish and Gentile powers were forced into some sort of a joint venture, whereby a verdict regarding the belief and the behavior of Paul might be attained.

What the narrative portrays is that “[t]hose who control religious and political institutions must listen to Paul and respond to him in some way.” Much as Paul had been confronted by Jesus and his message (Acts 9), so the powers of this world are here “forced” to listen to an ambassador of the kingdom which Jesus is establishing and to take action based on what they hear. Whatever Paul was up to has serious political implications. As Robert Tannehill observes, “The narrator is not content to present the powerful effect of the Christian mission in the private lives of individuals.” What has taken place in the person and work of Jesus and which continues through his followers has bearing in myriad ways on how nations, families, and individuals relate to God, to one another, and to the rest of creation. This continuity with Jesus and his activity in the world is indicated, among other things, by the way the narrator casts individuals such as Paul so that they resemble the presentation of Christ in the Gospels.

Several historical details about the Sanhedrin meeting with Claudius and Paul were left out of Acts, which results in a narrative in which “Luke pictures the scene as though it were a meeting of the Sanhedrin (23:1, 6), possibly because he wants to bring out the parallelism between Jesus and Paul.” Such an understanding is perhaps strengthened by the fact that the only occurrence of the term translated “Sanhedrin” in the Gospel According to Luke appears with reference to their examination of Jesus (Luke 22:66). Moreover, Jesus had prophesied that his followers would be dragged into synagogues and before kings and governors where

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5 Ibid., 285.  
6 For example, cf. the helpful paralleling of the miracles performed by Jesus and Paul in C. Marvin Pat, et. al., *The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 183.  
the disciples are to testify to both Jews and Gentiles concerning the appearance and the activity of the Kingdom of God in Jesus, who is the Christ (Matt 10:16-18; Luke 21:12-13). Paul joins some of the twelve apostles (Acts 4:5-22; 5:17-41) and Stephen (6:8-7:60) as representatives of Jesus and his Kingdom who appear, as he did, before the Jewish court in Jerusalem. However, Paul alone among Christ’s ambassadors is narrated to have testified concerning Jesus before governors and a king (chs. 24-26), and the book concludes with Paul anticipating a hearing before the emperor (25:11-12, 21; 26:32; 27:24; 28:19). Through Paul, first Jewish and then Gentile authorities are given the opportunity to align with Jesus and his authority over all of the earth. Within the overall composition, Paul seems to serve as the parade case in a transformed Israel who joins in the mission and the suffering of God whereby both Israel and the nations are confronted with the blessed new world order that has broken into the old. Since this new creation emerges within a new Israel, there must be fidelity to the unique identity and mission God has given to Israel. This is the concern raised by the Jews who opposed Paul in the Temple and to which he now responds before the leaders of his people.

The Defense Opening (23:1)

As J. Bradley Chance notes, “Readers should assume a narrative gap to stand between 22:30 and 23:1; surely some type of preliminary discussion, presentation of charges, or the like must have taken place.”8 Rather than rehearse those details, the narrator has chosen to zoom in on Paul at the moment in which he prepares to address the Sanhedrin. Paul is portrayed with eyes fixed intently on the Jewish authorities, whom he addresses as “men,

8 J. Bradley Chance, Acts (Smyth & Helwys; Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), 423.
brothers,” “the common formal address used among assembled Jews” (cf. 1:16; 2:29, 37; 7:2, 26; 13:15, 26, 38; 15:7, 13; 22:1; 23:6; 28:17).⁹

Paul declares that with a clear conscience he has lived as a citizen before God up to this day. This seems to communicate that “despite his being in Roman custody and standing before the Jewish supreme council, nothing within Paul convicts him of any wrongdoing; in fact, his conscience exonerates him.”¹⁰ Paul claims to be “a good Jew and a good Roman” (cf. Acts 25:8).¹¹ Nevertheless, the language employed, and the context in which it appears, serves to indicate that “Paul is first and foremost a citizen of the kingdom of God, and this dictates how he will live his life” (cf. Phil 1:27; 3:20).¹² What this points toward is that, through his opening statement, Paul telescopes the speech he delivered to the Temple mob in the previous chapter and extends that testimony of faithfulness to the God of Israel to include the recent activities for which he now stands charged (cf. 24:10-21).¹³ And a significant implication derives from such a declaration. As John B. Polhill indicates, “If Paul’s life as a Christian left him in complete innocence before God, then the Sanhedrin members who did not share his commitment to Christ were the guilty parties.”¹⁴ This perhaps lessens some of the shock over what happens next.

⁹ Richard N. Longenecker, “Acts,” The Expositor’s Bible Commentary 10, revised edition, eds. Tremper Longman, III, and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 1050. However, the two-word address, which is so common in Acts, never appears in the narration of formal Jewish assemblies in the Gospels.
¹⁰ Chance, 424.
¹³ Tannehill, 285-86, is perhaps overly specific when he claims that the statement serves to indicate that Paul has lived in obedience to the vision reported in chapter 22 whereby he was called to follow Jesus as his King.
The Discipline Order (23:2)

No counterargument or questioning is narrated. Instead, there is a report that the high priest orders that Paul be struck on the mouth. It is noteworthy that we are told where Paul was struck – “on the mouth.” Although the verse does not make plain why Paul is struck, where he was hit is viewed by some as an interpretive clue. Joseph A. Fitzmyer writes, “The mouth is specified because of what Paul has just said.”\(^\text{15}\) It seems to make sense that such a violent act fits better as a response to what was spoken, rather than to the possibility that Paul spoke before he was spoken to.\(^\text{16}\) Thus, John Stott is perhaps right to dismiss the latter explanation, along with a couple of others, in a well-worded evaluation of the reason for the high priest’s command:

It can hardly have been on a point of order that Paul spoke before he had been spoken to. Nor does it seem that his reason and experience were affronted, inasmuch as anybody who claimed to have lived a consistently conscience-free life was (in his view) a blatant liar. Nor is it easily conceivable that the high priest was exasperated by a plea of ‘not guilty’. The most likely explanation is that Ananias understood Paul’s words as a claim that, though now a Christian, he was still a good Jew, having served God with a good conscience all his life.\(^\text{17}\)

Some of the dismissed proposals remain debated and it is possible that multiple factors contributed to the high priest’s order. However, Stott rightly captures the larger context in which a primary issue is whether or not Paul is faithful to the God of Israel, given the proclamation of Jesus as the Christ and the practices which Paul has joined to that message.


When the verse is viewed in the context of the surrounding verses, the narrative effect is that “the high priest does not come off looking judicious or fair for ordering corporal punishment of a man who is guilty of nothing more than declaring his innocence.”\(^\text{18}\) A surface reading clearly places Ananias in a bad light, as a poor leader. John Calvin comments, “When Ananias, the president of the Council, ought to have been a restraining influence on the others by his gravity, he forgot all moderation, and incites them to violence and cruelty.”\(^\text{19}\) If the view is widened to include the larger story of Paul in Acts, what is immediately apparent is that “[a]ny hope that the council would respond with more hospitality than did the crowd in the Jerusalem streets evaporates abruptly.”\(^\text{20}\) Such a context invites the question, “How will Paul respond this time?” But before a move to the answer to that question, it is important to consider three details in this verse.

First, a single high priest is mentioned here, whereas a plurality of high priests is included among those gathered together according to the summary in 22:30. This is in keeping with references throughout the Gospels and Acts to both a singular high priest and a collection of high priests as ruling together over the people of God.\(^\text{21}\) Scripture does not

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\(^{18}\) Chance, 424.


\(^{21}\) The term “high priest” appears in the singular thirty-nine times (Matt 26:3, 51, 57, 58, 62, 63, 65; Mark 2:26; 14:53, 54, 60, 61, 63, 66; Luke 3:2; 22:50; John 11:49, 51; 18:10, 13, 15 [2x], 16, 19, 22, 24, 26; Acts 4:6; 5:17, 21, 27; 7:1; 9:1; 19:14; 22:5; 23:2, 4, 5; 24:1) and the plural sixty-six times (Matt 2:4; 16:21; 20:18; 21:15, 23, 45; 26:3, 14, 47, 59; 27:1, 3, 6, 12, 20, 41, 62; 28:11; Mark 8:31; 10:33; 11:18, 27; 14:1, 10, 43, 47, 53, 55; 15:1, 3, 10, 11, 31; Luke 9:22; 19:47; 20:1, 19; 22:2, 4, 52, 54, 66; 23:4, 10, 13, 24:20; John 6:7; 32, 45; 11:47, 57; 12:10; 18:3, 35; 19:6, 15, 21; Acts 4:23; 5:24; 9:14, 21; 22:30; 23:14; 25:2, 15; 26:10, 12). However, one of the singular occurrences appears with reference to two names (Luke 3:2; cf. Acts 4:6). The only other New Testament book to employ the word is the Letter to the Hebrews, where it appears seventeen times and contrasts the better and everlasting high priesthood of Jesus in the new covenant with that which operated in the old. In the Septuagint, the word appears just forty-four times and always in the singular. The term occurs just three times in the books which the Septuagint shares with the Hebrew Bible, once in Leviticus and twice in Joshua. The rest are in the deuterocanonical books of 1 Esdras (4x), 1 Maccabees (20x), 2 Maccabees (13x), 3
supply a clear explanation as to what this means. Typically, the inference is drawn that “although there was only one high priest in office at a time, retired high priests retained their title and much of their influence until their death.” This seems especially evident in the case of Annas, who sometimes is referred to as the high priest during the time when his son-in-law Caiaphas actually occupied the office (cf. Luke 3:2; John 18:13-14, 19-24; Acts 4:6).

Second, the high priest before whom Paul appears is named Ananias (cf. 24:1), the third character so named in the book of Acts, beyond the borders of which the name never appears in the New Testament. The first is the husband of Sapphira who, together with his wife, contributes generously to the apostolic community, but falls into Satan’s trap and falls dead at the apostles’ feet as judgment against practicing deception not only before humans but also before God who is present in the assembly of Jesus-followers (Acts 5:1-11). The second is the disciple at Damascus through whose initially-reluctant hands the Lord heals Paul of the judgment of blindness, which was caused by his persecution of those who professed Jesus is the Christ (Acts 9:1-19; 22:12-16). Thus, the third is the only Ananias not numbered among the followers of Jesus. But this Ananias, like the other two, appears in a story about judgment. In fact, his first action is to order the punishment of Paul, whose life already hangs in the balance as a Jew who has been accused of blasphemy.

22 Loveday Alexander, Acts (The People’s Bible Commentary; Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2006), 170. Cf. also Witherington, 191, who cites J. Jeremias, Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 157. Something somewhat similar perhaps occurs in the case of presidents of the United States of America, where past office-holders continue to represent the nation in a quasi-official capacity and are referred to by their last name prefaced with the title either “President” or “Former President.”

23 Ananias is to be distinguished from the high priest referenced earlier in Acts, whose name Annas is quite similar (4:6; cf. Luke 3:2; John 18:13, 24). The only additional references to a high priest with the inclusion of his name to be found in the New Testament, outside of Abiathar (Mark 2:26) and the mysterious Melchizedek (Heb 5:10; 6:20; cf. 5:6; 7:1, 10, 11, 15, 17) whose priesthoods are narrated in the Old Testament, are Caiaphas (Matt 26:3, 57; Luke 3:2; John 11:49; 18:13, 14, 24, 28; Acts 4:6) and Sceva (Acts 19:14). Cf. also John and Alexander in Acts 4:6.
Third, it is not made explicit why Ananias responds to the statement of Paul with “with physical abuse rather than reasoned rebuttal.” As Luke Timothy Johnson notes, “The order to strike Paul reminds us vividly of the scene involving Jesus in John 18:22-23, but the motivation in either case is obscure, and its unexpectedness (or irregularity) may account for Paul’s response.” Whatever the motive for the seemingly extreme order given by Ananias, the harsh response by Paul elevates the intensity.

The Disparaging Oracle (23:3)

Paul remains bold and steadfast in the face of political accusations and physical abuse. With his mouth still stinging, Paul “goes on the offensive, switching from defendant and apologist to prosecutor and proclaimer.” Yet in the process, “Paul does not attack the servant, but the person who gave the order.” That is, Paul holds accountable the person who ultimately is responsible. At the same time, what Paul says is “perhaps his most vindictive statement anywhere in Acts or his letters.” Paul utters a curse against the high

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26 This phrase is an adaptation from Larkin, 327.
27 F. Scott Spencer, Journeying through Acts: A Literary-Rhetorical Reading (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 221.
29 Craig L. Blomberg, From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006), 70.
priest, whom Paul then calls a derogatory name and criticizes for legal hypocrisy in the handling of Paul. What follows will consider each of these three components of Paul’s speech in turn.

First, the curse against the high priest contains an important verbal link with the act which he ordered against Paul – “Though lackeys of the high priest have struck (typ[t]ein) Paul, he declares that it is God who will strike (typ[t]ein) Ananias.” In the face of injustice, Paul invokes God to act against his appointed high priest. To do so, Paul employs a curse formula that seems to be drawn from Deuteronomy 28:22, which appears in the midst of the list of covenant curses that would befall God’s people should they walk in rebellion against the law, or instruction, of God. This indicates that Paul “interprets the council’s peremptory strike against him as evidence that it rejects his mission and message and, therefore, Israel’s God.” Thus, the high priest, far from representing God through the embodiment and the exposition of his word, is implicitly charged with the violation of it. Ananias is not what he appears to be, as the name-calling which follows emphasizes.

