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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

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# Primitive communism in Acts?

## Does Acts present the community of goods (2:44–45; 4:32–35) as mistaken?

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### Setting the scene

How should we understand the passages in Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–35 which speak of some form of sharing of possessions among the earliest believers? This paper<sup>1</sup> seeks to assess the view that the author of Acts<sup>2</sup> presents this practice as mistaken, since sharing of possessions seems to disappear from view in the remainder of Acts. I shall not be considering the different, but also interesting, question of whether such a sharing of possessions ever took place,<sup>3</sup> although I hope my discussion may shed some light on that question too. Nor shall I be seeking to answer the very large, wider question of the role of wealth and poverty in Luke-Acts, although again, I hope I shall contribute to such discussion.<sup>4</sup>

What are the grounds for arguing that Luke views the sharing of possessions as mistaken, and therefore as something which he *describes* rather than *prescribes* for the church of his day?

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- 1 This is a revised version of a paper presented to the Tyndale Fellowship New Testament Study Group in July 2006 and the London School of Theology New Testament research seminar in September 2006. I am grateful to the participants on both occasions for their helpful comments, and also particularly to Dr Brian Capper, who kindly read and commented graciously and helpfully on an earlier version.
  - 2 I shall refer to the author as 'Luke' henceforward, without necessarily assuming him to be Paul's travel companion of that name.
  - 3 See the judicious discussion of Brian J. Capper, 'Community of Goods in the Early Jerusalem Church', *ANRW* II/26.2 (1995), 1730–74, which makes a solid case for the historicity of such a sharing on the grounds of parallel practices among the Essenes – although note that I shall differ from Capper in the extent to which the early believers' practices were the same as those of the Essenes.
  - 4 For a valuable survey, see Thomas E. Phillips, 'Reading Recent Readings of Issues of Wealth and Poverty in Luke and Acts', *CurBR* 1 (2003), 231–69; for a helpful discussion from an anthropological perspective, see Louise J. Lawrence, *Reading with Anthropology: Exhibiting Aspects of New Testament Religion* (Bletchley: Paternoster, 2005), 152–71.

First and foremost, scholars suggest that there is a tension – not to say a contradiction – between the various accounts of the earliest believers' sharing of possessions. Thus Holtzmann argues<sup>5</sup> that 2:44-45 and 4:32-35 present a community with 'all things common' who sold their belongings and gave them into a common fund, thus practising a form of communism. However, he then notes that the examples given of Barnabas (4:36-37) and Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11) both suggest that the sale of property and donation of the proceeds were voluntary. In particular, 5:4, where Peter asserts that Ananias' property belonged to him before the sale and that the proceeds belonged to him after the sale, show that there was no genuine common ownership. 6:1-6 further shows, asserts Holtzmann, that the earliest believers were far from well organised in their provision for needy people, and thus undermines any suggestion that there was a genuine common ownership. Thus the picture painted in 2:44-45; 4:32-35 is 'idealised', which is a polite way of saying 'made up'.

Second, it is suggested that the size of the pot of shared possessions gradually shrank to virtually nothing under the weight of the needs of widows and other economically unproductive people, and thus that the community had to abandon their bold experiment in communism.<sup>6</sup> As evidence for this, references to the poverty of the Jerusalem church are cited, notably Acts 11:27-30 (concerning the famine during Claudius' time); 24:17 (where Paul states that he came to Jerusalem to bring many offerings for his own nation, thus [it is argued] suggesting that there was a 'chronic' ongoing state of shortage<sup>7</sup>) and Gal 2:10 (where Paul says that he was asked to 'remember the poor').<sup>8</sup>

Third, had all of the earliest believers sold all of their lands and houses, they would have lacked anywhere to meet, not to say live!<sup>9</sup> But 12:12 shows the believers meeting in Mary's home, a home which was large enough for such a gathering and had a front porch (12:13),<sup>10</sup> further underlining its size. This feature further suggests that the portrait in 2:44-45; 4:32-35 is unrealistic and idealised.

