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## Sharing possessions in early Christian communities

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2

### Four theses

- Luke portrays voluntary sharing
- Luke's portrait resonates with *both Jewish and Graeco-Roman culture(s)* of the period
- Luke portrays something which is historically plausible
- Luke advocates a radical re-shaping of attitudes and actions with 'possessions'

Four key theses in the paper, and will state them, and then unpack each of them with reference to primary sources.

3

## Voluntary sharing

4

“44 All those who had come to believe were together and they used to hold everything as common; 45 they used to sell their possessions and belongings and distribute the proceeds to all, as anyone had need. 46 Day by day, spending much time together in the temple and breaking bread in homes, they used to share food with joy and singleness of heart, 47 praising God and having favour with the whole people.”

Acts 2:44-47

Note imperfects ‘ἐπίπρασκον ‘used to sell’ and διεμέριζον ‘used to distribute’ and as people were in need (καθότι ἂν τις χρείαν εἶχεν, v 45).

Mary’s continuing possession of a rather large house 12:12.

5

“32 The heart and soul of the group of those who had come to believe was one—not even a single person used to say that any of their possessions was their own, but all things were common for them. 33 With great power the apostles kept giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34 This was seen in that there was no one in need among them, since those who were owners of fields or houses used to sell them and bring the proceeds of what they had sold 35 and lay them at the apostles’ feet, and they were distributed to each one, as anyone had need.”

Acts 4:32-35

‘their own’ = ἴδιον, contrasted with readiness to share as needed vv 34-35 [click]

6

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Acts 4:32-35

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Placement at apostles’ feet removes power of patronage which expected reciprocity—there was no one-to-one connection of giver and receiver. Chrysostom: ‘This was also a help to them against vain-glory.’

7

Sale of property and donation to community—only part of proceeds.

“IA certain man, Ananias by name, together with Sapphira his wife, sold a piece of property 2 and kept back for himself some of the proceeds with his wife’s full knowledge, and brought only a part, which he laid at the apostles’ feet. 3 Peter said, ‘Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart so that you attempted to deceive the Holy Spirit by keeping something back for yourself from the proceeds of the field? 4 While the field remained yours, it remained yours to dispose of, and after it was sold, it was at your disposal, wasn’t it? Why did you contrive this deed in your heart? You have not lied to human beings, but to God.’

Acts 5:1-4

8

Peter makes an issue of keeping something back

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Acts 5:1-4

9

This verse is the key issue of interpretation: A & S had the money at their disposal after the sale—they appear to have done nothing wrong per se by contributing part of it; presumably others also contributed some money which was theirs and not all. The issue is that they lied (v 4).

Specifically, I think Brian Capper is misguided here in thinking there is a two-stage membership of the community like that at Qumran—this verse suggests otherwise. Both before and after the sale, it was in A & S’s power to do as they wished; whereas on Capper’s view it should be after they handed the money over on the two-stage model, since they were still in control of the money (it had not yet been combined with the common fund, on Capper’s view).

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10

Practice of Essene communities around Palestine in villages

“12 This is the rule of the general membership for meeting all their needs: a wage of 13 two days every month at least shall be given to the Guardian and the Judges 14 who will give some of it for their wounded, with some of it they will support the poor and needy, and the elder 15 [bent with age], the man with a skin disease, whoever is taken captive by a foreign nation, the girl 16 without a near kinsman, the boy without an advocate...”

CD 14.13-16 [Wise, Abegg & Cook, tweaked]

11

More on practice of Essene communities in villages and towns of Judaea. No private property.

“1. Multitudes of his disciples has the lawgiver trained for the life of fellowship. These people are called Essenes, a name awarded to them doubtless in recognition of their holiness. They live in many cities of Judaea and in many villages and grouped in great societies of many members.... 4. This freedom is attested by their life. None of them allows himself to have any private property, either house or slave or estate or cattle or any of the other things which are amassed and abundantly procured by wealth, but they put everything together into the public stock and enjoy the benefit of them all in common.

Philo, *Hypothetica* 1.11.1, 4 [Loeb]

12

Common meals a key feature—as in early community, and also in Pauline communities, e.g. 1 Cor 10–11

“5. They live together formed into clubs, bands of comradeship with common meals, and never cease to conduct all their affairs to serve the general weal. 6. But they have various occupations at which they labour with untiring application and never plead cold or heat or any of the violent changes in the atmosphere as an excuse. Before the sun is risen they betake themselves to their familiar tasks and only when it sets force them selves to return, for they delight in them as much as do those who are entered for gymnastic competitions.”

Philo, *Hypothetica* 1.11.5-6 [Loeb]

13

Treasurer of group who provides what is needed from the pooled money.

“10. Each branch when it has received the wages of these so different occupations gives it to one person who has been appointed as treasurer. He takes it and at once buys what is necessary and provides food in abundance and anything else which human life requires. 11. Thus having each day a common life and a common table they are content with the same conditions, lovers of frugality who shun expensive luxury as a disease of both body and soul. 12. And not only is their table in common but their clothing also. For in winter they have a stock of stout coats ready and in summer cheap vests, so that he who wishes may easily take any garment he likes, since what one has is held to belong to all and conversely what all have one has.”