Second, Paul labels Ananias a “white-washed wall,” which builds on the precedent set by Stephen, who addresses the high priest and the entire Sanhedrin as covenant violators through the use of the labels “stiff-necked” and “uncircumcised in heart and ears” (Acts

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30 Calvin, 227, interprets the opening phrase as a threat rather than a curse, “For it is not a curse, as the Greek context makes plain enough, but rather a reproof coupled with the announcement of a punishment.” Bede, Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, trans. Lawrence T. Martin (Cistercian Studies 117; Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1989), cited in Acts, ed. Francis Martin (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament 5; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 277, interprets the phrase as a prophetic statement, “He did not say, ‘May God strike you.’ In fact, he signified by the indicative mood that this thing was going to happen; he did not utter a curse by using the optative mood.”

31 Chance, 424.

7:51). The address Paul uses also recalls the similar identification of the scribes and the Pharisees by Jesus as “white-washed tombs” due to their hypocrisy (Matt 23:27-28; cf. Luke 11:37-44). However, the closest parallel to the term “white-washed wall” is perhaps found in Ezekiel 13:10ff., where the image of “a crumbling wall covered with whitewash to conceal its decay, ready to fall with the first rainstorm,” is employed with respect to the false prophets of Israel who deceive the people of God. Just as Ezekiel says those lying “servants” of God “could no more stand against the onrushing judgment of God than a stone wall held together only by whitewash can withstand an oncoming flood,” so in the preceding curse Paul prophesies that judgment will befall Ananias. Given the associations of “whitewash” with hypocrisy, this appears to be the reason for the verdict the prisoner Paul issues against the high priest. In fact, in the subsequent words, “Paul makes the hypocrisy explicit as he declares that this one who sits to render judgment in accordance with the Jewish law himself violates the very law it is his place to uphold.”

33 This observation is drawn from Gaventa, 313.
35 Polhill, 468.
36 Larkin, 327.
37 The identification of this curse as prophecy is consistently found in the commentary literature, where emphasis is often placed on its fulfillment in the events surrounding the murder of Ananias in A.D. 66, which is reported in Josephus, *The War of the Jews* 2:426-29, 441-42, in *The Works of Flavius Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1987). By contrast, Bede, 277, emphasizes a Christological dimension to the understanding of Paul’s words here as prophecy, “[H]e [Paul] surely spoke by way of prophesying, for, as a figure, that high priesthood that had been compared to the likeness of a whitewashed wall was to be struck and destroyed, since the true priesthood of Christ had now come with the apostles’ preaching of the gospel.”
39 Chance, 424.
Third, a singular and emphatic “you” directs the accusation of acting as an unjust judge directly at Ananias. As Beverly Roberts Gaventa points out, “This accusation puts Ananias in the same company as earlier accusers of Paul, who commit the very acts of which they accuse him (see, e.g., 16:20; 17:1-9; 19:23-41).” The charge that Ananias violates the very law which he is supposed to uphold comes in the form of a question, which does not make explicit what law Ananias is accused of violating. This might be similar to the charge Stephen makes against the Sanhedrin, “you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it” (Acts 7:53). What this perhaps indicates is that “Luke is characterizing Judaism through its representatives – its relation to the Law is broken and hypocritical (cf. 7:50-53).” Although Paul does not cite a specific law, he perhaps alludes to Leviticus 19:15 (cf. Deut 1:16-17; 19:15-21), which states that God’s people must not render unjust judgment but rather judge their neighbor with justice. The problem in the case of Paul is that “[n]o verdict had been reached, no deliberations even begun, and yet the action of the high priest had already pronounced judgment.” Worse yet, “Ananias’s rejection of Paul’s prophetic ministry among the Jews incriminates not only the high priest but also all of unrepentant Israel, who blindly follow his spiritual leadership.” As the next verse makes clear, no one in the Sanhedrin challenges the activity and the authority of the high priest. All become complicit with his treatment of Paul, which stands over against God and his word, as well as his appointed King Jesus, much as Paul himself had previously stood during his

40 Gaventa, 313.
42 Polhill, 468.
persecution of the early church. At the same time, it is often asked why Paul does not appear to follow the pattern set by Jesus with regard to defense before accusers.

Jesus typically stood silent before his accusers and refused to retaliate. Moreover, Jesus had specifically taught his disciples to turn the other cheek when slapped (Matt 5:39; Luke 6:29; cf. Isa 50:6). Paul even summarizes his ministry and that of his fellow apostles with the words, “When reviled, we bless” (1 Cor 4:12; cf. 1 Pet 3:9). Yet it might appear that in a “burst of anger” Paul curses Ananias who has cursed him. Thus, some conclude that “despite all that seems right about Paul’s response, it is, as Paul will quickly admit, still wrong.” However, as John 18:22-23 makes plain, “when Jesus himself was struck during his interrogation before Annas, he too protested against the illegality of the action.” Thus, to find Paul guilty of violating this theology would incriminate Jesus as well. Surely some other meaning is intended here.

As Chrysostom observes, “[W]e often find Christ Himself ‘speaking abusively’ to the Jews when abused by them.” It then appears that there is a time for sharp yet sound speech rather than silence before one’s accusers. The exegetical and pastoral insight of Calvin is helpful here:

45 Longenecker, 1051. Longenecker, 363, affirms the straightforward sense which is reflected in the angry-outburst interpretation, “We should not dismiss out of hand the simple explanation that Paul lost his temper, with verse 5 giving something of an apology: Paul was both human and sinful, and we do not need to credit him with a sinless perfection that he himself never claimed.” Although Longenecker admits the possibility of this interpretation, he concludes that a greater probability lies with another view.
46 Larkin, 327.
47 Bruce, The Book, 426.
48 Cf. Chrysostom, 290, “For neither was it abuse that was spoken by him [Paul], unless one would call Christ’s words abusive, when he says, ‘Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, for ye are like unto whitened walls.’”
49 Chrysostom, 290. Cf. Longenecker, 363, “Paul spoke out in the name of God against his [Ananias’] corruption, just as Jesus had spoken quite freely of Pharisaic corruption (Lk. 11:39-52).”
Christ does not demand silence from His people, which may encourage the boldness and impudence of the wicked, but only puts a bridle on their minds, so that they may not be impatient in bearing an injury that they have received. Christ wishes His people to be prepared to suffer a second injury as well as one they have already received, and in this way He curbs all desire for revenge. This is a true and brief definition of endurance, which is becoming to all the faithful, so that they may not boil over in anger, and match injury with injury (ne certent maleficiis), but strive to overcome evil with goodness. But this does not prevent them from complaining about injuries done to them, convicting the ungodly of their guilt, and summoning them to the judgment-seat of God, provided that they do so calm of mind, and, secondly, without ill-will and hatred, just as here Paul appeals to God’s judgment, so that the high priest may not pride himself in his tyranny.\(^{50}\)

Sometimes something simply has to be said, and that for the salvation of the person(s) addressed, or others under their influence, or both. Criticism in such instances is not focused on self-preservation, but on the good of others. Motivation matters. Quoting at length again from Calvin:

> Therefore let there be no desire to revile, and in that way it will be lawful, not only to take note of foolishness in our brothers, but also to describe their crimes for their own sakes when the need arises. Thus Paul did not speak for his own sake, in order to avenge the high priest’s insult with abusive language; but, because he was a minister of the Word of God, he did not wish to pass over in silence an outrageous act, that deserved a grave and earnest rebuke, especially since it would be a beneficial thing to drag out the gross hypocrisy of Ananias from its hiding-place into the light of day. Therefore, whenever we have to deal with impudent men, if we desire to present a good case well, we must take care that no emotion of anger surge up in us, and that no desire for revenge stimulate us to be abusive. However if the spirit of gentleness rules in us, we shall be free to deal with impious men, as if out of the mouth of God, in accordance with their deserts; yet in such a way that it is apparent that we are...

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\(^{50}\) Calvin, 227-28. Similar pastoral counsel, accompanied by reference to the political theology expressed in Romans 13:1-7, appears in N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part Two: Chapters 13-28* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 168, “God wants the world to be governed, because he wants people to live in peace and justice, and if you don’t have structures of justice then the bullies, the extortioners and the rest will always win. The problem, of course, is when those structures become structures of injustice; but the present passage meets that question head on. The fact that you must respect the structures does not rule out, but rather actually includes, the duty to remind the people currently operating the structures what it is that they ought to be doing, and for that matter not doing.” Cf. Dennis E. Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997), 233 n. 35, which references the same Romans passage, along with 1 Peter 2:13-17, as corresponding to Paul’s actions relative to human authority in Acts 23:1-5.
prophets rather than people who thoughtlessly blurt out anything with uncontrolled passion.\textsuperscript{51}

This is sound advice and insight which draws on the larger theology of Scripture as Calvin sees it. However, it perhaps comes at the cost of losing something of the compositional context. Therefore, it would be well to combine this theological interpretation with a more careful compositional reflection such as is offered by C. K. Barrett:

What Luke wishes us to see (and doubtless he was right) is the courage with which Paul faced official opposition, injustice, and violence. When many a man would cringe, Paul answers back, and points out (this is more important than the curse – if curse is the right word) that the Jewish judge is himself not observing the Law that he is appointed to administer. This is a point that Luke emphasizes throughout the book; his complaint against Jews is not that they are Jews but that they are not good Jews. The better they are the greater the sympathy they will show to the Christians.\textsuperscript{52}

Courage and commitment to the Scriptures and to the God of Israel are portrayed here, and throughout the book of Acts, in the lives of those who submit to Jesus as King. By implication, “If a Jew refuses to accept the Christian message he, and not the Christian, is a traitor to the Law and the Prophets.”\textsuperscript{53} So far in this passage, the wrong person appears to be on trial.

\textbf{The Designation Offended (23:4)}

Bystanders express their shock, if not outrage, that Paul would dare to speak this way to the high priest.\textsuperscript{54} The irony, and indeed hypocrisy, here is that the onlookers “do not appear

\textsuperscript{51} Calvin, 228.
\textsuperscript{52} Barrett, 1053-54.
\textsuperscript{53} Dermot Cox, “Paul Before the Sanhedrin,” \textit{Liber annus} 21 (1971): 64.
\textsuperscript{54} John 18:22 records a strikingly similar question asked of Jesus when he appeared before the high priest Annas, as noted in Barrett 1061; S. L. Bowman, “Paul and Ananias before the Sanhedrin at Jerusalem,” \textit{Methodist Review} 78 (July 1896), 577; Bruce, \textit{The Book}, 426 n. 11; \textit{idem., The Greek Text}, 464; Marshall, 363; and C. Williams, 248. Cf. Bruce, \textit{The Greek Text}, 464, “As on the journey to Jerusalem, so now before the high priest Luke seems to draw conscious parallels between the experiences of the Master and the servant.”
to have been so shocked by Ananias’s outburst, although that was no way for the high priest to speak.” Calvin makes the same point, “For why do they not rather find fault with Ananias, when they saw that he forgot all moderation, and broke out in violence and blows in a barbarous manner?” Thus, it is not only Ananias, but also the other Jewish leaders gathered with him, who are portrayed here in a bad light. Equally on display is their solidarity, as the bystanders “come to the priest’s defense, asking Paul rhetorically whether he would revile God’s high priest (v. 4).” Alternatively, Gaventa proposes the possibility that the question “virtually invites Paul to give vent to disrespect for the high priest,” which means “the bystanders goad him [Paul] to repudiate the high priest and, therefore, the people, the temple, and the law (21:28).”

Among the interpretive issues in Acts 23:4 is that the word translated “God’s” or “of God” is grammatically connected to the term translated “high priest,” which combination forms an “unusual expression.” Usually, the term translated “high priest” is not appended in “Scripture,” but when it is the appended term does not explicitly denote deity. The rare instances include: Jonathan, the brother of Judas Maccabeus, as “the high priest of your [the Jewish] nation” (1 Macc 10:20), Onias II as “the high priest of the city [Jerusalem]” (2 Macc 3:9), Alcimus as “the high priest of the great temple” (2 Macc 14:13), and Jesus as “the high priest of our confession” (Heb 3:1; cf. 4:14) and “the high priest of the good things (which come) through the greater and perfect tabernacle” (Heb 9:11). However, Barrett mentions

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55 Bruce, The Book, 426.
56 Calvin, 228.
57 Chance, 424.
58 Gaventa, 314.
59 Haenchen, 638.
60 To these could be added the following instances, which use a different grammatical construction: Simon, the brother of Judas Maccabeus, as “the great high priest” (1 Macc 13:42; 14:27) and Jesus as a “merciful and
three instances where the shorter term which is translated “priest” is appended with another word(s) that denotes deity in order to form a phrase which denotes the high priest:

Melchizedek is referred to as the “priest of God Most High” (Gen 14:18; Heb 7:1), Eli as “the priest of God” (1 Sam 14:3), and Abiathar as “the priest of the Lord” (1 Kgs 2:27). These three instances then form the nearest thing to a scriptural parallel to the label “the high priest of God.” However, the informing contribution they might offer for the interpretation of the Acts passage has been overlooked for the most part. A thorough study of the possible relationship between these passages is beyond the scope of this thesis, but three preliminary observations might indicate the potential value of such a pursuit.