Fourth, Capper claims that the move from a Jewish context to a Hellenistic setting, which he detects in 6:1-6, was what led to a move away from common

5 H. J. Holtzmann, 'Die Gütergemeinschaft der Apostelgeschichte', *Strassburger Abhandlungen zur Philosophie. Eduard Zeller zu seinem siebenzigsten Geburtstag* (Tübingen: Akad. Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1884), 27-60 [cited by Capper, 'Community', 1731].

6 Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 67, 90.

7 The gifts mentioned are usually identified with the Pauline 'collection', cf. Rom 15:26, although note the recent cogent argument that this is not so in David J. Downs, 'Paul's Collection and the Book of Acts Revisited', *NTS* 52 (2006), 50-70.

8 Harrison, *Acts*, 90; Capper, 'Community', 1774.

9 Gerhard Krodel, *Acts*, ACNT (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1986), 117.

10 τὴν θύραν τοῦ πλῶνος 'the door of the porch' (12:13) suggests quite a large house (BDAG 897 πλῶν §1), cf. Josephus, *J.W.* 5.5.3 §202 writing of temple gateways which each had two doors.

ownership.<sup>11</sup> He sees the 'Hellenists' as a 'fringe group' of Greek-speaking Jews who did not practise common ownership, and for whose widows there was no daily provision like that of the 'Hebrews'. Capper thus considers the appointment of the seven to 'serve tables' as being the appointment of leaders for the Hellenists, one of whose first tasks was to be to work out an arrangement for care for their widows which fitted into their cultural setting. In response the Hellenists established a looser kind of community life, notably in not having common ownership – and it was this model which spread into the churches planted in the Diaspora.

Fifth, as part of the common scholarly reconstruction that the earliest communities lived with a lively imminent expectation of the *parousia*, scholars frequently consider that there could have been a brief period of sharing of possessions such as that portrayed in 2:44-45; 4:32-35. However, this practice would have faded as impractical once believers realised that the *parousia* would not be happening any time soon.<sup>12</sup>

More than that, Krodel argues that the presence of Galilean disciples would necessitate some form of economic sharing, since they had left their trades behind in Galilee and would need support in the daily necessities of life.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in Krodel's view, the gifts of Barnabas and Ananias and Sapphira were exceptional and unusual, and not a precedent for any future action.

These arguments do not form a coherent overall position – indeed, some of them are mutually contradictory – but they illustrate the combination of historical incredulity and a hermeneutic of suspicion being applied to this feature of Acts. So what is to be made of this? In what follows I shall consider, first, the key passages in 2:44-45 and 4:32-35 with the allied stories of 5:1-11 and 6:1-6, to see what Luke affirms about the earliest believers' practice concerning sharing of possessions. Second, and much more briefly, I shall then consider how

11 Capper, 'Community', 1766-71. In correspondence, Dr Capper suggests that the period where common ownership was practised may have been a matter of months or even weeks (depending on the chronology adopted for the early chapters of Acts). He notes two possible points which might have marked the introduction of a category of believers who did not practise common ownership: (i) the incident with Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), which he believes would give potential new converts pause about joining common ownership; or (ii) Acts 5:12-14a, where people are unwilling to join 'them', which Capper takes to refer the 'inner circle' which practised common ownership, although believers continue to be added to the Lord, and Capper takes these to be the new category of non-common-ownership believers – on Acts 5:12-14a, Capper is following Daniel R. Schwartz, 'Non-joining Sympathisers (Acts 5.13-14)', *Bib 64* (1983), 550-55 and Rainer Riesner, 'Essener und Urkirche in Jerusalem', *Bibel und Kirche* 40 (1985), 64-76, esp. 75-76. See more fully Brian J. Capper, "'With the Oldest Monks..." Light from Essene History on the Career of the Beloved Disciple?' *JTS* n.s. 49 (1998), 1-55, citing 42-47.

12 Krodel, *Acts*, 118; C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994, 1998), 1:168.

13 Krodel, *Acts*, 118.

the theme of possessions develops in the remainder of Acts by focusing on two key themes: the place of almsgiving (9:36; 11:28-30; 12:25), and Paul's practice of self-support (20:33-35).