Philo, *Hypothetica* 1.11.10-12 [Loeb]

14

Shared table and shared life emphasised.

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15

Even shared clothing! cf. Tabitha in Acts 9

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## Transformation by the Spirit

- 2:42-47 follows on Pentecost and 2:38-39
- 'Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Messiah for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and all those far away, whoever the Lord our God calls:"'
- 4:32-35 follows on 4:29-31
- 'Now, concerning the present situation, Lord, pay attention to their threats and grant your servants to continue speaking your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand for healing, and signs and wonders are done through the name of your holy servant Jesus. After they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.'

16

The passages we looked at in Acts 2, 4 each follow hot on the heels of passages about the coming or gift of the Spirit.

## Luke's portrait resonates with Jewish and Graeco-Roman culture(s)

17

18

οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐνδεής τις ἦν ἐν αὐτοῖς Acts 4:34  
'there was no-one in need among them.'  
οὐκ ἔσται ἐν σοὶ ἐνδεής Deut 15:4 LXX  
'for there will not be a needy person among you'

Jewish connection through Scripture here: Acts 4:34 echoes Deut 15:4 LXX—widely recognised—ἐνδεής an NT hapax legomenon, so strong likelihood of echo here.

Deut statement in context of promise of no needy person because of redistribution provided by the sabbatical laws.

19

καρδία καὶ ψυχὴ μία Acts 4:32  
 'one heart and soul'

'I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God.' Ezek 11:19-20 NRSV

Oneness of heart and soul a striking phrase, echoing Scripture, e.g. Ezek 11:19-20 (interestingly here, the Greek of Ezek has 'a different heart', stressing change rather than unity.

20

'Whoever shows favour to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full.' Prov 19:17 NRSV

- triennial tithes to those in poverty Deut 14:28-29; 26:12-15
- produce in sabbatical year for the benefit of those in poverty Exod 23:11
- duty of almsgiving, especially when visiting the temple Acts 3:2-3
- Capper shows parallel practices to the Essene communities in Palestine

Provision for people in poverty a key feature of biblical law and practice, summarised by Prov 19:17. Exemplified by:

- triennial tithes being give to people in poverty: classic list of 'Levites, resident aliens, widows and orphans'

21

εἶχον ἅπαντα κοινά

'they used to hold all things common' Acts 2:44

'none of its members possessed any private property, but rather they regarded all they had as the common property of all' Plato, *Critias* 110C-D [Loeb]

'the assured possession by each man of the common resources [so that] you could not find a poor person among them' Seneca, *Epistles* 90.38 [Loeb]

κοινὰ τὰ φίλων

'friends' goods are common property' Aristotle *et al.*

'And if you need anything that is yours, write us, for my possessions, Plato, are by all rights yours, even as they were Socrates' *Socraticus* 26.2 [Malherbe]

Key phrase about holding all things common in Acts 2:44 echoes other ancient authors, notably Plato and Seneca. Both locate this discussion in context of good government, so Luke would be heard by those who knew these sources as making a claim to offer an alternative society.

Similarly, saying that 'friends' goods are common property' is found in Aristotle and others

cf. later letter in *Socraticus*, which shows that 'private ownership' still existed—this was not a common ownership of goods, but a readiness to share them as needed.

22

καρδία καὶ ψυχὴ μία

'one heart and soul' Acts 4:32

A friend is μία ψυχὴ δύο σώματασιν ἐνοικοῦσα

'one soul inhabiting two bodies'

Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 5.20

- but note in Acts
  - they are τῶν πιστευσάντων 'the believers' 4:32 and κοινωνία 'fellowship/partnership' 2:42
  - lack of expected reciprocity

Relationship of people in early community as 'one heart and soul' Acts 4:32 has antecedents, e.g. Diogenes Laertius.

However, in spite of the apparent parallels in GR culture, there are differences too:

- the group are characterised as 'the believers', rather than 'friends', and Luke designates them 'the fellowship'—also fictive kinship (not kindship!) language of 'brother and sister'
- there is no required or expected reciprocity, as there was in GR culture—the giving was without necessary expectation of return; laying at apostles' feet relinquished control by giver, so that the direct link of giver to recipient was broken

Was this Golden Age language? Perhaps—see Noble.

23

'...so that times of refreshing [καιροὶ ἀναψύξεως] may come from the Lord: and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things [χρόνων ἀποκαταστάσεως πάντων]...'

Acts 3:20-21

Luke reshaping the Jewish and GR ideals in the light of a now and not yet eschatology

- now there is real and genuine experience of 'times of refreshing'
- but there is more to come at the restoration of all things

24

Historically plausible



## Parallels

- Pauline parallels
  - Luke Johnson cites Gal 2:10; 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8-9; Rom 15:2-5
- sub-apostolic sources

25

Parallels in Pauline letters, which are written earlier than Acts (and thus closer to the events of the early Jerusalem community)—indeed, it would be surprising if Paul had not learned about the early practices during his travels, including his Jerusalem visits.

Also sub-apostolic sources...