First, it is significant to note that the reference to Eli occurs in the midst of the identification of Ahijah as one of his priestly descendants (1 Sam 14:3; cf. 14:18-19). This is faithful high priest” (Heb 2:17). Moreover, a near-parallel is perhaps found in a construction which uses the term translated “priest” – the Amaziah who served during the reign of Jeroboam II is identified as “the priest of Bethel” (Amos 7:10, Bethel is a sacred city whose name is translated “House of God”). Translations mine. 61 Barrett, 1060. Whether or not they refer specifically to a high priest, there are also two instances of such a construction used with respect to pagan deities, Mattan as “the priest of Baal” (2 Kgs 11:18; 2 Chron 23:17) and the unnamed person as “the priest of Zeus” (Acts 14:13). However, the use of this construction as a label for a high priest is evidently absent from the identification “priests of the Lord” which is applied to Hophni and Phinehas (1 Sam 1:3), the descendants of Eli slaughtered by Saul (1 Sam 22:17 [2x], 21), those driven out and replaced with a false priesthood by King Jeroboam I (2 Chron 13:9), the eighty who joined Azariah in opposing King Uzziah for his presumption in burning incense in the temple (2 Chron 26:17), and the restored Israel (Isa 61:6), as well as from the identification “priests of God and of Christ” which is applied to Jesus’ faithful followers (Rev 20:6). The same can be said with respect to pagan deities in the references to “the priests of Dagon” (1 Sam 5:5), “the priests of Bel” (Bel 1:15; cf. 1:9 [TH], 11 [TH]), and “the priests of Nanea” (2 Macc 1:15; cf. 1:13). Yet these need not violate the pattern, since the plural form of the term “priest” is used in these verses. Some other phrases which employ the term “priest” and are used as a reference to the high priest include: Aaron (Ezra 7:5; 1 Esd 8:2), Seraiyah (2 Kgs 25:18; Jer 52:24), and the Azariah who served during the reign of Uzziah (2 Chron 26:20) as “the head/chief priest” in the Hebrew Bible or “the first priest” in the Septuagint; Jehoiada, the father of Benaiah (1 Chron 27:5; cf. 12:27), and the Azariah who served during the reign of Hezekiah (2 Chron 31:10) as “the head/chief priest” in the Hebrew or “the ruling priest” in the Greek; the Jehoiada who served during the reign of Josiah (2 Chron 24:11); the Amariah who served during the reign of Jehoshaphat as “the head/chief priest” (2 Chron 24:11); the general reference to the office (Lev 21:10; Num 35:25, 28, 32 [Greek]; Josh 20:6 [Hebrew]; 1 Chron 9:31 [Greek]); the Jehoiada who served during the reign of Jehoshaphat as “the head/chief priest” (2 Chron 24:11); the Amariah who served during the reign of Josiah (2 Chron 24:11); a postexilic Eliashib (Neh 3:1, 20; 13:28), the Joshua of postexilic Jerusalem (Hag 1:1, 12, 14; 2:2, 4; Zech 3:1, 8; 6:11), Joakim (Jdt 4:6, 8, 14; 15:8), Onias I (1 Macc 12:20), Simon I (1 Macc 14:20; 15:2), and Simon II (Sir 50:1) as “the great priest” (2 Kgs 23:4); and Jesus as a “great priest” (Heb 10:21). Translations mine.
interesting because earlier that narrative emphasizes the rebelliousness against the Lord exhibited by Eli’s two sons Hophni and Phinehas (1 Samuel 2:12-17, 22-25), which resulted in the rejection of Eli’s household as an everlasting priesthood (2:27ff.). God promises as a sign of his rejection of Eli’s house that both of his sons would die on the same day (2:34; cf. 4:11), and promises to raise up for himself a faithful high priest whose actions will accord with God’s heart and mind and to whom Eli’s descendants will come pleading for bread (2:35). It seems possible to see here a foreshadowing of the priesthood of Jesus in which the bread of the Eucharist is offered for the healing of God’s nation of priests (including the priestly line, cf. Acts 6:7), as well as of all nations. Moreover, the prophecy of judgment on Eli’s house finds fulfillment not only in the deaths of Hophni and Phinehas, but also when Saul later kills all of the descendants of Eli, presumably including Ahijah (1 Sam 22:6-22). Among the reasons this slaughter takes place is Saul’s irrational jealousy of David, whom Saul had previously sought to kill (19:1ff.), whom Saul now thought that the priests had sided with against him (22:11ff.), and who had already been secretly anointed king in Saul’s place (16:1-13). Thus, the murder of the priests occurs in the midst of the narration of the rise of David amid the demise of Saul, which finds its full expression only with the death of Saul (1 Samuel 31; 2 Samuel 1) and the public declaration of David as king (2 Sam 2:1-11). This somewhat mysterious and bloody transition to a new leadership over the people of God saw but one priest escape Saul’s executioner – Abiathar, who flees to David and informs him that Saul has slaughtered “the priests of the LORD” (1 Sam 22:20-21; cf. 23:6-9). Then, during the formal reign of David, Abiathar (cf. 2 Sam 15:35; 17:15; 19:12; 20:25; 1 Kgs 1:7,
19; 1 Chron 15:11) and his descendants (cf. 2 Sam 8:17; 15:27; 1 Chron 18:16; 24:6) are given a prominent role among the priests.

Second, the reference to Abiathar as high priest is when Solomon expelled Abiathar from the priesthood (1 Kgs 2:27), shortly after the death of David (2:10-11). This was an essential part of establishing the reign of Solomon, since Abiathar had been numbered among those who joined in the recent attempt to install Solomon’s half-brother Adonijah as king in place of the aged David (cf. 1:5-27). However, the narrative lists another reason for the deposition of Abiathar. It is explicitly equated with fulfillment of the prophecy against the house of Eli (1 Kgs 2:27). A new priesthood had to be established in place of Eli’s. In this instance, Abiathar’s long-time co-laborer Zadok is appointed high priest in his stead (2:35).

Thus, the first two near-parallels to the title “the high priest of God” are associated with the outworking of the replacement of one priestly line with another, as well as with transitions first to the reign of David, who is promised an eternally reigning descendant (cf. 2 Sam 7), and second to the reign of his son Solomon.

Third, the reference to the high priesthood of Melchizedek (Gen 14:18; Heb 7:1) first appears in the narrative long prior to the institution of the Mosaic covenant and its Levitical priesthood. These verses also identify Melchizedek as the king of Salem, who greets Abra(ha)m who has just been victorious in battle. Moreover, they specify that Melchizedek brings bread and wine to Abraham, on whom Melchizedek pronounces God’s blessing, combined with a blessing of God himself (Gen 14:18-19). This all perhaps foreshadows the Eucharist. In any case, no genealogy or posterity is listed for this priest and king, whose only other appearance in the Old Testament is in Psalms 110:4. There the emphasis is again on an
individual who is victorious in battle. However, this time it is a king, who is associated with
David in some way via the superscript. Moreover, the opening address is from God to “my
Lord” (v. 1), whom the New Testament interprets not as a reference to David but to the
greater David to come, who is the long-promised Messiah and Lord, who has been revealed
to be Jesus. Moreover, the opening address is from God to “my
Lord” (v. 1), whom the New Testament interprets not as a reference to David but to the
greater David to come, who is the long-promised Messiah and Lord, who has been revealed
to be Jesus.62 A second address from God in the psalm assures the king, “You are a priest
forever after the order of Melchizedek” (Pss 110:4). Thus, the figure addressed is both a king
and a priest, and that perpetually. This verse is later cited by the author of Hebrews as
pointing to Jesus (Heb 5:6; 7:17, 21), the priest-king whose priesthood in some ways
resembles that of the cryptic Melchizedek and stands in stark contrast to the failed Aaronic
priesthood (cf. Heb 5-7). Thus, all three near-parallels to “the high priest of God” are
connected to a larger scriptural trajectory that has to do with the replacement of the failed
priesthood under the old covenant with the faithful priesthood under the new. It seems
reasonable to see the rare expression in Acts as tapping into this trajectory, especially given
the suspect portrayal of Ananias in the passage to which return must now be made.

The use of the phrase “the high priest of God” is intended “to heighten the offence: it is
no common man whom you insult, but the high priest who has been appointed by and thus
represents God himself.”63 The askers of the question perhaps intended to emphasize the
“dignity” of the person Ananias by appeal to the position he held.64 At the same time, their
“emphasis on his being the representative of God shifts the focus from the man to the role,

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63 Barrett, 1061.
64 Cf. Haenchen, 638, “the unusual expression is intended to emphasize the dignity of the man scolded by Paul”; and Fitzmyer, 717, “Thus is expressed the dignity of the man reprimanded by Paul: he is not just a high priest, but God’s high priest.”
and in that respect Paul’s demeanor underwent a radical change as well.”

Indeed, Paul had to repent in order to remain faithful to God, if the sense of the question is something like, “Do you dare be so shameless as to demean the very honor of God by mocking God’s highest representative?”

The Disclosed Obedience (23:5)

Paul perhaps acknowledges his guilt in regard to the most recent charge, but attributes it to his ignorance about the identity of Ananias. The text does not at this point make explicit that Paul apologizes for wrongdoing, just that he admits to a lack of knowledge. Whatever the response such a claim may have elicited from Paul’s hearers that day, his statement of ignorance has troubled interpreters of the book of Acts, perhaps ever since it was published. Several answers have been suggested in response to the question as to how Paul could not have known that Ananias was the high priest. Darrell L. Bock summarizes five responses, each of which warrants careful consideration, even if “none of the various explanations offered for this anomaly is entirely satisfying.”

First, the speculation is made “that in the babel of voices in court Paul was not able to identify who it was who had ordered him to be struck.” Put more subtly, “[W]as Paul not

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65 Polhill, 469. Cf. Witherington, 689.
66 Spencer, 222. Cf. Larkin, 327, “Here is God’s high priest, Israel’s chief leader since it has no king, and Paul has declared God’s judgment on him!”
67 Darrell L. Bock, Acts (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 670. Cf. Barrett, 1062, “The multiplicity of explanations shows that the historical question is not an easy one…There is historical material behind this paragraph, but it is deep and remote, and it is wise to recognize with Bauernfeind that there are limits to our power to explain.”
68 Gaventa, 314.
69 Stott, 352. Stott, 352, cleverly draws on Paul’s name-calling of Ananias in support of his interpretation, “In this case ‘you white-washed wall’ may have been not so much a reference to hypocrisy as an uncouth allusion to a white-robed figure across the court whom Paul could only dimly perceive.”
looking in the direction from which the words came, so that he could not be sure who actually uttered them?" However, Marshall rightly observes that this and the second response each “lack foundation,” each is void of solid footing in the text itself.

Second, the speculation is made that Paul had poor eyesight, which prevented him from seeing who had given the order to strike him. Among recent commentators, John Stott opts for this view, while Hans Conzelmann refers to it as “comic” and Haenchen lists it with the previous interpretation as illustrations of the fact that Paul’s reply to the bystanders “is so unbelievable that it has driven the theologians to desperate efforts.” S. L. Bowman exposes the contextual difficulty of this interpretation when he writes, “[I]t assumes without proof that the apostle did not and could not see the high priest, while the narrative itself relates that he did see discerningly all over the assembly, discriminating the Pharisees from the Sadducees.

Related to the second view is the speculation that, rather than a problem of nearsightedness, the lack of priestly garb hindered Paul from recognizing the high priest. Stott summarizes this view well, “Some think that this was an informal meeting of the Sanhedrin and that in consequence Ananias was neither robed, nor presiding, so that he could

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70 Bruce, *The Book*, 426.
71 Marshall, 363-64.
72 Dunn, 179; and Stott, 352, cite Gal 4:13-16 and 6:11 as possibly alluding to an ocular ailment in Paul. Longenecker, 1051, criticizes this interpretation of the Acts passage as doubtful, since “Luke was not averse to excusing his hero from blame wherever possible, and it may be assumed that he would have made some reference to Paul’s failing eyesight if that were the case and was relevant here.”
73 Stott, 352.
74 Conzelmann, 192.
75 Haenchen, 640.
76 Bowman, 571.
have easily escaped recognition.” This conjecture is certainly a possibility, but the text does not supply readers with such details.

Third, the speculation is made that recently there had been a change in the high priesthood, which Paul was unaware of. As Ben Witherington observes, “Paul had been away from Jerusalem itself for about five years, but more importantly away from the corridors of Jewish power in Jerusalem for over two decades by the time this meeting occurred.” Related to this is the speculation at the opposite end of the spectrum that Paul was so aware of the rising and falling of high priests as to know that Ananias had been deposed but later usurped the position during a period of its vacancy, when Paul happened to be brought before the Sanhedrin. Calvin criticizes the succession-ignorance interpretation with appeal to the second half of verse 3:

Paul’s words put the matter beyond argument, when he rebukes him, because he makes the Law his excuse for occupying the judge’s bench, and proceeds contrary to the Law, without any moderation. Therefore, Paul knew what rank he held, when he said that he made wrong use of his power.

At the same time, the succession-knowledge interpretation suffers from the fact that “[w]hile Ananias may have been the high priest by usurpation the evidence does not seem to be conclusive of that point.” It perhaps also has difficulty squaring with Paul’s subsequent appeal to a scriptural verse that affirms submission to the appointed leader over God’s people.

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77 Stott, 352.
78 Witherington, 688.
79 Bowman, 571-72.
80 Calvin, 229.
81 Bowman, 572.
Fourth, the speculation is made that what Paul says is rhetorically driven. In this view, “The remark is ironic in the sense that Paul is trying to show that the high priest is not really the representative of the people and of God’s way, but because the high priest is so perceived by the people, Paul retracts his words.”

Witherington indicates what is then understood as the textual emphasis of Paul’s response and its meaning, “I did not realize, brothers, that he was high priest,” the point being that Ananias’s action made him unrecognizable as high priest. Polhill paraphrases it this way, “He didn’t act like a high priest should; how could I recognize him as such when he was so totally out of character?”