In what follows, I propose to doubt both parts of the reconstruction that I am considering. I shall argue both that Luke does not present the earliest communities as practising common ownership, and that the later churches' practice of almsgiving and care for the poor is consistent with the earliest believers' practice in Jerusalem.

### What did the earliest believers actually do?

We shall first consider the key passages in the early part of Acts in turn: 2:44-45 and 4:32-35; 4:36-5:11; and 6:1-6.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35*

2<sup>44</sup> All the believers were together and they used to hold everything in common; <sup>45</sup> they used to sell possessions and belongings and distribute the proceeds to all as each was having need.

4<sup>32</sup> The heart and soul of the multitude of those who believed was one, and not even one used to say that any of their possessions was their own, but all things were shared by them. <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles regularly gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup> For there was no-one in need among them; for those who were owners of fields or houses used to sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales <sup>35</sup> and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they were distributed to each one, as they had need.

The use of imperfect verbs throughout 2:44-45 and 4:32-35 (all of the indicative verbs are imperfects) is usually taken as indicating that these are summary statements indicating the habitual practices of the earliest believers.<sup>15</sup> Our reading of these two passages turns on a series of exegetical decisions about key words and phrases.

First, what form of togetherness is implied by ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό (2:44), usually translated 'together'? Bruce speculates that they formed themselves into a synagogue of messianic believers.<sup>16</sup> Taylor similarly suggests that this expression parallels the semi-technical use of the Hebrew equivalent יחד or יחדו (*yhd* or *yhdw*) as a label for the community in the Dead Sea Scrolls, notably 1QS 5.2, and thus might be rendered 'all the believers *belonged to the community*'.<sup>17</sup> While both Bruce and

14 Translations of the NT are my own.

15 E.g. Barrett, *Acts*, 1:169.

16 F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 3rd edn. (Leicester: Apollos, 1990), 132.

17 Justin Taylor, 'The Community of Goods among the First Christians and among the Essenes' in David Goodblatt, Avital Pinnick and Daniel R. Schwartz, eds., *Historical Perspectives: From the Hasmoneans to Bar Kokhba in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*,

Taylor may be going beyond the evidence,<sup>18</sup> there is certainly a form of shared living implied in these and the surrounding verses (2:42-47), a form which includes shared learning, shared meals and hospitality, shared prayer, and regular, daily, gatherings in homes and the temple to facilitate this shared living (v 46). Other uses of this favourite Lukan expression suggest shared living as the focus of this specific phrase,<sup>19</sup> and thus point us to the likelihood that this phrase prepares for the fuller description of their meetings in v. 46, both all together in the temple and in smaller groups in homes.<sup>20</sup>

Second, a central phrase for our discussion is εἶχον ἅπαντα κοινά, 'they used to hold all things common' (2:44). As is widely recognised, this phrase echoes key phrases from Graeco-Roman writings concerning the ideal community, notably Plato and Seneca,<sup>21</sup> as does the parallel expression in 4:32, ἦν αὐτοῖς ἅπαντα κοινά 'all things were common to them.' The Greek ideals did not preclude private ownership, however, since (e.g.) the Cynic Epistles include a letter purportedly to Plato saying, 'And if you need anything that is yours, write us, for my possessions, Plato, are by all rights yours, even as they were Socrates.'<sup>22</sup> It was a matter of possessions being held loosely, so that friends might ask for them as they needed help. Thus it is entirely compatible for Luke to write of people selling their property and the proceeds being distributed to those in need (2:45;

Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah 37 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 147-61 citing 148; so also Capper, 'Community', 1738-39; Max Wilcox, *The Semitisms of Acts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 93-99.

18 For critique of the arguments of Capper and Wilcox (n. 17), see Richard Bauckham, 'The Early Jerusalem Church, Qumran, and the Essenes' in James R. Davila, ed., *The Dead Sea Scrolls as Background to Postbiblical Judaism and Early Christianity: Papers from an International Conference at St Andrews in 2001*, Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah 46 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 63-89, here 85-88.

