

LUKE, THE ROMAN EMPIRE AND POLITICS

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How should Christians think biblically about politics? The New Testament was written in a different political world, and yet a world with interesting parallels.

Paul wrote positively of the role of the Roman authorities as those responsible for administering justice and to be respected by all (Romans 13:1-7) – and yet the Book of Revelation portrays the Roman empire as the beast rising from the sea and attacking God's people (Revelation 13:1-8). These two pictures seem in tension: how can both be true? Luke's portrait of Jesus and his followers in the Roman empire offers us clues which help us think about a Christian approach to today's rulers.

Like the tension between Paul and Revelation, Luke offers a variety of perspectives on Christian relations with the empire. When the empire is friendly and acting justly, believers can expect the state to allow them freedom to bear witness to Jesus and to speak 'unhindered'. Models of this situation include Paul's eighteen-month visit to Corinth (Acts 18:1-18a), Paul's two years plus of (relatively) peaceful ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:1-22), his visit to Malta (Acts 28:1-10), and the closing scene of Acts, where Paul is allowed to proclaim the Gospel unhindered (a technical legal term) in Rome (28:30-31). Luke presents Paul and Jesus as innocent of the charges against them, and this would encourage Christians to live at peace with the authorities as far as it lay with them to do so. For a modern Western democracy, this implies Christians should engage in the political sphere, not least by voting in elections.

But Luke does not have a romantic, idealised view of the empire – he knows that politics can be a dirty game. He is well aware that Christians can be harassed, persecuted and arrested for their witness to Jesus, both officially and unofficially. Jesus before Pilate (Luke 23), the death of James (Acts 12:1-2), and Paul's trials (Acts 22-26) each offer pictures of faithfully maintaining the Christian confession under pressure – sometimes leading to deliverance and sometimes to punishment or even death. Luke thus calls his readers not to fight with the enemy's weapons, whether violence or falsehood. Rather, they should offer testimony to Jesus in similar manner to these great figures, relying on Jesus' promise that the Spirit will show them how to speak (Luke 12:11-12). With Paul, they should maintain their innocence (Acts 25:8) and with Peter and John they should 'obey God rather than human beings' (Acts 4:19; 5:29). Luke would not be surprised by corruption in politics or opposition to Christians in the political sphere – he is not naïve about politics.

Luke applies to Jesus key terms which were normally applied to Caesar, and by doing this shows that those who rule must ultimately answer to Christ. These terms include

'Lord' (especially 'Lord of all', Acts 10:36), 'king' (e.g. Acts 17:7) and 'saviour' (Luke 2:11; Acts 5:31; 13:23) – all highlight that Jesus, not Caesar, truly reigns. Indeed, in raising Jesus from the dead, God showed that the empire's verdict on Jesus was wrong. Not only does God deliver Jesus, but God reassures Paul that he will stand before the emperor (Acts 23:11; 27:23-24), and Paul's arrival in Rome underlines how God kept his word. Throughout Luke and Acts God works his purposes out, whether or not he receives human co-operation, and those purposes are not ultimately frustrated. The greatness of God's power is an encouragement to Luke's readers – including us – to keep trusting God when the state opposes them, for God is at work and his purposes will come to fruition in spite of state opposition.

Overall, then, Luke offers his readers a strategy of critical distance from the empire. He thus falls at *both* ends of the spectrum we sketched between Romans 13 and Revelation 13. Where co-operation and mutual respect are possible, Christians should do nothing to harm those. Where the empire or its representatives turn against the Church, the believers' stance is to be twofold: to call the state back to justice and right action, and to bear faithful witness to Jesus – in the political sphere no less than in the private.

Dr Steve Walton is Senior Lecturer in Greek and New Testament, and Director of Research at LST. Steve has written more fully on this topic in his article, 'The State They Were In: Luke's View of the Roman Empire' in Peter Oakes (ed.), *Rome in the Bible and the Early Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), pp 1-41.