Calvin supports this interpretation, stating “I myself agree with Augustine, and have no doubt that this excuse is ironical.” As for Augustine, he goes farther than most recent commentators for he “finds in Paul’s declaration of ignorance an esoteric message that here the high priest is not Ananias but Christ, who by being in Paul is in truth being reviled.” However, Chrysostom points out that the scripture quotation which follows perhaps calls into question the use of irony here and appears to show that Paul “confesses him [Ananias] to be still ruler.”

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82 Bock, 670. Cf. Bruce, The Book, 426; *idem., The Greek Text*, 464, “I did not think that a man who spoke like that could possibly be the high priest”; Chance, 425, “How could I have known that one who flagrantly flouted God’s law would be the high priest?”; and Luke Johnson, 397, “the chief priest’s behavior was not in accord with his status and function.”

83 Witherington, 689. Cf. Luke Johnson, 397, “Far from an ‘apology’ for a mistake, Paul’s statement is another prophetic criticism of the chief priest, whose behavior makes him ‘unrecognizable.’”

84 Polhill, 469. Cf. Spencer, 222, “perhaps he [Paul] speaks with sarcastic intent, suggesting the high priest’s whitewashed demeanor has rendered him effectively ‘unrecognizable’ as a faithful and true leader of God’s people.”

85 Calvin, 229.

86 Martin, 276. Cf. Augustine, 277, “It is as though he were saying, ‘I have come to know another high priest, for whose name’s sake I am suffering these injuries—a high priest whom it is not lawful to revile but whom you are reviling, because in me you hate nothing else than his name.’” Bede, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* 23.5, in *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Lawrence T. Martin (Cistercian Studies 117; Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1989), cited in *Acts*, ed. Francis Martin (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament 5; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 277, makes the same argument when he writes that Paul “had actually recognized that this man was not the chief priest in the new covenant.”

87 In addition to the scripture citation, the address “brothers” for Paul’s accusers is cited as conflicting with ironical speech by Haenchen, 638, and Gaventa, 314.
Fifth, the speculation is made that “Paul reacts without considering the man’s position.” A paraphrase of the verse in this view would be, “I spoke without taking note of [i.e., taking into consideration] the fact that he is high priest.” In terms of compositional context, this could serve to indicate that “[n]ot only does Paul respect the temple, contrary to the accusation in 21:28, but also he respects the office that controls its operations.” In terms of canonical context, William Larkin, Jr., draws on the example of David to support this understanding, “Paul’s prophetic curse, given in hasty anger, had violated a basic biblical precept lived out by David in his dealing with Saul. Though an officeholder dishonors the office through his conduct, one does not have liberty to dishonor him (1 Sam 24:6; 26:9-11).” N. T. Wright expresses this perspective when he writes that Paul is “quick to apologize—not for the sentiment, but because it was expressed to someone whose office ought to be respected… Paul respects the office, though clearly not the present holder of it.” However, it remains debatable whether a person can honor an office without at the same time honoring the occupant of it. Moreover, Calvin doubts the legitimacy of this interpretation, “since the dignity of the priesthood had been abolished by the advent of Christ.” At the same time, it should be pointed out that David honored the dishonorable and deadly Saul as the Lord’s anointed/messiah (cf. 1 Sam 24:3-10; 26:9-11, 16, 21-25; 2 Sam 1:14-16) long

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88 Chrysostom, 290.
89 Bock, 670.
91 Tannehill, 286.
92 Larkin, 328.
93 Wright, 167-68. Cf. Longenecker, 1051, “All Paul could do when told that he was speaking to the high priest was apologize — though he did so, it seems, more to the office than to the man”; Polhill, 469, “Now that the focus was on the role, Paul made clear that he respected the office”; Bruce, The Book, 426, “he apologized to the official, if not to the man”; and Chance, 425, “Paul, ever portrayed by Luke as the loyal Jew, shows proper deference, if not to the man Ananias, at least to the office.”
94 Calvin, 229.
after David had been anointed to replace Saul (cf. 1 Sam 16:13; 2 Sam 2:4, 7). Bede perhaps reflects something similar with regard to Paul and Ananias:

Although [Paul] had actually recognized that this man [Ananias] was not the chief priest in the new covenant, nevertheless, in instructing others and advising them to conduct themselves more decorously toward those in power, he himself also decided to use moderation here.95

Just as David respected Saul because God had placed Saul in the office of king, despite his abuses of that position, so also it appears that Paul respects Ananias as the priest appointed by God, regardless of Ananias’ misuse of that role. Only God should remove Ananias from the priesthood, and that likely through death as the prophetic curse of Paul perhaps had already implied (Acts 23:3; cf. Lev 10; 1 Sam 26:9-11).

Bock admits, “Any of these options is possible, although either of the latter two is more likely, as the first two are difficult to accept as probable and the third also seems uncertain given Paul’s past relationship with Jews in Jerusalem.”96 Each of the last two views perhaps draws attention to the office as much as to the person who occupies it. However, it is debatable how much the office can be separated from the officer.97 This perhaps gets into a chicken-or-the-egg debate – which came first, the office or the official? Did God create positions and then fill them with people? Or did God call people to fulfill particular roles in the reshaping of humanity, amid which offices such as the high priesthood developed (cf. e.g., the emergence of what later became the office of “deacon” in Acts 6:1-6)? Or did the creation of the positions and of those to occupy them emerge together, perhaps resembling the creation account(s) in Genesis? Or is some combination of all of these closer to what has

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95 Bede, 277.
96 Bock, 670.
97 Cf. Calvin, 229, “[I]f Paul respected the priesthood, then he ought to have paid more honour to the man who possessed it”; and 230, “[A] man, who discharges his office badly, is not to be stripped of honour.”
taken place? It is beyond the scope of this thesis to resolve such a debate. But it is worth noting that Aaron occupied a priestly role (cf. e.g., Exod 4:29-31; 5:1), which perhaps could be defined as mediating between God and his people and between God and the rest of creation, before the exodus journey to Mount Sinai, where were given the instructions regarding the Levitical priesthood. However this all developed in the mind of God and the outworking of history, it could be argued that respect for the office of the priesthood and respect for the priests who occupy that office are inseparable. But respect does not mean the refusal to critique, as the prophets of God repeatedly did according to the Old Testament.

Paul rebuked no less than the high priest of God. When confronted with this reality, Paul pleads ignorance regarding the identity of the man he cursed and expresses solidarity with his accusers, as the chosen people of God, when he addresses them as “brothers” (Acts 23:5; cf. 23:1). Paul then quotes Exodus 22:28 “against himself,” in order to show that “he did respect God’s representatives in accordance with the Torah.” Tom Wright understands this to be an illustration of what Paul means in Acts 23:1 when he says that he lives before God in a good conscience:

This does not mean ‘I have never done anything wrong’; it means ‘Whenever I have done anything wrong I have immediately done whatever was necessary to put it right’, including, as here, apologizing for a ‘sin of ignorance’ (Acts 23:5). That was precisely the kind of thing that the sacrificial system was designed to deal with.

That is certainly possible, if not probable. However, Wright perhaps leaves out some equally important New Testament background.

98 Put more simply, a priestly role could be defined as mediating between the Creator and his creation, representing God before the world and the world before God.
100 Witherington, 689. Cf. also Gaventa, 313-14.
101 Polhill, 469.
102 Wright, 168.
A subtle difference of emphasis appears in Longenecker, who writes “he [Paul] had no intention in being guided by Christ and the Holy Spirit to act in a way contrary to the law or to do less than the law commanded.” Although the term “Spirit” is not employed in Acts 23:1-5, it is well to consider the operation of the Spirit in Paul at precisely this point.

Bowman helpfully elaborates:

[W]hat is to become of our Lord’s own assurance of his apostles, of whom Paul was confessedly chief, when he says: “But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you” (Matt. X, 19, 20). “For I will give you a mouth of wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist” (Luke xxi, 15). “For it is not you that speak, but the Holy Ghost?” (Mark xii, 11).

That these circumstances fit Paul’s case is unmistakable. Our Lord puts the whole responsibility of the utterance upon the Holy Spirit, and denies it to the apostle in any case. Now, did the Holy Spirit fail Paul in the very first instance of his experience before Jewish rulers?

This understanding fits well with the compositional emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit, as well as with the meaning-giving role of canonical dialogue. However, the difficulty with this interpretation is that Paul appears to acknowledge that his speech was inappropriate. Yet this charge is avoided if the Scripture quotation of Acts 23:5b is not understood to be part of Paul’s reply. As Craig L. Blomberg points out, “it is also possible that this half-verse should be punctuated not as Paul’s words, but as Luke’s follow-up explanation (cf., his similar parenthesis in v. 8).” Alternatively, it is possible that the Spirit might have led Paul to say precisely what he said to Ananias as a prophetic critique, only for Paul then to apologize.

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104 Bowman, 577. These “assurances” also appear to find fulfillment in the narrative about Stephen in Acts 6:8-8:1.
upon his discovery of the ruling position of Ananias and affirm the Scripture which commands that he be honored. In this understanding, the Spirit is shown to speak freely through God’s servant whose speech is prophetic, even if improper due to Paul’s ignorance. And Paul is shown to humble himself before others, as Jesus instructed amid his critique of the Jewish rulers of his day (cf. Matt 23:12; Luke 14:11; 18:14). God’s mission and message then remain on display, and in a way which perhaps shows that he alone is in control. Or did the zealous Paul simply respond to Ananias from what he knew of Scripture, since the passage neither references the Spirit, nor does the book record the death of Ananias to indicate a fulfilled prophecy? Ignorant that he was addressing the high priest, Paul then quickly submits himself so that no lasting harm is done. Or was Paul simply out of step with the Spirit during the rebuke of Ananias, as in another instance Paul is recorded to be (cf. Acts 16:6-7)? It is difficult to say.

What is clear is that since Exodus 22:28 “forbids him [Paul] to speak evil of the High Priest, however badly the High Priest behaves (and Paul says nothing to moderate his judgment of the High Priest’s action), he will abstain from doing so.”106 Chrysostom observes, “He [Paul] wishes to show that he thus speaks, not from fear, nor because (Ananias) did not deserve to be called this, but from obedience to the law in this point also.”107 Therefore, “Paul, in contrast to the High Priest, makes an effort to follow the

106 Barrett, 1055. Cf. Dennis Johnson, 225, “Even when a leader abused his authority, Paul exhibited respect for the office, in deference to its divine source.” Calvin, 230, disagrees, “But when the spiritual rule degenerates the consciences of the godly are released from obedience to an unjust domination.” It seems odd that Calvin here argues for submission to secular rulers who are faulty, yet against such to their ecclesial counterparts. Since no exegetical support is given, perhaps this could be attributed to the divisive spirit of Calvin’s time through which the church was being ripped apart.
107 Chrysostom, 289.
law.”\textsuperscript{108} This marks Paul “as a Torah-abiding Jew,”\textsuperscript{109} “a good Jew, a Christian Jew.”\textsuperscript{110} Moreover, in the process of quoting this verse, whether it is attributed to Paul or to the narrator, the text “confesses him [Ananias] to be still ruler.”\textsuperscript{111} The narrator, and likely Paul, refuses to reject the high priest whom God and his people have installed.

In the end, the narrative portrays Paul as in submission to corrupt Jewish authorities, whom God is in the process of reestablishing in his new priesthood in Christ. Just as David knew God was at work to establish David as king in place of Saul yet refused to remove Saul from office, so Paul (also known as Saul; cf. Acts 13:9) arguably recognizes the fulfillment of Israel’s hopes not in the Levitical priesthood but in that of Christ yet submits to the Levitical priesthood presumably until its demise or Paul’s death. Therefore, the date of the ongoing public rejection of the Levitical priesthood by Christians must be found elsewhere, and lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

What Acts 22:30-23:5 demonstrates, among other things, is that Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, remained in submission to God, his Word (the Old Testament and the yet-to-be inscripturated teachings of Jesus and his earliest followers), and his appointed rulers over his people Israel. The new work which had just begun in Christ certainly stood in tension with the Jewish powers, but it had neither cast aside Israel nor its priesthood. Just as God did not abort creation when it went awry but initiated a process whereby it will be transformed to


\textsuperscript{109} Witherington, 689. Cf. Fitzmyer, 718; Haenchen, 638; Luke Johnson, 400; and Polhill, 469.

\textsuperscript{110} Barrett, 1055. Cf. Tannehill, 286, “This scene is a good example of the lengths to which the narrator will go to show that Paul is not anti-Jewish.”

\textsuperscript{111} Chrysostom, 290.
accomplish his original plan, so God has acted in Jesus to transform an unfaithful Israel and its faulty priesthood so that his people will bring about his intended blessing to all nations. Since the transformation rather than the trashing of the priesthood is in view, Paul remains in submission to God who will raise high or bring low the rulers of his people to accomplish his purposes. For Christians who are two thousand years removed from the events narrated by this text and who live long after the people of God became divided into the two religions of Judaism and Christianity, each of which underwent additional divisions, the question becomes what from this text can be said to inform ecclesiology today.
CHAPTER 4

THE ETHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ACTS 22:30-23:5

In order to discern the ethical significance of Acts 22:30-23:5, it is important briefly to recall something of how God has made his will for humanity explicit throughout history.

