

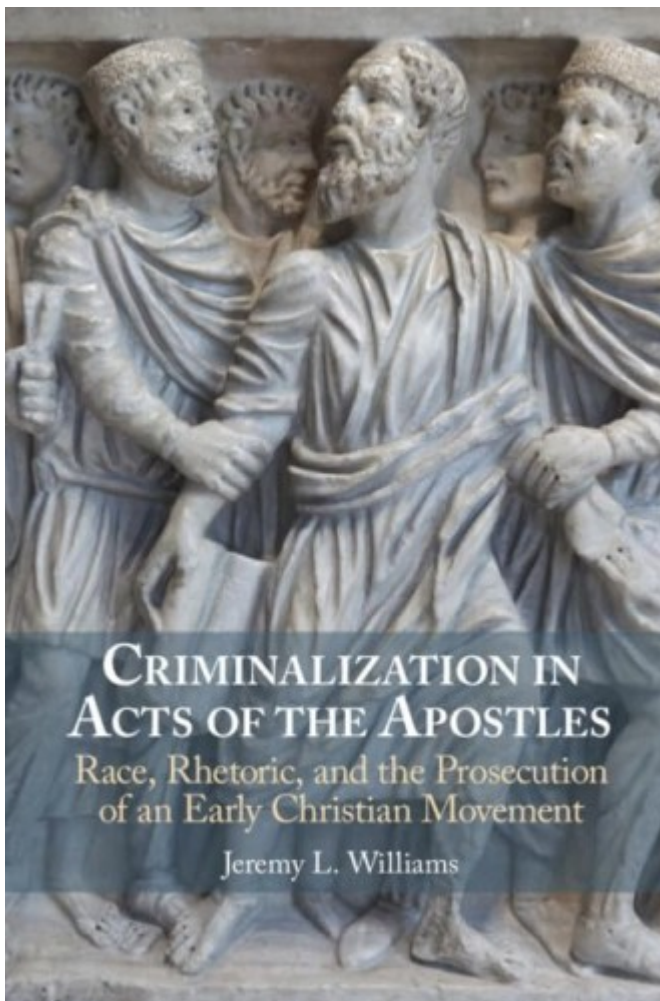
The criminalized apostles

Jeremy Williams offers an indispensable study of the book of Acts and the rhetoric of crime in the Roman Empire.

by [Jimmy Hoke](#) in the [June 2025](#) issue

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## In Review



## Criminalization in Acts of the Apostles

Race, Rhetoric, and the Prosecution of an Early Christian Movement

By Jeremy L. Williams  
Cambridge University Press  
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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

The earliest followers of Jesus were not persecuted; they were prosecuted. This is the crucial point Jeremy Williams makes in *Criminalization in Acts of the Apostles*. While the distinction sounds subtle, it enacts an immense shift. The myth of Christian persecution by Rome persists in popular Christian imagination, despite scholarly consensus that such persecution was highly isolated (e.g., Candida Moss's *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*). Prosecution emphasizes the *rhetorical* nature of criminal charges, which do not always result in incarceration or penalty. As a fictionalized narrative, Williams demonstrates, Acts retells the beginnings of the Jesus movement with specific rhetorical purposes—including how it represents the prosecution of this movement. Figures like Paul were not criminals; they were criminalized.

Like criminalization today, the rhetoric of crime in ancient Rome and its colonized land was racialized. Williams's readings of Acts attest to how judicial prosecution, and especially Roman policing, created criminals from classes at the bottom of the empire's hierarchy: foreigners and enslaved people. Unlike in the persecution myth, Roman prosecution did not single out Christians as a target. Roman elite interests associated the Jesus movement with broader groups that it made into criminalized targets. Williams shows how Acts both attests to this criminalization and presents it as false when it comes to leaders from the Jesus movement (but not other populations).

In the first part of the book, Williams creates a system to help readers approach the rhetoric of criminalization in ancient texts by engaging critical race theory and womanist and feminist scholarship. He proposes four categories of questions to ask about how texts criminalize people and shows interpreters how they can use these questions to analyze ancient texts. Williams's analysis provides a rich picture of the system of criminalization in the Roman world of the second century CE, the rhetorical context for Acts. An awareness of this system of criminalization necessitates new translations of terms connected to Roman policing and imprisonment. Williams suggests "thug" in place of "bandit" (*lēstas*), "court" instead of "Sanhedrin" (*sunēdrion*), "sheriffs" for "magistrates" (*stratēgoi*), and "militarized police" as opposed to "soldiers" (*stratiōtēs*). These shifts better encapsulate the

historical reality of Rome's policed criminalization and help readers connect it to contemporary criminalizing language.

In the second part of the book, Williams applies his analytical system to passages from Acts. For example, he shows how Acts rehearses the racialized question of who counts as human—a question also asked by Sojourner Truth (“Ain’t I a Woman?”) and Ernest Withers (“I Am a Man”). In Acts 21:31–39, Roman prejudice toward Egyptians is the backdrop for Paul’s proclamation that he is human (21:39). This passage exemplifies how Acts classifies humans and puts Roman policing on display. Williams shows how, even though Paul’s appeal is unsuccessful, Acts deploys respectability politics when its author accepts Rome’s dehumanizing criminalization of Egyptians and portrays Paul as an innocent (non-Egyptian) human.

In the epilogue, Williams reflects on how considering the rhetoric of prosecution in Acts centers folks criminalized by Rome and draws attention to “the criminals on top rather than the socially constructed criminals on the bottom.” This attention emphasizes solidarity with the criminalized across history and demands ongoing justice for groups who remain criminalized today. This solidarity is especially apparent in Williams’s work on Acts 16:16–40, the story of Paul casting out a Pythian spirit from an unnamed enslaved girl, which Williams analyzes over two chapters. In this passage, Acts presents the Roman crime of violence (*vis*) as motivated by the economic interests of elite Roman enslavers. The sheriff, who falsely charges Paul with *vis*, makes racialized assumptions that rely on Roman prejudice against Jews as violent disruptors. Paul’s criminalization in Acts holds Roman elites to higher standards of justice by indicting Rome as not living up to its own legal standards.

Even though Acts critiques Roman enslavers for their unjust criminalization of Paul, the unnamed enslaved girl ultimately exposes the text’s deeper alignment with Roman hegemonic masculinity. Acts repeatedly associates this unnamed woman with vice and “treats her as competition to be conquered,” especially *vis-à-vis* the virtuous, wealthy, and freeborn Lydia. Williams suggests a resistant reading of the text that draws from womanist emphases on the enslaved girl as a sassy truth teller.

I cannot overstate the indispensable relevance of this book for Christian leaders. Williams helps readers understand how to read Acts as a story with an agenda, which sometimes aligns with their own—and sometimes doesn’t. He underscores the difference between criminals (those who have actually committed injustices) and the criminalized: those who have been made criminals. The folks whom we think of as

“criminals” tend to be folks who have been criminalized through racialized rhetoric, which includes laws, stories, and elite economic interests. These strategies, Williams reminds us, have roots in Roman imperialism.

The book of Acts, which was not written by elite Romans, attests to Roman policing tactics and holds Roman justice to higher standards. Acts, however, is not above critique. It too criminalizes, especially when it perpetuates the criminalization of Egyptians and Jews who are not part of the Jesus movement. Williams weaves into his analysis critiques of criminalization from contemporary voices (such as the Equal Justice Initiative) to underscore the ongoing impacts of the criminalization we see in Acts. His rigorous analysis of criminalizing texts teaches readers to confront these impacts in their own interpretations of Acts, the New Testament, and the prosecutorial rhetoric we continue to encounter.