19 Luke 17:35; Acts 1:14; 2:47; 4:26; it is found elsewhere in the NT only at Matt 22:34; 1 Cor 7:5; 11:20; 14:23.

20 In v. 46 ὁμοθυμαδὸν indicates their meeting all together in the temple, by contrast with their smaller group meetings in homes; see discussion in Steve Walton, 'Ὁμοθυμαδὸν in Acts: Co-location, Common Action or "Of One Heart and Mind"?' in P. J. Williams, Andrew D. Clarke, Peter M. Head and David Instone-Brewer, eds., *The New Testament in its First Century Setting: Essays on Context and Background in Honour of B. W. Winter on His 65th Birthday* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004), 89-105, esp. 99.

21 Note especially Seneca, *Epistles* 90.38; Plato, *Republic* 420C-422D; 462B-464A; *Laws* 679B-C; 684C-D; 744B-746C; 757C; *Critias* 110C-D. For a full listing of parallels, see Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, revised edn. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005), 48-49.

22 *Socratic* 26.2 'To Plato', translation from Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles: A Study Edition*, SBLSPS 12 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), 281. Cf. Cicero, *De Officiis* 1.16 §51: '... the common right to all things that Nature has produced for the common use of man is to be maintained, with the understanding that, while everything assigned as private property by the statutes and by civil law shall be so held as prescribed by those same laws, everything else shall be regarded in the light indicated by the Greek proverb: "Amongst friends all things in common." [*amicorum esse communia omnia*]' (LCL translation).

4:34-35) alongside references to private homes where the believers met (e.g. 2:46, κατ' οἶκον; 12:12). Indeed, it seems likely that these references imply that believers did not sell their own houses, but other properties which belonged to them.<sup>23</sup>

This key phrase 'they used to hold all things common' may be elucidated further by reflection on the earlier part of 4:32, Τοῦ δὲ πλήθους τῶν πιστευσάντων ἦν καρδιά καὶ ψυχὴ μία, καὶ οὐδὲ εἷς τι τῶν ὑπαρχόντων αὐτῶ ἔλεγεν ἴδιον εἶναι, 'The heart and soul of the multitude of those who believed was one, and not even one used to say that any of their possessions was their own.' As Taylor notes,<sup>24</sup> the picture found here is of a continuing 'private ownership' of property, denoted by τῶν ὑπαρχόντων αὐτῶ, 'the things which belonged to him', combined with a radical willingness to share one's goods with others in need. Verse 34 sharpens the focus of the picture, for it explains the mechanism by which the provision for needy people happened, with γάρ introducing an explanation of how it was that 'great grace was upon them all' (v. 33). This construction parallels the exegetical use of καὶ in 2:45, which introduces an explanation that the theme of 2:44 was carried out by means of people selling property and possessions.

What lies behind the assertion made in v. 32? Again, Greek ideals have been seen as echoed here, notably the oneness of heart and soul which was a feature of friendship. Aristotle cites two proverbs with approval in expounding his understanding of friendship: 'Friends are one soul' and 'Everything belonging to friends is common' (*Nicomachean Ethics* 9.8.2). Diogenes Laertius cites Aristotle as saying that friends were 'one soul dwelling in two bodies' (*Lives* 5.20). Plutarch similarly says that friends 'who, though existing separately in bodies, forcibly unite and fuse their souls together' (*Dialogue on Love* 21.9 = *Moralia* 767E; my translation). There may well be an echo of such ideals in Acts 4:32, and Luke may thus be asserting that the primitive Christian community realised all the highest hopes for human community of the Graeco-Roman world.

But the biblical background to the common life of the earliest believers ought not to be neglected either, and a third key phrase points us clearly to Scripture as a resource which Luke draws on here. οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐνδεής τις ἦν ἐν αὐτοῖς 'for there was not a needy person among them' (4:34) echoes Deut 15:4. This verse in Deuteronomy comes in the midst of laws on the remission of debts every seven years – laws which may never have been enacted – and asserts that the regular redistribution of property implied by these laws would not cause poverty or deprivation, 'for there will be no poor among you (for the LORD will bless you in the land which the LORD your God gives you for an inheritance to possess)' (NRSV). The LXX rendering is closely echoed by Luke here, using ἐνδεής ('needy'), an NT *hapax legomenon* found in Deut 15:4 LXX: ὅτι οὐκ ἔσται ἐν σοὶ ἐνδεής 'because there will not be among you a needy person'.