God has sometimes come to people veiled in material such as a cloud of the heavens, out of which a voice has declared the behavior God expects of humans.\(^1\) However, the hearers and the hearings of this voice have been few when considered relative to the whole of humanity and of history (cf. e.g., John 5:37). This limitation largely has been overcome as the message from the voice of God has been rehearsed orally and textually ever since those various encounters (cf. e.g., Exod 24:3-4; Deut 31:1, 9; Luke 1:1-4). Yet the rehearsals have included not only the words from God, but also a selective recounting, which is given from a certain perspective, of the attendant circumstances of the revelations,\(^2\) the ways humans have responded when confronted with words from God, and some sort of understanding as to the

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\(^2\) Cf. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 63, “there is no such thing as a ‘bare event’”; 82, “There is not, nor can there be, any such thing as a bare chronicle of events without a point of view,”; 83, “At the most trivial level, any attempt to record ‘what happened’ without selection would fail, for the sheer overwhelming volume of information – every breath taken by every human being, every falling leaf, every passing cloud in the sky. *Some* human breaths might be worth recording: that of a person thought to be dead, for instance. Some falling leaves and passing clouds might suddenly attain significance, depending on the context (consider the small cloud which Elijah’s servant saw from the top of Mount Carmel). But even a video camera set up at random would not result in a completely ‘neutral’ perspective on events. It must be sited in one spot only; it will only have one focal length; it will only look in one direction. If in one sense the camera never lies, we can see that in another sense it never does anything else. It excludes far more than it includes.”
larger story of what God has done, is doing, and will do in the world.\(^3\) Thus, every recounting of a revelatory event has communicated some view of God and the world. Each has presented something of a worldview which is built upon “the human capacity for and drive toward making sense, storied sense, of our experienced world.”\(^4\)

Over time a sacred collection of texts emerged (our Old Testament), which the chosen people of God, Israel, recognized as the authoritative and revelatory story of the Creator and his creation. Thus, the ethics expected by God became “revealed” particularly via a textually-mediated voice, in which God (via the writings of his servants) employs a variety of genres to narrate an overarching vision of where the world has come from, where it has been, and where he is taking it for those who submit to his authority and seek after his activity. This overarching narrative, or “metanarrative,” is also referred to as “the story of redemption,” “redemptive history,” or “salvation history.”\(^5\) And Christians understand Jesus of Nazareth, and the Church which embodies his message and mission, as the fulfillment of

\(^3\) Cf. Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 12, “The Bible narrates the story of God’s journey on that long road of redemption. It is a unified and progressively unfolding drama of God’s action in history for the salvation of the whole world”; Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, third edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 90, “the story they [the biblical narratives] tell is not so much our story as it is God’s story – and it becomes ours as he ‘writes’ us into it”; and Joel B. Green, “The (Re-)Turn to Narrative,” in *Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching: Reuniting New Testament Interpretation and Proclamation*, eds. Joel B. Green and Michael Pasquarello III (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 31-32, “The Bible is not first and foremost a ‘human book,’ in the sense of ‘being about’ the life and times (and sorrows and happiness) of *Homo sapiens*, or even of a particular, identifiable segment of humanity, Israel. Nor is the Bible a christological book, in the narrow sense. Its plot is *theologically* determined. Its subject and focus is God.”

\(^4\) Green, 15.

\(^5\) The term “history” is helpful here not only because it indicates a presentation of events that are purported to have actually taken place in the real world, but also because it indicates a narrative which integrates these events in such a way as to reveal their meaning and significance. Cf. Wright, 113, “The task of the historian is not simply to assemble little clumps of ‘facts’ and hope that somebody else will integrate them. The historian’s job is to show their interconnectedness, that is, how one thing follows from another, precisely by examining the ‘inside’ of the events. And the model for such connections is not simply that of random atoms cannoning into one another. It is that of the interplay of fully human life – the complex network of human aims, intentions and motivations, operating within and at the edges of the worldviews of different communities and the mindset of different individuals. To display this, the historian needs (it will come as no surprise) to tell a story.”
the ethic God expects, which Israel had expressed in their story of God’s activity toward the restoration and perfection of creation.6

Of course, such a bold claim necessitated, as proof of its validity, the rehearsal of the stories of Jesus and his followers to evince that they accord with the hope narrated in the inscripturated story of Israel (cf. 1 Cor 15:4, in addition to the citations of and allusions to the Old Testament in New Testament).7 These accordant stories of Jesus and the early church eventually became the New Testament, the scriptural story of the emergence of a renewed Israel who embodies God’s ideals, who expands to include people from every nation, who experiences God’s new world amid the old, and who embraces the sure hope of the eschatological consummation of the renewal of all creation. The question then becomes, what ethical norms for the people of God living today can be drawn from the interpretation of any particular episode, as it is set within this two-testament story of Scripture. To answer this, some methodology is needed to determine how divinely designed and desired behaviors can be discerned in the reading of authoritative stories as they appear in individual compositions and the canonical cloth.8

6 Bartholomew and Goheen, 13, put it this way, “The Bible narrates God’s mission to restore the creation. Israel’s mission flows from this: God chose a people to again embody God’s creational purposes for humanity and so be a light to the nations, and the Old Testament narrates the history of Israel’s response to their divine calling. Jesus comes on the scene and in his mission takes upon himself Israel’s missionary vocation. He embodies God’s purpose for humanity and accomplishes the victory over sin, opening the way to a new world. When his earthly ministry is over, he leaves his church with the mandate to continuing in that same mission.”
7 Cf. Wright, 79, “[R]epeated use of the Old Testament is designed not as mere proof-texting, but, in part at least, to suggest new ways of reading well-known stories, and to suggest that they find a more natural climax in the Jesus-story than elsewhere.”
8 For some helpful reflection on what is meant by the authority of the scriptural story, cf. Wright, 143, “I am proposing a notion of ‘authority’ which is not simply vested in the New Testament, or in ‘New Testament theology’, nor simply in ‘early Christian history’ and the like, conceived positivistically, but in the creator god himself, and this god’s story with the world, seen as focused on the story of Israel and thence the story of Jesus, as told and retold in the Old and New Testaments, and as still requiring completion.”
The Identity-Shaping Purpose of Scriptural Narrative

Readers are better equipped to approach any passage of Scripture when they come with the recognition that the pericope serves a larger compositional story and canonical story, through the proclamation and the practice of which God and his people act to transform the world. And the cosmos that needs to be transformed begins with the chosen people of God, who are to be guided by the scriptural story. Therefore, as those called and commissioned by God, “[o]ur task is to make our lodging the Genesis-to-Revelation narrative so that our modes of interpretation are conformed to the biblical narrative, so that this story decisively shapes our lives.” Lest any confusion arise at this point, clarification of the two words used to identify the nature of Scripture here is in order.

Although the term “story” has been used a great deal in this chapter, the near synonym “narrative” serves as well. Indeed, “Narratives are stories – purposeful stories retelling the historical events of the past that are intended to give meaning and direction for a given people in the present.” In this sense, narratives are histories. Their importance, among other things, lies in the fact that “[w]e cannot escape our histories because it is in them that our identity is generated.” And they are generative not only in the sense of recalling the origins of our existence, but also in the service of our ongoing formation. Joel Green helpfully expresses this identity-shaping purpose of the story of Scripture, “The biblical

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9 Cf. Green, 23, “[T]he fundamental transformation that must take place is not the transformation of an ancient message into a contemporary meaning but rather the transformation of our lives by means of God’s Word…Scripture does not present us with texts to be mastered but with a Word, God’s Word, intent on mastering us, on shaping our lives.”
10 Ibid., 17.
11 Ibid., 28-29, makes a subtle distinction between the two denotations.
12 Fee and Stuart, 90. Cf. Wright, 123, “[W]orldviews provide the stories through which human beings view reality. Narrative is the most characteristic expression of worldview, going deeper than the isolated observation or fragmented remark.”
13 Green, 17.
narrative is present as an alternative framework within which to construe our lives, and so challenges those who would be Christian by calling for a creative transformation of the stories by which we make sense of our lives and of the world.”

The intended design, in this understanding, is that “these stories [of Scripture] may, if we attend to them, reaffirm, modify, or subvert some or all of the stories we have been telling ourselves.” However, “Church history, and for that matter the stories of Israel, and of the disciples during Jesus’ ministry, are in fact littered with examples of individuals, groups and movements whose improvisation turned out to be based on a misreading of the story so far.” At least part of the problem this reflects is the challenge of discerning what can be appropriated from a particular story in Scripture and how properly to do so. Whatever might limit the misappropriation of scriptural stories will have at least something to do with an awareness of the larger scriptural story, an understanding of how each narrative within Scripture serves the overarching narrative of Scripture. Here a distinction is evident between these two uses of the term “narrative.”

Joel Green employs the word first in a differentiation between literary genres of Scripture and second in a denotation of the overarching story to which the various pieces of

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14 Ibid., 17. Cf. Bartholomew and Goheen, 12, “Many of us have read the Bible as if it were merely a mosaic of little bits – theological bits, moral bits, historical-critical bits, sermon bits, devotional bits. But when we read the Bible in such a fragmented way, we ignore its divine author’s intention to shape our lives through its story. All human communities live out of some story that provides a context for understanding the meaning of history and gives shape and direction to their lives. If we allow the Bible to become fragmented, it is in danger of being absorbed into whatever other story is shaping our culture, and it will thus cease to shape our lives as it should.”

15 Wright, 67.

16 Ibid., 143.

17 Cf. Green, 28, “To speak of ‘the narrative of Scripture’ is to make a theological claim that takes us beyond the warrants of any one of the books comprising the Bible, or even what might be strictly authorized by one or another of the Bible’s Testaments. It is to insist that the whole of the Bible is, in Christian engagement, more than the sum of the parts, and that we can and should account for a theological presumption behind and woven into this collection of books. The particular contribution of the concept of ‘narrative’ is the attribution to these books of a single, coordinating and unifying, plot. These words, these books, these collections of books, read as a whole, are said to generate a coherence that might otherwise be missing, or hidden, apart from the whole.”
scriptural literature contribute, when he writes, “Not only is the overwhelming portion of the Bible cast as narrative, but even lists of precepts (“You shall…”) and the formulation of truth claims (“God is…”) appear and are rooted in the ongoing narrative of Israel’s life with God.”

Although not all of Scripture appears in the literary form of narrative or prose (cf. e.g., Psalms, Proverbs, and the Song of Songs), every passage and book taps into the metanarrative of God’s activity in the world. Yet the question remains, what specifically can be drawn from the stories about what God told people to do long ago and what they actually did so that the people of God might find clear instructions about how to live today?

### The Identity-Shaping Perception of Scriptural Narrative

The Church recognizes the scriptural story as ethically and theologically shaping for its identity. This two-testament story supplies the script for the people of God. Therefore, Christians find their identity determined by the Genesis narrative as much as by the charges of Paul to the predominantly Gentile Church in his Letters. This must be so, for each book is equally the word of God given for the instruction of his people (cf. 2 Tim 3:16-17). While the tendency of many Christians is to rely almost exclusively on those passages whose ethical significance is more explicit or more easily identified with where they think present day Christians fit into the biblical story, the reality is that there is a sense in which every part of the scriptural story is our story. Each passage remains vital for the perception of what it
means for us to be the people of God today, yet to get at that meaning demands interpretation of the passage in at least the four contexts of composition, canon, creed, and community.

The focus of this thesis has been on the compositional and the canonical contexts for perceiving what a particular passage might contribute to the discussion of submission to ecclesial authority, a discussion which sometimes is limited to those passages where explicit or propositional teaching concerning ecclesiology can be found. The latter approach is both scripturally and theologically reductionistic and risky, for those more explicit instructions (which themselves are open to a variety of interpretations) rely on the larger scriptural story for their meaning and message. Those passages only “make sense,” at least the divinely inspired sense, when read in dialogue with the overall scriptural story. Therefore, narrative, which encompasses the vast majority of Scripture, must be theologically and ethically determinative for God’s people as much as the epistolary imperatives. The question then is not whether narratives can or should contribute substantially to ecclesial identity, but how they do so. An example drawn from the first and foundational narrative of Scripture might help to clarify the way.

Noah was instructed by God to build an ark (Gen 6:14ff.). However, most readers today don’t perceive that to be God’s decree now issued to them. Nor do they recognize boats as the divinely desired mode for their transport, or “gopher wood” as the divinely designated material for their construction projects. Instead, some might interpret the Genesis narrative’s emphasis on the righteousness of Noah over against the wickedness of the surrounding culture (Gen 6:9, 11-12) to indicate that what matters here is little more than a moral lesson –

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19 Cf. Fee and Stuart, 105, “Do not be a monkey-see-monkey-do reader of the Bible. No Bible narrative was written specifically about you … you can never assume that God expects you to do exactly the same thing that Bible characters did or to have the same things happen to you that happened to them.”
be like Noah and obey God’s every instruction, rather than like the disobedient people of his time. This perhaps reflects part of the purpose (or one of the purposes) of the story of Noah and the ark, but is there not more to it than that? And perhaps problematic to such an understanding is that Genesis speaks of a drunken, naked, and passed-out Noah right on the heels of the flood account (Gen 9:20-21). Although Noah is not explicitly faulted for such behavior, few Christians find it to be morally exemplary. Perhaps it could be argued that some episodes in the life of Noah supply a positive example, while others supply a negative example, which could also be argued in the cases of other key biblical figures such as Abraham, David, the twelve disciples of Jesus, and the apostle Paul. But what is often missed is the fact that “[t]he purpose of the various individual narratives is to tell what God did in the history of Israel, not to offer moral examples of right or wrong behavior.”

Nevertheless, as has already been argued, the history of God’s activity is not given as mere information, but as inspiration to live in ways pleasing to him. So the matter of the ethical implications to be drawn from the narratives must be addressed. What is the script which they supply the reader with?