'5 Do not be one who stretches out the hands to receive but withdraws them when it comes to giving. 6 If you earn something by working with your hands, you shall give a ransom for your sins. 7 You shall not hesitate to give, nor shall you grumble when giving, for you will know who is the good paymaster of the reward. 8 You shall not turn away from someone in need, but shall share everything with your brother or sister, and do not claim that anything is your own. For if you are sharers in what is imperishable, how much more so in perishable things!

Didache 4:5-8 [Holmes]

26

Didache, late first century/early second century: encourages readiness to give to those in need with language of 'share everything with your brother or sister, and do not claim that anything is your own'

'You shall share everything with your neighbour, and not claim that anything is your own. For if you are sharers in what is incorruptible, how much more so in corruptible things!'

Epistle of Barnabas 19:8 [Holmes, Anglicised]

27

Epistle of Barnabas, similar period: very similar statement to Didache with same rationale.

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- sub-apostolic sources
  - Did. 4:5-8; Barn. 19:8
- James 1:27; 2:14-17; 5:1-6
- Essenes/Qumran
- but lack of idealisation—Ananias and Sapphira 5:1-11
- continuity with Jesus' ministry
  - parables
  - practice of itinerancy and dependence on others

28

Also James speaks of readiness to share, particularly criticising those who hoard wealth for themselves.

The Essenes model, at least in part, the sharing which takes place.

Lack of idealisation by Luke is striking: doesn't hold back from telling the distressing story of Ananias and Sapphira, which is embarrassing.

There is continuing with Jesus' ministry in Luke: parables of rich fool, and of Lazarus and rich man; practice of dependence on others, such as women in Luke 8:1-3, and use of common purse with Judas as treasurer.

## Did it happen, then stop?

- later practices as instantiating principles found in Jerusalem sharing
- two kinds of discipleship during Jesus' ministry
  - itinerant, e.g. Jesus' Twelve
  - settled, e.g. Martha and Mary
- two kinds of discipleship during the apostolic period
  - itinerant, e.g. Paul
  - settled, e.g. the churches of the NT letters
    - these settled groups saw themselves as interconnected, e.g. inter-church aid
    - principle of *ισότης* 'equality' (2 Cor 8:14)

29

Yes and no answer: they did not do the same thing later, because it was not a good fit to the changed situation—but they did act out the same principles of sharing.

During Jesus' ministry, two kinds of discipleship

After Jesus' ministry, a similar two kinds of discipleship. In settled communities, interconnection seen, on basis of equality—inter-church aid provided on this basis.

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- two kinds of discipleship during the apostolic period
  - itinerant, e.g. Paul
  - settled, e.g. the churches of the NT letters
    - these settled groups saw themselves as interconnected, e.g. church-to-church aid
    - intra-church aid at meals and for believers in poverty

30

But also intra-church aid during meals—that's why Paul is so horrified at the practices of the Corinthians at the eucharist—and in providing for believers in poverty: e.g. Tabitha making clothes for widows, proverbially poor group; Paul receiving hospitality from believers in various places.

## Luke advocates a radical re-shaping of attitudes and actions with ‘possessions’

### Growth notices

- Every day the Lord was adding to their group those being saved. (2:47b)
- Through the apostles' hands many signs and wonders were being done among the people. They all used to meet together in unity in Solomon's Portico, but none of the rest dared to join them; nevertheless the people spoke highly of them. *More than ever believers were added to the Lord, large numbers of both men and women*, so that they even carried sick people into the streets and placed them on beds and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on them. A great number of those from the towns surrounding Jerusalem kept gathering, bringing sick people and those troubled by unclean spirits, and they were all healed. (5:12-16)
- God's word continued growing and the number of disciples in Jerusalem continued to multiply, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith. (6:7)

Striking that each of stories of sharing possessions is followed by a 'growth notice', suggesting that Luke sees God approving of what the believers are doing by adding to their number.

### Reflecting Jesus' teaching and practice according to Luke

- Jesus commends Zaccheus Luke 19:8-9
- Abraham condemns the rich man 16:22-26
  - Zaccheus as the rich man who does what the one in the parable does not
- the women who provide 8:1-3
- Jesus hosted by Martha and Mary 10:38
- these practices carry through into Acts

Continuity between ministry of Jesus and the early believers' practices. Notice that Zaccheus is commended for sharing his possessions, even if partly as restorative justice, and the rich man who does not help Lazarus is condemned. Noticeable that Abraham mentioned in both stories; Z is a 'son of Abraham', whereas Abraham refuses to welcome the rich man. There is no reference to Abraham in between these two stories, which suggest that they can profitably be read together—Z is the one who shows how a rich man should behave with his possessions, Lazarus' rich man is the opposite.

Similarly: the women who support Jesus and the Twelve; Mary and Martha, who host Jesus in their homes.

These practices, as we have seen, carry through into Acts.

Luke's concern, then, may be summed up as regarding material goods and property as held in stewardship by believers; they are to be generous to those in need because and as God in Christ has been generous to them (cf. 2 Cor 8:9). The form of this generosity will vary from place to place and time to time, of course, but Luke wants believers' commitment to it to be steadfast.

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