23 Andreas Lindemann, 'The Beginnings of Christian Life in Jerusalem according to the Summaries in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 5:12-16)' in Julian V. Hills, ed., *Common Life in the Early Church: Essays Honoring Graydon F. Snyder* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 202-18, citing 211 n. 46.

24 Taylor, 'Community', 152.

More than that, the language of the community being 'one heart and soul' (4:32), which we noted as paralleled in Graeco-Roman authors, also has biblical parallels. Unity of heart and soul in the knowledge of God and the pursuit of godliness is a theme running through Deuteronomy, not least in the *Shema* (6:5), where Israel is exhorted to love Yahweh with heart, soul and strength. The prophets similarly point to a time when humans will have singleness of heart (e.g. Jer 32:29; Ezek 11:19), which means complete devotion to Yahweh and his concerns and ideals.

Thus Luke presents the messianic community in Jerusalem as fulfilling the hopes and ideals embodied in the Torah for a community life in which no one was poor or in need. There are, of course, Graeco-Roman writers who envisage such a state of affairs too. Seneca writes of ancient times when 'you could not find a single pauper' (*Epistles* 90.38). My point here is simply that Luke's portrait of the earliest believers is not only an echo of Greek ideals, but also of biblical ones.

Luke is clear, of course, that this community life flows from the pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit, for 2:44-45 follows hot on the heels of the promise of the Spirit to those who believe (2:38), and 4:32-35 follows on the description of a fresh filling with the Spirit in response to prayer (4:31).<sup>25</sup> It is notable that Jeremiah 32 and Ezekiel 11 are both passages which hint at God's intervention to bring about the radical change to human attitudes and actions which they cannot accomplish unaided.<sup>26</sup> Thus divine power is behind the early believers' ability to hold their possessions lightly, and this background suggests that a broader biblical theology of stewardship may underlie our two passages in Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35.

For the biblical authors, 'the earth is the LORD's and everything in it' (Ps 24:1) and thus humans hold it in trust from God as those who image him (Gen 1:26-28), rather as statues – that is, *images* – of the emperor populated the Roman empire to mark his claim upon it. Accordingly, property and money are held in trust on behalf of their divine owner: the forgiving of debts every seven years, as well as the radical Jubilee legislation, were signals of limits on the 'rights' (if we may use such a term in relation to biblical thought) of private property under the sovereign rule of Yahweh.

If such an understanding underlies these key passages, then we may have a way to hold together both the radical provision for believers in need and the evidence of continuing ownership of property by individuals. But that is to run ahead of ourselves, for we need first to consider one particular reading of these

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25 Lawrence, *Reading*, 163-65 notes the thoughtful work of Douglas Davies, arguing that the Spirit acts as a divine gift which functions as a 'boundary marker' for the new community, 'linking believers to their origins in Jesus and his resurrection' (164).

26 Were I N. T. Wright, I would also be noticing that they come in 'return from exile' contexts; see N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 2 (London: SPCK, 1996), *passim*, but esp. (e.g.) 126-27, 203-04, 209.

passages which arises out of the examples of Barnabas, and Ananias and Sapphira, and that is Brian Capper's proposal that the Essene community provides the model of a two-stage membership which explains the way in which possessions were shared.

*Acts 4:36-5:11*

Capper's proposal hinges on his reading of 5:4 in the light of his suggestion, noted above,<sup>27</sup> that behind the key phrase ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό (2:44) stood a Semitic expression meaning 'together', an expression which had a semi-technical sense in Essene writings for the community. Building on this suggestion, Capper argues that the natural reading of Peter's explanation to Ananias in 5:4 is that Ananias is not yet a full member of the community and thus that he is not obliged to contribute all of his goods to the common fund.

