

WORLD UPSIDE DOWN, Part 3

A study of C. Kevin Rowe's *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age*

Important Review of Last Week - Collision with the Graeco-Roman World as a result of the *Apocalypse!* Converting to Christ entailed a change in their total way of life.

COLLISION.... BUT NOT IN THE WAY YOU THINK!

- **Avoiding the pendulum swing:** how do we understand BOTH the socially disruptive passages AND the passages where the Christians are declared innocent and set free? Is Luke showing us that Christianity is socially and politically revolutionary OR that Christianity is politically harmless? Answer? Neither! (though kind of both!)
 - "These men . . . advocate customs which it is not lawful for us Romans to accept or practice' (Acts 16.21) **must be read together with** 'I found he had done nothing deserving death' (Acts 25.25). The hermeneutical necessity is *to think the juxtaposition.*" (Rowe, 56)
 - Important disclaimer: Ancient Rome is not the Modern West! Politics and religion were always intertwined, so to attack one is to always attack the other.

KEY PASSAGES: Acts 18.12-17 (Gallio); 21.27-23.30 (Claudias Lysias); 24.1-27 (Felix); 25.1-26.32 (Festus)

Read Acts 18.12-17

- Jews ambiguously charge Paul as violating "the law" (Roman or Jewish?) because they want to implicate Christianity as "potentially disruptive to gentile culture" in order to avoid "unwanted retaliation" from the Roman government and "to retain the legal privileges that had long been theirs under Roman rule" (60).
- Gallio - the highest ranking official to speak in Acts - "displays an anti-Judaism typical of his class and summarily frustrates the legal maneuvering of the delegation" (60).

- **Conclusion: "Christianity is not a bid to take over the state.** The Christian mission does not seek, that is, to become the new Rome by means of a direct assault upon the present polity. . . ." YET "it does not strictly follow that Roman law remains unaffected by the Christian mission. For Christianity, as Luke narrates it in Acts, is **anything but a disembodied docetism** in which concrete practices are elided by a purportedly high, purer spiritual reality. . . . [Rather] the cultural space created by this new identity simultaneously spells the possibility of pagan cultural collapse. It is to this possibly that the Roman legal system cannot remain indifferent. Of all this Gallio seems unaware." (62).

Read Acts 24.1-27 (ch. 23 ends with Paul claiming Roman citizenship, thus "turning on" the Roman legal system in order to more fully deal with their prisoner)

- **The Charge** - very serious in light of "mid- to late-first-century Palestinian political situation, in which seditious disorder and sectarian violence were overwhelming problems." (73). Hence, the proper legal trial and the significant charge of sedition ("riots"), which to the Romans also implied treason. The temple charge is perhaps in light of Ac. 21.27ff. The argument is that the Jews commendably prevented a riot by seizing the seditious Paul. If Paul is convicted, he would be executed.
 - Jerusalem was famous for being one of the "most significant locations in the empire that proved problematic or caused administrative worry" to the Romans (74). Thus, Jews were extremely sensitive about maintaining peace in Jerusalem, and the temple in particular.
- **Paul's Defense** - this is not about Roman law, but about whether the resurrection of the Messiah has taken place.

From Acts 25.1-26.32

- Paul appeals to Caesar as a Roman citizen, so is still liable to execution, but with a higher legal standard.
- **Festus**, Felix's replacement, repudiates Judaism as a "superstition" in typical Roman fashion, and then declares Paul to be crazy - "you are out of your mind (26.24)". As Rowe comments, "His problem is not simply that he does not understand the intricacies of Jewish theology. It is rather a much deeper problem in that, as a pagan, he **lacks the comprehensive hermeneutical framework** in which to place the debate about the identity of Jesus. He is not missing bits and pieces of information, that is,

but the entire context in which such information would make sense in the first place. He is literally unable to understand. . . . Festus' speech, if pompous, is straightforward. The 'entire mob' of Jews clamored for Festus to impose the death penalty upon Paul. But the juridical investigation turned up 'nothing worthy of death' (25.26). **So Pilate and Jesus; so Festus and Paul.**" (84-5).

- **Read Acts 26.1-8** - notice Paul's rhetorical surprise!

- **Conclusion:** "The rejection of insurrection does not simultaneously entail an endorsement of the present world order, as if the fact that Jesus was *dikaos* [justified/innocent] necessitates Luke's approval of the crucifixion. . . . [Luke portrays] the reality of the **state's idolatry and blindness**—its satanic power— and the necessity that the mission of light not be misunderstood as sedition. . . . The state must itself must find that Jesus and his followers 'have done nothing deserving death.' And in order to display narratively gentile blindness and idolatry, the state must kill them away. . . . Christians do not deserve death and yet will the gentiles rage (cf. Acts 4.25-6)." (88-9).

Implications for us:

1. **Regarding our Hopes in Mission** - Which side of the balancing act do you tend to - total collision with the pagan world OR political harmlessness?
 1. Notice that mission according to Acts avoids BOTH: (1) competing for Caesar's power on Caesar's own terms, and (2) capitulating to Caesar simply because Christ's kingdom does not impact Caesar's. If (1) was true, then Jesus and Paul would have led a political revolt; but if (2) were true then Jesus and Paul would not have been killed!
2. **Regarding our Approach to Mission** - How many people with whom we engage "lack a comprehensive hermeneutical framework" to even begin thinking about Jesus? If so, how ought we to think about evangelism with them?
3. **Regarding Sin** - Look how foolish a Christ-less world is! Their blindness runs so deep that don't even know what sight is. This should not only humble us in our own sin, but also give us confidence as we're not surprised by the sin of the world.
4. **Regarding our Expectations in this Life** - This topic will be more fully developed in the next chapter, but what is our Christian life and community supposed to look like? What should spiritual formation look like? How do we need to adjust our expectations of cultural, political, or social power?