Paradigms, Patterns, and Precedents in the Scriptural Story

Christian readers of Old Testament narratives tend to “moralize, allegorize, personalize, and so on,” rather than “think of these narratives as serving as patterns for Christian behavior

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20 Ibid., 92. Cf. 105, “Bible characters are sometimes good and sometimes evil, sometimes wise and sometimes foolish. They are sometimes punished and sometimes shown mercy, sometimes well-off and sometimes miserable. Your task is to learn God’s word from the narratives about them, not to try to do everything that was done in the Bible. Just because someone in a Bible story did something, it does not mean you have either permission or obligation to do it, too.”
or church life.” The latter is evident when the story of Noah and the ark, where the world is washed of its wickedness and creation begins afresh in covenant with God, is understood to foreshadow what takes place when Christians are baptized into Christ who works to restore the cosmos (1 Pet 3:20–21). Thus, Christian readers of Genesis do not understand the narrative as a directive to enter into a wooden (or fiberglass or metal, if we update the story) ship in order to experience deliverance from judgment, but rather as part of a larger story which directs readers to enter into Christ whose body is the place of salvation. The former, the personalization of Old Testament narrative, is evident in Christians who reference the example of Gideon, who on consecutive evenings directed God to confirm his will via a sign first in the dampness and second in the dryness of a woolen fleece which Gideon twice left out overnight (Jdg 6:36–40), as justification for putting out their own “fleeces” in order to discern the desire of God. However, these Christians “never put out an actual fleece for God to make wet or dry.” Instead, they set up their own test(s) whereby God is supposed to reveal his will. Unfortunately, these readers fail to “consider that Gideon’s action was really not a good one inasmuch as it showed his lack of trust in God’s word that had already been given to him.” Moreover, it violates the example of Christ, who refused to put God to the test when Satan proposed that Jesus do so, and the explicit teaching against such actions as

21 Ibid., 107.
22 While such a misunderstanding perceivably could be held by some to find support in the instruction that those sailing with Paul had to remain on the ship with him if they desired not to perish (Acts 27), what might such imagined readers do with the instructions to those sailing with God’s prophet Jonah that they had to throw him overboard if they wished to be spared (Jonah 1), or the disciples’ fear of drowning when Jesus was aboard a boat with them (Matt 8:23–27//Mark 4:36-41//Luke 8:22b-25), or Jesus’ instruction for Peter to get out of the boat and walk on the water (Matt 14:22-33//Mark 6:45-52//John 6:14-21)? In none of these passages are readers charged to do the same things these characters do, yet each surely says something about God’s mysterious way of salvation.
23 Fee and Stuart, 107.
24 Ibid., 107.
Deuteronomy 6:16 instructs, which Jesus at that time quoted to Satan (Matt 4:5-7/Luke 4:9-12).25

This exposes the difficulty of the interpretive task, as well as perhaps the hermeneutical deficiency of those whose ecclesial education has been overly reliant on the presumed control inherent in propositional statements. While God and his program can be comprehended to a certain extent and communicated in propositional terms, the Church always runs the risk of creating a deity which is captive to the doctrinal declarations or understandings of God’s people. No doubt this was the difficulty many Jews in Jesus’ day faced, when their monotheism needed to expand into the Triune shape given it through the incarnation. Similarly, the Church deals with this untamable God whose overarching story of cosmic creation, distortion, and restoration calls the people of God continually to repentance and to reinterpretation. The dogmatic declarations of what it means to be the Church might stand in need of some healthy engagement with those narratives whose import with regard to ecclesial authority might not be as easily or as immediately apparent. This applies equally to the narratives of both testaments, to the second of which consideration will now be given.

Christians read New Testament narratives in much the same way as they do those of the Old Testament. Behavioral patterns are drawn out of the text for both the Christian and the Church. However, readers disagree over what practices actually appear in the text, as well as which ones are required of God’s people today. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart list some examples:

Such diverse practices as the baptism of infants or of believers only, congregational and episcopalian church polity, the necessity of observing the Lord’s Supper every

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25 The Deuteronomy verse refers to the episode narrated in Exodus 17:1-7, where the people demand a special provision of water in the midst of the wilderness as evidence that God really is with them.
Sunday, the choice of deacons by congregational vote, the selling of possessions and having all things in common, and even ritual snake handling (!) have been supported in whole or in part on the basis of Acts.²⁶

Perhaps more than any other book of Scripture, Acts is understood to supply “the normative model for the church of all times.”²⁷ Yet one of the perennial problems in the interpretation of Acts remains deciphering “the extent to which it is prescriptive, saying how the church is always meant to be, or descriptive, telling us how the church was at a particular time.”²⁸ As a way of addressing this challenge, interpreters typically appeal to the discovery in scriptural narratives of something variously referred to as “paradigms,” “patterns,” or “precedents.”

Each term can be understood to represent reflection on the scriptural narrative at a particular level. “Precedents” are individual examples of narrated behaviors that are perceived to be approved, if not authoritative. The (ab)use of the story of Gideon’s fleece as a model for discerning the will of God and the rising of believers to their feet for the liturgical reading of Scripture as did those in Nehemiah’s day (Neh 8:5; cf. 9:3) are examples of the employment of biblical precedents.²⁹ “Patterns” are divinely blessed behaviors that reappear in the narrative, which perhaps intensifies the justification for their adoption today.³⁰ Steve Walton supplies an example drawn from Acts:

²⁶ Fee and Stuart, 108.
²⁷ Ibid., 107.
²⁹ Typically, churches do not employ the precedent of the casting of lots for the selection of church leaders, which was set by the apostles when a replacement was needed for Judas in Acts 1. However, numerous examples of denominational, ecumenical, regional, national, and international church councils follow the precedent of something of a church council in Acts 15.
³⁰ Cf. Fee and Stuart, 124, “If one wishes to use a biblical precedent to justify some present action, one is on safer ground if the principle of the action is taught elsewhere, where it is the primary intent so to teach. For example, to use Jesus’ cleansing of the temple to justify one’s so-called righteous indignation – usually a euphemism for selfish anger – is to abuse this principle. On the other hand, one may properly base the present-day experience of speaking in tongues not only on the precedent of repeated occurrences (in Acts) but also on the teaching about spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14.”
For example, 2:38-42 presents a fivefold pattern of what it means to become a Christian, involving repentance from sin, water baptism, receiving forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit, and joining the renewed people of God. This pattern keeps reappearing in Acts, not always in the same sequence as in 2:38-42, but with the same elements present (e.g., 8:12-17; 10:44-48; 19:1-20).31

“Paradigms” expand beyond merely individual precedents and repeated patterns to the establishment of mental constructs, which are “built up out of the repeated telling of many stories, of what it means to be a good Israelite [or believer] in different social situations.”32 An example appears in Christopher J. H. Wright’s summary of his study of how Scripture employs the exodus as a paradigm:

In the Old Testament we have repeatedly observed that Israel’s experience of liberation through the exodus functions as a paradigm for a wide variety of social and ethical obligations that were laid upon them. Even in ancient Israel itself this was not a matter of literal imitation or replication: Israel could not recreate an ‘exodus, parting of the sea and all’ for every social context of need or injustice they encountered. But the exodus was certainly a paradigm, calling for a certain pattern of response to oppression that would reflect in different circumstances what the historical particularity of the exodus had demonstrated about the LORD.33

Since paradigm can be understood to represent a level of interpretation that includes and extends beyond both pattern and precedent, that expands from the primarily compositional context to the canonical context, the following discussion will focus on the role of paradigm in the ethical interpretation of narrative.

31 Walton, 30.
32 Christopher J. H. Wright, Old Testament Ethics for the People of God (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 70.
33 Ibid., 71-72. Cf. Richard Bauckham, Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 137-38, “The exodus, then, established a paradigmatic link between God’s particular identity as the God of Israel and God’s purpose of universal self-revelation to the nations. This pattern of acts of salvation for Israel that make God known to all the nations recurs in later instances: YHWH dried up the Jordan for Israel to cross ‘so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty’ (Joshua 4:24); Hezekiah prays for deliverance from the Assyrian army ‘so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, LORD, are God alone’ (1 Kings 19:19; Isaiah 37:20); Ezekiel prophesies God’s restoration of Israel after exile not for Israel’s sake, but for the sake of God’s name, so that ‘the nations may know that he is the LORD’ (Ezekiel 36:22-23; cf. 36:38; 38:23; 39:7).”
Israel as Paradigm

Christopher Wright supports the identification of paradigms as vital to the interpretation of narratives by appeal to the analogy of learning paradigm words, whose endings either are applied or adapted in the formation of other words, in the process of learning a foreign language.\textsuperscript{34} Just as word-paradigms assist the acquisition of language, so behavior-paradigms drawn from scriptural stories aid the approach of a life which pleases God.

Christopher Wright points out:

[I]n the Old Testament itself certain events and narratives were of such a revelatory power that they took on the nature of a paradigm for both how God could be expected to act in the future, and also how Israel should act in response. The exodus is the obvious example. In narrative, poetry, law and prophecy the exodus stands as a paradigm of the LORD’s faithfulness, justice and compassion, and similarly as a paradigm for Israel’s social life in many dimensions.\textsuperscript{35}

Moreover, perhaps surprising details from the exodus narrative are understood by the writers of the New Testament to serve as paradigms. For example, Paul uses “one aspect of the manna in the wilderness as a way of encouraging equality and sharing among Christians (2 Cor. 8:13-15)” and “the law providing for the welfare of the working ox as support for his demand that working pastors and missionaries should be provided for (1 Cor. 9:8-12).”\textsuperscript{36}

However, this perhaps should not surprise us, since “Israel as a society was intended from the

\textsuperscript{34}Christopher Wright, 65-66.
\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., 69. Wright here acknowledges that he draws on Paul D. Hanson, \textit{The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible} (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).
\textsuperscript{36}Christopher Wright, 73. This exposes the subtle misstep regarding the value of narratives in ethical formation which is reflected in Fee and Stuart, 105-106, “They teach us a lot – but what they directly teach us does not systematically include personal ethics. For this area of life, we must turn elsewhere in the Scriptures – to the various places where personal ethics are actually taught categorically and explicitly.” This is all the more confusing because the sentence which precedes these statements appears to hint at the reality that ethics are implicitly taught via narratives, “Narratives are precious to us because they so vividly demonstrate God’s involvement in the world and illustrate his principles and calling.”
start to be a paradigm or model to the nations, a showcase of the way God longs for human society as a whole to operate.”

As a result, “[w]e are not only justified” but “indeed expected to make use of the social patterns, structures and laws of Old Testament Israel to help us in our thinking and choosing in the realm of social ethics in our own world.”

This is simply another way of saying that the narrative speaks theologically to shape the identity of its readers. The same holds for the New Testament, where Jesus and his early followers embody a renewed Israel.

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37 Christopher Wright, 74. Cf. the missional hermeneutic proposed by Bauckham, 11, “I shall try to show how the Bible itself embodies a kind of movement from the particular to the universal, which we as readers need to find ourselves inside. The Bible is [perhaps better, “the biblical story speaks of and exists to serve”] a kind of project aimed at the kingdom of God, that is, towards the achievement of God’s purposes for good in the whole of God’s creation. This is a universal direction that takes the particular with the utmost seriousness. Christian communities or individuals are always setting off from the particular as both the Bible and our own situation defines it and following the biblical direction towards the universal that is to be found not apart from but within other particulars. This is mission.”; and 46-47, “We have noted the singularity of God’s choice as he singles out the one person Abraham, the one nation Israel, the one king David and the one place Zion. We have also seen how God’s purpose always begins with such singling out but never ends there. It was never God’s intention to bless Abraham purely for his and his descendant’s sake. It was never God’s intention to reveal himself to Israel only for Israel’s sake. It was never God’s intention to base his kingdom in Zion only so that he might rule the immediate locality. God’s purpose in each of these singular choices was universal: that the blessing of Abraham might overflow to all the families of the earth, that God’s self-revelation to Israel might make God known to all the nations, that from Zion his rule might extend to the ends of the earth. None of these forms of the biblical movement from the particular to the universal is, strictly speaking, mission. Abraham, Israel and David are not sent out to evangelize the world. But these three major trends of the biblical story are what make the church’s mission intelligible as a necessary and coherent part of the whole biblical metanarrative. They establish the movement from the particular to the universal that the church is called in its mission to embody in a particular form. They establish the purpose of God for the world that, again, the church is called to serve in mission to the world. This is why we have been able, even if rather briefly, to trace the echoes of each of these Old Testament trajectories within the New Testament.”

38 Christopher Wright, 74. Cf. 321, “My point here is that this paradigmatic nature of Israel is not just a hermeneutic tool devised by us retrospectively, but, theologically speaking, was part of God’s design in creating and shaping Israel in the first place.”
Jesus as Paradigm

The life of Jesus as narrated in the Gospels is understood by Christians as the paradigm par excellence of a life that pleases God. However, Christians typically “do not feel obliged to practice carpentry, wear seamless clothing, pursue an itinerant and homeless lifestyle, or preach from boats.” Why not? Since “[n]one of those things, in themselves, would constitute what the New Testament means by being ‘Christlike’.” Instead, readers “move from what we know Jesus did to what we might reasonably presume he would do in our changed situation.” And that demands a thorough familiarity both with the story of his life and with the circumstances in which we operate. Christopher Wright puts it this way:

The overall shape and character of his life – comprising his actions, attitudes and relationships as well as his responses, parables and other teaching – becomes our pattern or paradigm, by which we test the ‘Christlikeness’ of the same components of our own lives.