Capper is reflecting on the two stage membership of the Qumran community, which consisted in a novitiate of one year, following which property and possessions were handed over to the community bursar and the prospective member became a postulant. However, at this stage possessions were not merged with the common fund or spent, but a record was kept of them (1QS 6.19-20). After a further year, the postulant could become a full member of the community, and at this stage his property was merged fully into the communal property (1QS 6.21-22). This community of goods was what marked out the community from outsiders (1QS 9.8-9). Thus, severe penalties were enacted on those who lied about property: they were excluded from the common meal for a year and their rations were reduced by 25% (1QS 6.24-25).

Capper proposes that Peter's explanation in 5:4 reflects these two stages: Ananias and Sapphira were in full possession of their property before it was sold and of the proceeds after the sale. After laying the money at the apostles' feet, Capper suggests, it remained Ananias and Sapphira's property, for they were not yet full members of the community, by analogy with the 'novitiate' at Qumran. In other words, Peter's assertion, 'after it was sold, was it not in your power?' identifies that at the point of laying the proceeds at the apostles' feet Ananias and Sapphira were beginning the second phase of membership, which involved surrender of their property to the community, but not yet merging of their property into the common fund. Thus to lie about this was to incur punishment, by analogy with the penalties for lying about property at entry into the Qumran community.<sup>28</sup> However, for the earliest believers, such lying was lying to God, understood to be

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<sup>27</sup> See n. 17.

<sup>28</sup> In particular, Capper argues that Luke's choice of *νοσφίζω* in Acts 5:3 has the sense 'pilfer, embezzle' (Brian J. Capper, 'The Interpretation of Acts 5.4', *JSNT* 19 [1983], 117-31, here 123); but see the entries of BDAG 679 and LSJ s.v., neither of which suggest this sense for Acts 5:3. For a full and helpful discussion of the echo of the same verb from Josh 7:1, see Hyung Dae Park, *Finding Herem? LNTS 357* (London: T. & T. Clark International, 2007), 132-45.

identified with his representative, Peter.

This is an attractive and interesting proposal, which has the merit of locating the events of the early chapters of Acts within a Jewish matrix. Thus Capper argues, cogently it seems to me, that there is a strong case for some form of sharing possessions among the earliest Christians being historical, since there is evidence of other Jewish groups practising some form of shared possessions in this period in Palestine.<sup>29</sup>

However, it seems doubtful that the parallels he proposes are exact, and thus doubtful that the earliest Christians practised a 'common fund' analogous with that at Qumran. The key weakness in Capper's view is that the assertion of Peter in 5:4 *prima facie* is that *prior to handing over the money* to the apostles, the proceeds of the sale were Ananias and Sapphira's to dispose of as they wished, rather than that this was so *after* they handed the money over. While Peter's question οὐχὶ μὲν σοὶ ἔμμενεν καὶ πρᾶθεν ἐν τῇ σῆ ἐξουσίᾳ ὑπῆρχεν; is not straightforward to translate, its general thrust seems clear enough, giving the sense, 'Surely it is the case that,<sup>30</sup> while it remained yours, it was at your disposal, and that after it was sold, it was still in your authority?' Capper attempts to evade the apparent thrust of this verse (which he notes is translated in similar ways in all the modern English versions<sup>31</sup>) by arguing that the expression ἐν τῇ σῆ ἐξουσίᾳ 'in your authority' is equivalent to a Semitic phrase 'in your hand', based on Hebrew NT translations having used this phrase, and that the Hebrew expression involved might have been used at Qumran for the situation of a postulant's funds following their completing the one year novitiate.<sup>32</sup> This argument seems to be stretching the point considerably and to be building hypothesis on hypothesis in an unpersuasive way.

Further, there appears to have been variety of practice among Essenes outside Qumran, as Capper acknowledges.<sup>33</sup> The Damascus Document provides evidence of Essene communities which did not practise a compulsory sharing of possessions, but which did have a common fund for provision for widows and orphans, e.g. CD 14.13 asserts that for each member of the community, at least two days' income each month should be given to the 'Guardian and the Judges' to provide for those in need. Philo<sup>34</sup> and Josephus<sup>35</sup> similarly record evidence of such Essene communities. These looser communities seem a likelier analogy for the situation of the earliest Christians than a fully residential community such as that at Qumran. If Capper and others are right in postulating an Essene quar-

29 So also Taylor, 'Community', 155.

30 Taking οὐχὶ as implying the answer 'Yes' to the rhetorical question.

31 Capper, 'Community', 1751.

32 Brian J. Capper, "In der Hand des Ananias": Erwägungen zu IQS 6:20 und der urchristlichen Gütergemeinschaft', *Revue de Qumran* 12 (1986), 223-36.

33 Capper, 'Community', 1760.

34 *Every Good Man is Free* 76-77, 85-87; *Hypothetica* 11.4-13.

35 *Ant.* 18.1.5 §§20-22; J.W. 2.8.3-4 §§122-27.

ter in Jerusalem near to the likely site of the Upper Room,<sup>36</sup> then the likelihood increases of such a nearby community's practices being a more relevant analogy than the isolated community at Qumran.<sup>37</sup>

*Acts 6:1-6*

So what should we make of the 'daily distribution' (6:1)? It is hard to see that this contributes much to our understanding of the sharing of possessions among the earliest Christians in Jerusalem – the focus here seems, rather, to be on the distribution of food to those in need. Later rabbinic literature attests a synagogue-based distribution to those in need, and Jeremias argues that a similar system obtained before AD 70.<sup>38</sup> Seccombe argues cogently against Jeremias, noting that the presence of beggars in the Gospels and Acts is a key argument against any widespread system of synagogue-based poor relief.<sup>39</sup>

However, as Capper notes,<sup>40</sup> Philo records the behaviour of the Essenes at their evening gathering each day:

<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, each of these men, who differ so widely in their respective employments, when they have received their wages give them up to one person who is appointed as the universal steward and general manager; and he, when he has received the money, immediately goes and purchases what is necessary and furnishes them with food in abundance, and all other things of which the life of mankind stands in need. <sup>11</sup> And those who live together and eat at the same table are day after day contented with the same things, being lovers of frugality and moderation, and averse to all sumptuousness and extravagance as a disease of both mind and body. (*Hypothetica* 1:10-11)<sup>41</sup>

The daily nature of this feature of life may provide a useful parallel, Capper argues, to the 'daily distribution' of the early Christians. We may agree that this provides a possible analogy, particularly in relation to the looser Essene commu-

36 Capper, 'Community', 1752-59; see also Brian J. Capper, 'The Palestinian Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods' in Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting*, AICS 4 (Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1995), 323-56, esp. 341-50; Rainer Riesner, 'Synagogues in Jerusalem' in Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting*, AICS 4 (Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1995), 179-211, esp. 190-92 (with helpful further references).

37 Although proximity need not imply direct influence, as Bauckham argues by noting that key designations of the earliest Christians were not used in the same way as at Qumran. He considers 'the way', 'the holy ones/the saints', 'the church of God' and 'the community' (Bauckham, 'Early', 75-89).

38 Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1969), 131-34.

39 David P. Seccombe, 'Was There Organised Charity in Jerusalem before the Christians?' *JTS* n.s. 29 (1978), 140-43.

40 Capper, 'Community', 1764.

41 Here in Yonge's translation.

nities which existed around Palestine,<sup>42</sup> while at the same time denying Capper's wider case for a Qumran-like community of goods among the earliest believers.

### Summary

In sum, I have argued that the life of the earliest believers in Jerusalem was marked by a remarkable level of economic sharing which fell short, however, of the common ownership found at Qumran. They grasped, I suggest, the theological keynote of God's ownership of all things, and thus held their possessions lightly as in trust from God, being ready to give them or to realise their value in response to needs among the poorer members of the believing communities.<sup>43</sup> The Essenes provide a partial parallel to the life of this community, as do the aspirations of Graeco-Roman writers such as Plato, Aristotle and Seneca.

### And later in Acts...

The limits of this paper forbid a full study of the role of possessions in the rest of Acts, but two features suggest that a similar understanding of God's ownership of all things and believers holding possessions in trust, to be placed at the disposal of those in need, underlies later practice.