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39 Cf. Bauckham, “Jesus, in a sense, repeats the particularity of each of the three chosen ones we have studied. He is the descendant of Abraham through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed. He assumes for himself his nation Israel’s own destiny to be a light to all the nations (Luke 2:31-32). He is the new, the ideal, David, the only one truly able to be the human embodiment of God’s rule over all. But when we see Jesus’ particularity in these ways, in the categories established by the Old Testament, then we at once see also his universality. We can see how it makes sense that the New Testament is amazingly focused on this particular human person, who dominates its every page, while at the same time it constantly speaks the language of universal truth, universal relevance and universal effect. The whole New Testament thought is unified around the universal relevance of precisely the particular human being Jesus.”

40 Christopher Wright, 72. Cf. Fee and Stuart, 123, “Although Jesus’ life is in many ways exemplary for later believers, not everything in his life can be normative for us. Thus while we are expected to live by taking up a cross, we are not expected to die by crucifixion and be raised three days later.” Even in the case of the apostle Peter, whom early Christian tradition records was crucified, the execution is distinguished from that of Jesus in that Peter was crucified upside down and did not rise to life after three days.

41 Christopher Wright, 72. Cf. 37-38, “For when we speak about Christian discipleship as ‘Christlikeness’, we do not mean that we are obliged to imitate every detail of Jesus’ earthly life in first-century Galilee. Often we work back from the stories of Jesus to a composite picture of his character, attitudes, priorities, values, reactions and goals. Then we seek to be ‘Christlike’ by reflecting what we know to have been true of Jesus in the choices, actions and responses we have to make in our own lives.”

42 Ibid., 73. Cf. 38, “The WWJD (‘What Would Jesus Do?’) expression is a rather simplistic tag, but it does embody a valid ethical stance, even if it usually needs a lot of hard thinking and working out in our very ambiguous circumstances (and usually more than most people are prepared to do).”

43 Ibid., 73.
To follow Jesus entails more than adhering to the explicit teachings of his recorded in the Gospels. It requires conformity with the theology which is put on display through the narration of his actions and attitudes, as well as his articulations. To some extent, the same can be said of the apostle Paul.

**Paul as Paradigm**

Paul urges fellow Christians to be imitators of him (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; cf. 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 3:7-9; Heb 6:12; 13:7),\(^4^4\) even as he has imitated Christ (1 Cor 11:1; cf. 1 Thess 1:6) and all believers are to imitate God (Eph 5:1).\(^4^5\) This call to imitate Paul especially points readers of Scripture back to the narration of his life in the book of Acts, since the imitation of a person implies at least some knowledge of the life to be imitated, and this knowledge arguably takes story form. For example, a television commercial aired a few years ago in which people sang about their desire to “be like Mike.” The referent of the commercial is Michael Jordan. To show what the words of the song meant, the producers apparently found it helpful, if not necessary, to tap into the story of who Mike is as seen through the eyes of

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\(^{4^5}\) Cf. also the thanksgiving of Paul to God for the Thessalonians due to their having been imitators of the churches in Judea (1 Thess 2:14). Christopher Wright, 37, carefully differentiates between the imitation of God and that of Christ, “The phrase ‘the imitation of God’, or *imitation Dei*,…needs to be used with some qualification…Certainly, it would be misleading to think in terms of mere mimickry – attempting to do *whatever* the LORD did or does, for clearly there are whole areas of the activity of God that are not available or appropriate for human replication. Furthermore, it cannot be used in simple analogy to the imitation of Christ, since the incarnation means that in Jesus we have a human being who, like us, actually lived and acted as a moral agent in the world, and is there capable of more direct imitation by ourselves.” Cf. 38, “the imitation of the LORD, if we use the phrase at all, would have meant that Israelites should work from what they knew of the character and priorities of their God to what they could assume he would want to be done in any given situation. And in a sense their own history was an ‘incarnation’ of the LORD, for in it he expressly revealed his own identity, character and ethical values. For this reason it would be preferable to speak of the *reflection of God’s character*, rather than the imitation of God, if the latter can be confused with merely copying the actions of God.”
the typical television viewer. Thus, the commercial aired short clips of Mike’s performances from various televised games in the National Basketball Association, alternated with clips of boys and girls who try to do the same things on playgrounds. Of course, the goal was for people to buy the company’s product, which Mike is shown to use in interspersed clips of staged pickup games. The implication is that this product not only enables Mike to play basketball the way he does, but that it also could do the same for the commercial viewer.

Other commercials did similar things, but instead drew attention to the shoes or to the clothes which Mike wore as the key to the pursuit of his likeness. The point of this analogy is simply to demonstrate that we must know something of another person’s story if we are to be like him or her. And selected bits or patterns of what we know are what we are to emulate – amazing abilities on the basketball court and utilization of the some commercial product in this analogy. In the case of Paul, the Letters associated with him mention details clipped from his experiences and make summary references to his overall story, while “Acts tells us something of the canonical Paul’s persona, circumstances, vocation, and religious motives.”

In order to make (storied) sense of the clips contained in the Letters, readers presumably are suppose to recall the larger presentation of his life which is narrated in Acts.

Perhaps the parade case where the story of Paul as told in Acts is utilized to inform the interpretation of the Pauline Letters, and vice versa, has to do with his missionary journeys. Interpreters combine and coordinate the details from the various texts and thoughtfully yet imaginatively fill in the gaps in order to create narratives (usually referred to as


47 However, this is not to say that the interpretive assistance flows only in one direction.
“reconstructions”) of his travel itinerary, which are then utilized in the interpretation of both Acts and the Pauline Letters. And these speculative stories and scriptural studies have enormous ethical implications for Christians, since the Church views the apostle to the Gentiles as the paradigm for (world) missions. No doubt this is due to the fact that Jesus ministered primarily to the lost sheep of Israel when he walked the earth, and the apostles who had journeyed with him hardly get beyond that scope within the confines of the scriptural canon.

It is interesting to note the way in which the story of Paul is understood by “Missions” professors and practitioners to normatively shape the practice and the proclamation of the kingdom of God today. For example, most emphasize in some way the role of travelling to those who have not heard the gospel, while the mysterious ways in which the Spirit of God selects, sends, and steers Paul in his travels typically receives less treatment, even though it arguably reflects as much of the thrust of the Acts narrative. By the same token, the charge Jesus gave Paul to take the gospel to all nations (the Gentiles) is lifted up as the norm for the church, but his pattern of going first to the Jews has long since been cast aside by most missionaries, few if any of whom even attend synagogue services on a regular basis. Perhaps understood to be even less exemplary for present-day missionaries is the series of legal hearings Paul faced, which “embarrassingly” occupy nearly half of the narration of his ministry in Acts. Should not the applicants of Missions agencies be told that their occupation places them at great risk politically, and be taught how to handle the anticipated legal challenges they will face? Yet I received no such instruction before the summer missions trips I have been on, and suspect many other short-term and long-term missionaries have not
either. This perhaps elicits the question of the polity of Paul’s mission and that of the Church today. Who rules Christians?

Certainly the God of Israel and King Jesus rule the people of God from heaven. But who are the earthly authorities to whom Christians are to submit themselves? And how does that submission find expression? This is a complicated matter for which appeals to selected passages such as Romans 13:1-7, with regard to secular leaders, and the instructions about overseers and deacons in the Pastoral Epistles, with regard to ecclesial officers, only scratch the surface. These passages broadly tell readers who they are to submit to, but offer little insight concerning how to do so. For that, role models are needed. And the example of Paul in Acts should not be overlooked as providing a scriptural paradigm for Christian submission.

The Identity-Shaping Paradigm of Paul in Acts 22:30-23:5

Since Paul instructs Christians to imitate him and since the story of this life to be imitated is told most thoroughly in the book of Acts, whole-Bible readers are likely expected to read the Acts narration of Paul’s life with the intention of discovering paradigmatic attitudes and actions. This could be viewed simply as a submissive response to the divinely inspired compositional and canonical pointers, as discussed above and in the opening chapter. Perhaps among the behaviors for which a model is to be discerned is the way in which Christians are to treat religious authorities as the new creation of God breaks out amid the old, as God refashions a people who will do his will.
Since a remnant among the chosen people of God was the first to experience this renewal in Christ, a key question becomes what the relationship of the renewed believers was with respect to those rulers among God’s people who as yet had not been renewed. The story of Paul in Acts reveals the radical shift in his understanding of this renewal, as well as supplies an example or model (among others in Acts such as Peter and Stephen) for early Christians about how to relate to the old covenant community and its leaders amid the emergence of the new covenant community. However, as Scripture, this story has been given to inform all believers ever since, not just those who lived during the first centuries of Church history when the sister religions of Judaism and Christianity were emerging from the one people of God. Put simply, these narratives serve the divine purpose of shaping the theology and ethics of his people forevermore. Therefore, the issue of religious authority is one among the many theological concerns brought to the fore in Acts which remain identity-shaping for the people of God. Although the historical specifics of readers today certainly differ from those of the characters in Acts, the theology supplied via the narrative remains the same and requires careful implementation. The question mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph might then be rephrased in this way to address the present-day context, how should Christians relate to ecclesial authorities who act in violation of the sacred script according to which the church is to operate, who do not conform to the paradigm set by Christ? One passage that might shed light on this is Acts 22:30-23:5.

In this passage, the apostle Paul appears before the Jewish rulers as a man accused of violating the traditions of Israel, for which the request already had been made by Jews that Paul face capital punishment. The appearance had actually been arranged by the Roman
tribune Claudius Lysias, who was seeking to sort out what, if anything, Paul had done wrong and what course of action should be taken if he had erred. In the narration of this life-and-death struggle, the narrative camera focuses particularly on Paul and the high priest Ananias. Paul twice respectfully addresses the Jewish council as “brothers” (23:1, 5), but the action of this passage centers in a confrontation between Paul and Ananias. When Paul claims fidelity to the God of Israel, Ananias calls for physical violence against Paul, who then criticizes and condemns Ananias, only to discover that he is the high priest, whom no evil should be spoken against. Since the interpretive details were discussed in the previous chapter, the question as to what, if anything, can be learned about Christian submission to religious authority from these verses can now be addressed.

What follows is offered as the proposals of one who has wrestled with the passage in its compositional and canonical context in the quest for the scriptural paradigms God desires for his people to follow, with recognition of the aforementioned interpretive challenges in the identification of paradigms in the scriptural narrative and with realization that these insights might need to be altered at some points and altogether abandoned at others. This is an admission that the interpreter not only might have something to offer to the community of God’s people, but that the expositor also needs to stand ready to be corrected by fellow citizens of the kingdom of God, and especially the rulers he has appointed over them. Since the interpretive insights here offered are selective rather than exhaustive, and since the exposition runs the risk of either discounting or distorting the exegetical force of details supplied by the passage, the composition, the canon, and the community, what follows simply seeks both to encourage and to enter into the discussion of the perhaps neglected
ethical significance of Acts 22:30-23:5. In other words, the following theological reflections are an attempt to bring the voice of an often-neglected passage into the larger discussion over what constitutes submission to religious authority today, on the basis of the compositional-canonical considerations that might argue for the inclusion of its voice in the matter.

The opening defense of Paul was no claim to perfection, but the confession of ignorance of anything worthy of the charge of apostasy. Despite the radical transformation of certain beliefs (e.g., that Jesus rose from the dead) and behavior (e.g., that Gentiles now are to be welcomed into the people of God without becoming Jews) that had taken place in the life of Paul, about which many of these Jews undoubtedly knew, Paul “never considered himself to have been ‘converted’ but always held he was a true Jew, if we take conversion as a change from one religion to another.” 48 Whatever Paul was about, it was not the formation of a new religion. Instead, the work of God in Jesus and through Jesus in Paul represented the renewal of the religion of the Jews, the realization of the hope of Israel (cf. 26:6-7; 28:20). Therefore, Paul does not come out swinging against Jewish leaders who seem to have missed, as he had at one time, the new work of the Spirit of God. Should not the same be true of believers in every era?

Critical self-reflection before the God who speaks in Scripture, coupled with a spirit of unity and a submissive respect for those whom God has placed in authority over us, both of which abide despite any real or imagined differences of interpretation and await the transformative work of God both in ourselves and in the other, are requisite for the believer. Perhaps things would have gone better a century and a half ago and violent bloodshed could have been averted had this been the consistent practice of Christians in the United States,

while the Church was bitterly and deeply divided amid the Spirit’s determination to end modern slavery. Or, in the present day, Christians might ponder how such an approach could shape the practice and the proclamation of their faith in the midst of a Church which is sharply separated over practices such as abortion and homosexuality. When ecclesial councils call for testimony in these and other divisive matters, may believers embody the likeness of Paul who, by the power of the Spirit, critiques himself before the God of Scripture and commits himself in unity with those among the people of God whose expositions and experiences differ with his.

Paul does not respond to physical violence with physical violence, nor does he call down fire from heaven to destroy those who would not receive his message, as the apostles James and John had once offered to do to some Samaritans who had rejected Jesus (cf. Luke 9:51-56). Here Paul follows the pattern set by Christ. Each was a prisoner falsely accused of crimes whose penalty was death, yet each refused either to act aggressively against the accusers or to call down divine judgment against them. In the case of Paul, it is true that he announced divine judgment would befall Ananias, but Paul did not himself ask for it. It is helpful to recall that Stephen also addressed his accusers with sharp criticism, which perhaps implied the threat of divine judgment, yet he did not appeal for God to destroy Stephen’s accusers, but to deliver them from their sin(s), and did so while they executed him. The pattern, or paradigm, appears to imply that Christians today ought not to use violent force against others Christians and ought to pray that divine mercy will be extended to those

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49 Sadly, violent bloodshed between Christians happened most recently in the Orthodox community, amid the battles between the countries of Russia and Georgia. Of course, this enters into the larger discussion of the relationship between Christians and the secular state. In this instance, Christians obeyed the deadly decrees of secular rulers over against their peace-proclaiming ecclesial counterparts. By the same token, it perhaps raises
powers that deploy such force against them. After all, Jesus instructs us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us, which is one of the ethical indicators of the children of God (Matt 5:44-45; cf. Rom 12:14). Yet the persecutors in the Gospels typically are from among the people of God, from among our own family! Therefore, this ethic ought to extend beyond prayer for those among God’s people who abuse us to the expression of forgiveness of them, just as God has forgiven us (Matt 6:12//Luke 11:4, Matt 14-15; 18:21-35; Mark 11:25; Luke 6:37c; 17:4; Col 3:13). In this way, the Acts-Ananias passage contributes to the larger theology of charity expressed through nonviolence. Let us follow Paul, who followed Christ, who bore the true image of God in the way of mercy.

The refusal to respond to violence in kind and the request that God forgive one’s persecutors by no means hinder freedom of speech in the community of faith. Paul and Stephen each utter strong critiques against the leaders among God’s people before whom they appeared. Yet the speech of each was constrained (no “absolute” freedom of speech here) by the scriptural story, upon which each draws in the confrontation of the spiritual leaders. At the same time, each extends the scriptural story to include the fresh activity of the Spirit in their day and so expounds the message of Scripture relative to the situation each faced (in the case of Paul, this occurs in other passages such as his speech in Acts 22). Neither claimed some kind of independent authority for themselves, but rather appealed to the common story of God and his people. Thus, Stephen and Paul each began from a recognized place of unity in order to address the disunity and the discipline which each faced.

the question of whether those who struck Paul should have disobeyed the high priest, rather than display such force against one of God’s people. And had they done so, it might have resulted in their joining Paul as those who experience something of the sufferings of the Suffering Servant of God (cf. 2 Cor 1:5-7; Phil 3:10; Col 1:24; 2 Tim 3:10-17; 1 Pet 4:12-19). Also, the question could be raised as to whether the use of violent force by Christians against unbelievers is ever allowable.
What this perhaps indicates is that faithfulness need never mean the fracture of the body of Christ when Christians are faced with appointed rulers who speak or act in ways which we interpret to be wrong. Breaches in the body may emerge, but they are a last resort for the people of the God whose mission is to refashion and reunite his sadly distorted and divided world that it might be full of his glory (cf. how Paul repeatedly goes to the Gentiles only after the Jews reject his message, all the while hoping that his fellow Jews again will be grafted into the renewed Israel as Romans teaches). Should such breaks occur, they expose the limited nature in which the restored world has appeared in the fallen world and convict the people of God of their ever-present need for repentance and striving toward the realization of the new creation begun in them which is to permeate the earth. Therefore, the way to respond to differences of interpretation, even violent differences, is by careful communication of what each of the parties perceives the others to be missing in or misusing from the scriptural story (cf. the multi-year proceedings which the Anglican communion is presently wrestling through), rather than to part ways in the face of abuses so as to establish a separate or alternative religious system(s) as happened during the reign of Solomon’s son Rehoboam (1 Kgs 11-12) and during the Reformation (and is being proposed, if not enacted already, by some Anglicans). It is perhaps not unwarranted to consider that, among other ecclesial tragedies, Jesus may have recalled the former and anticipated the latter, when he prayed for the unity of all who would come to believe in him (John 17:20-23).

Christians everywhere must embody visible forms of unity before the watching world in order that all people may witness the good news that God is restoring harmony and order throughout all of creation. Since this new creation arises amid the fallen and fractured one,
prayerful forbearance after the likeness of God needs to be displayed before both sacred and secular powers that all people might be saved (cf. 1 Tim 2:1-4). Therefore, let us enter into the prayer, the proclamation, and, as needed, the pain whereby the powers that are awry in the world might come to see the patience, the power, and the purpose of God which seeks not to destroy but to deliver.

Just as Jesus did not start a different nation to replace rebellious Israel, but rather initiated a renewed Israel, so Stephen and Paul were not out to replace their spiritual rulers or to establish an entirely different spiritual community. Instead, all three pursued a path of faithfulness to God and his mission, which meant faithfulness to the people of God through whom his program moves forward. Whatever newness the Spirit of Christ brings, it is not an immediate and complete overthrow of the present authorities among God’s people, but an orderly transformation of the people, the powers, and the practices of the holy nation that will make them into something, at least the specifics of which, none likely could have anticipated. That the two religions of Judaism and Christianity emerged from the one people of God is reflected in the portrayal of the Acts narrative, yet the presentation of this breach is as an unfortunate and unintended development from the perspective of the followers of Jesus. It is certainly not what Paul pursued, yet it is what the Spirit eventually permitted. God is far more willing than his children are (contrast Jesus with the disciples in the Gospels) to watch and to wait amid the work of changing the minds that perhaps matter most, those of the people who occupy the positions of power and prestige. And this perhaps leads into the question as to whether there is a single mind that matters most among the leaders of God’s people.
Christians rightly recognize the mind of Christ as the human mind that matters most (cf. Phil 2), a mind which mysteriously enables him to represent true deity before humanity and true humanity before deity. But that man now sits at the right hand of God in heaven. How, then, do the earthly rulers who presently shepherd the people of God fit under the authority of God and his anointed King Jesus? It is usually held that most, if not all, of the Jews present at the Roman-ordered gathering of the Sanhedrin in Acts 23 were rulers of the chosen nation. Thus, Paul perhaps knew it was a ruler of his people whom he addressed. When confronted with the fact that is was actually the high priest, the most authoritative ruler of God’s people (the nearest parallel to this today would be the pope of the worldwide Catholic Church), Paul pleads ignorance of the fact and proclaims the scriptural injunction to honor the ruler of the people of Israel. Even a corrupt ruler is to be held in honor, since God has placed him in office. But is there today a highest office among the people of God, whose occupant Christians dare not speak evil of? And if so, is there not a trickle-down obligation to refuse to speak evil of the officers under this highest earthly authority?

It is important to recall that the Acts passage supplies precious little in terms of the makeup of the assembly before whom Paul appeared. Any argument as to specifically who was or was not there, beyond Paul, Ananias, and Lysias, is somewhat of an argument from silence. Therefore, it is possible that some Jews who were not members of the Sanhedrin were in attendance, including but perhaps not limited to servants of the Sanhedrin or its members. In that case, Paul not only may have been ignorant of the fact that Ananias was the high priest, but also that he was a member of the Sanhedrin. If so, his condemnatory speech may not have been addressed intentionally to any ruler of the holy nation. In any case, when
confronted for insulting the high priest, Paul immediately expresses his commitment to honor religious authorities in accord with Scripture, which encourages the consideration of this account in the larger theology of submission to and respect for religious authority. And let the reader not miss that the faultiness of the high priest is not utilized by Paul to justify rebellion against the scriptural injunction.

Protestants, when they are at their best, seek to embody such a model by refusing to speak evil of their so-called “senior minister,” or “preaching pastor,” despite the failures and the flaws they might know of. This does not mean that the pastor is above correction or critique, only that he is to be honored as the servant selected by God (through his people) to keep that congregational expression of the household of God. The first inclination of Christians must be to believe the best about such fathers of the family of God. The same holds on a larger scale for denominations like the Anglicans which employ the offices of bishops and archbishops, while on a smaller scale the pattern is applied to elders and deacons who oversee various ministries of the church. Yet someone remains the head of the leaders, on earth as it is in heaven.

What is reflected in the positions of the pope, the archbishop, and the senior pastor is something of a first among equals. Therefore, these men do not occupy a place of authority which is void of human accountability. However well or poorly such structures operate, each of these three examples is to be held in highest honor among their peers, as well as by the people under their authority. Confrontation and criticisms may occur, but to speak evil of these men would be tantamount to speaking evil of the God who placed them in such a sacred position and who pursues, through them, the establishment of the church as the new
Israel, the new creation which continues to break out amid the old. It is difficult at this point not to break down in tears and prayers of repentance, both individually and corporately. Perhaps we should.

How far we have fallen from God’s ideal, from the paradigms of Scripture. If we cannot honor those authorities whom we can see, how can we hope to honor the Authority whom our eyes presently cannot see? Let us restore the honor of God, which among other things finds present expression in the honor of those whom God places in authority over us. And when we fail to do so, whether privately or publicly, whether intentionally or unintentionally, whether the ruler did something wrong or not, let us follow the paradigm of Paul by offering admission that we have erred and by aligning ourselves again with the spiritual authorities and the God they serve.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This study has considered whether or not the confrontation between the apostle Paul and the Jewish high priest Ananias narrated in Acts 22:30-23:5 might represent a neglected scriptural voice in the ongoing development of the theology of ecclesial authority. Were this scriptural passage to be considered in isolation from its compositional and canonical context, readers might find little that informs how the Church today is to operate faithfully as the people of God. But when read in dialogue with the rest of Acts, the remainder of the New Testament, and the Old Testament, this encounter appears to serve the overarching story of the divine determination to establish a chosen people whose right relationship with their rulers is a vital component in the establishment of the universal blessing of God.

God remains true to Israel, whose covenant infidelity had necessitated their destruction so that God might refashion his special servant through whom creation restoration comes. In Jesus, a resurrected Davidic dynasty, a restored kingdom of Israel (cf. Acts 1:6), and a redesigned covenant emerge. However, this King and Kingdom were not what many of the Jews had envisioned. They viewed the followers of the crucified Jesus as a heretical sect whose instruction and influx of Gentiles as Gentiles into the people in whose midst God dwells were deemed heretical compromises that warranted swift judgment lest the anger of the Lord break out against his holy people. Although Paul originally had shared this view, the grace of God had opened Paul’s eyes so that he recognized Jesus as the Anointed One of God whose followers form the new covenant community, the new Israel, the new creation.
which has broken out amid the old. However, the efforts of Paul to convince his fellow Jews of this revelation swiftly met resistance, which led to his appearance before the high priest Ananias.

The exchange between Paul and Ananias demonstrates, among other things, that Paul situated himself in submission to God, his Word, and his appointed rulers over his people Israel. Although the new work begun in Christ stood opposed by the Jewish authorities, the Lord had neither cast aside Israel nor its priesthood. Instead, God had acted in Jesus to transform a faithless Israel and its faulty priesthood so that his people might finally bring about his intended blessing to all nations. Since Paul had been brought to understand this, he submitted to the high priest in accord with the instruction of the Torah and sought no retribution for the abuse suffered when Ananias acted out of sorts with the Torah by ordering Paul to be struck without a fair hearing. It is not that Paul offered no critique of the actions of Ananias, but that Paul recognized that the responsibility either to raise high or to bring low the rulers of God’s people belongs to God alone and occurs solely to accomplish his purposes. Therefore, Paul rejected a path which would either disregard or dishonor the spiritual leaders God had placed over Paul, and did so without in any way compromising his commitment to the lordship and high priesthood of Christ or to the embodiment of the teachings of Scripture.

The beliefs and behavior of Paul in this passage should then be deemed paradigmatic for members of the body of Christ, which is what whole-Bible readers might expect given Paul’s instruction elsewhere for believers to imitate him (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; cf. 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 3:7-9; Heb 6:12; 13:7), even as he has imitated Christ (1 Cor 11:1; cf. 1 Thess 1:6) and all believers are to imitate God (Eph 5:1). In fact, to discern in the Paul-Ananias episode a
model for proper relationship to ecclesial superiors arguably represents a submissive response to the divinely inspired compositional and canonical pointers. This does not imply that readers are to speak and act precisely in the same way as Paul, for their context will differ from his, only that the theology which is drawn from the story of Paul and Ananias ought to inform how believers regard and interact with the humans who presently rule over them as the people of God.

Whenever there might emerge between an ecclesial leader(s) and a congregant(s) any real or imagined differences of interpretation of Scripture and of the activity of God in current events, the congregant(s) must embody critical self-reflection before the God who speaks in Scripture, coupled with a spirit of unity and a submissive respect for those whom God has placed in authority over the church, while awaiting the transformative work of God both in oneself and in the other. However right either party might believe they are, no one has arrived. Should the leader(s) appear to have failed to fulfill the instruction of Scripture, the believer(s) must remain in submission to God and his servant(s) rather than rebel against the leader(s) and so violate the scriptural charge to honor ecclesial superiors. Two wrongs would not make a right. And should a congregant(s) dishonor an ecclesial leader(s), whether privately or publicly, whether intentionally or unintentionally, whether the ruler(s) did something wrong or not, let the believer(s) follow the paradigm of Paul by offering admission of one's error and by aligning oneself again with the spiritual authorities and the God they serve.

The correct course of action is always adherence to the teaching of Scripture, even if it hurts. Therefore, let believers enter into the prayer, the proclamation, and, where necessary, the pain whereby the powers that are awry in the world, whether in the church or in the host
nations, might come to see the patience, the power, and the purpose of God which seeks not to destroy but to deliver. Since the new creation continues to arise amid the fallen and fractured one, let every Christian display prayerful forbearance after the likeness of God, his son Jesus Christ, and his servant Paul before both sacred and secular powers so that all people might be saved (cf. 1 Tim 2:1-4). For if Christians fail to honor those authorities whom they can see, particularly those in the church, how can they hope to honor the Authority whom their eyes presently cannot see? Through it all, let the church fulfill its mission to refashion and reunite the sadly distorted and divided world that it might be full of the glory and knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.
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