First, almsgiving was a key feature of the life of the believers, inherited from their Jewish origins. Dorcas is commended for her generosity, which seems to have featured making clothes for widows in particular (9:36, 39). The Antiochene believers gathered financial help for believers in Judea during the Claudian famine (11:28-30) – a gift which would reflect the aggravated conditions of need caused during a famine,<sup>44</sup> but also a gift going to believers in the city of Jerusalem, a city in a parlous financial position as a result of a series of disasters over the previous 150 years<sup>45</sup> and containing large numbers of poorer people.<sup>46</sup>

42 Cf. Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 131.

43 Cf. Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 1:413, arguing (in dependence on Wendel) that 'Luke presents a pragmatic ethic of possessions that places the needs of the poor in the center', rather than 'a world-denying "love-communism"' which rejects private property as a concept.

44 Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 20.2.5 §51, describing Queen Helena purchasing corn from Egypt and figs from Cyprus for the general population of Jerusalem during the same famine. Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 123 estimates (on the basis of Josephus, *Ant.* 14.2.2 §28) that the price of wheat went up sixteenfold during the famine of 64 BC, and notes that Josephus, *Ant.* 3.5.3 §320 records that during the Claudian famine, the price of wheat was about thirteen times the usual. See also Ze'ev Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), 223.

45 Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 140-44 notes the series of impoverishing disasters impacting on Jerusalem during the period from 169 BC to AD 70.

46 The Jewish religious duty to give to the needy likely drew people with disabilities or others unable to support themselves financially to the city, to beg from those who came to the Temple (cf. Acts 3:2; John 13:29). For discussion and further references, see Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 116-19, 128-30, 138.

In addition, the building of the Herodian temple was in process, absorbing a vast amount of money. The commendation of Dorcas and the gift from Antioch to Jerusalem both present people ready to give from what they had to meet others' needs.

Second, Paul's practice according to Acts was not to be dependent on people financially in the towns and cities where he proclaimed the gospel; rather he is presented as providing for himself and his companions by working (20:34; 18:3) – work expressed using κοπιῶντας (20:35), a verb denoting tiring, physical labour.<sup>47</sup> He is, moreover, a man free of the desire for others' money or high quality clothing (20:33). But most significantly, the principle behind his self-support is that he might have a surplus to support 'the weak' (τῶν ἀσθενούντων, 20:35), a phrase which likely connotes some form of physical weakness which would prevent those affected working for their own living.<sup>48</sup> As an example of such charitable support, we might think of the men whose hairdressing expenses Paul pays (21:23-24, 26). This practice Luke's Paul commends to the Ephesian elders – a theme, as I have argued elsewhere, thoroughly in tune with the Paul of 1 Thessalonians.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

In sum, then, in asking, 'Does Acts present the community of goods as mistaken?', I suggest that we are looking at a 'Have you stopped beating your wife?' question. By this I mean that we are presented with a question whose premises we should doubt. We should doubt that Luke believes that the earliest believers in Jerusalem practised common ownership of all of their possessions *and* we should doubt that the theme of sharing possessions vanishes from the rest of the book. Whether or not Luke knew the Pauline letters, he would have approved of Paul's expression of the theological basis of such economic action for those in need:

I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, 'The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.' (2 Cor 8:13-15, NRSV)

## Abstract

This article assesses the widespread scepticism about the historical value of the

47 BDAG 558 κοπιῶω §2.

48 For discussion, see Steve Walton, *Leadership and Lifestyle: The Portrait of Paul in the Miletus Speech and 1 Thessalonians*, SNTSMS 108 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 170-72.

49 Walton, *Leadership*, 167-72.

portrait of the earliest Christians sharing their possessions in the early chapters of Acts, and criticises two key claims: first, that Luke believes the earliest believers practised compulsory pooling of possessions by those who became Christians; and second, the assertion that sharing possessions disappears once the mission spreads into Gentile circles. A careful reading of the key passages (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-5:11; 6:1-6) shows that, while there was a remarkable readiness among the believers to share with those in need, there was no compulsion about this. Rather, the principle of holding possessions lightly as God's stewards guided practice, and this principle also underpins later almsgiving among Christians reported in Acts.

## Reading Luke Interpretation, Reflection, Formation

Craig G. Bartholomew, Joel B. Green, Anthony C. Thiselton (Editors)

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