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WAS THERE A "LUKAN COMMUNITY?"

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In an article entitled, "On Finding the Lukan Community: A Cautious Cautionary Essay," Luke Timothy Johnson has argued that, granted the existence of an entity known as the "Lukan community," far less is or can be known about that entity than many students of Luke-Acts seem to suppose.¹ His argument is completely convincing. With regard to the Lukan Sitz im Leben, too many have too often crawled too far out on the limb of scholarly speculation. Yet despite this fact and the correctness of most of his observations, Johnson has not really taken us to the heart of the matter. A more fundamental question - and one which, as far as I can determine, has seldom been asked - still poses itself, namely: Should reference to the "Lukan community" be countenanced in the first place? It is the purpose of this brief piece to list several reasons for thinking that it probably should not be.

(1) What, to begin with, might be meant by the "Lukan community?" Those writing on Luke or Acts have unfortunately, not always favoured us with clear or precise definitions.² The expression might refer to any one of several things - to a very small group of people, perhaps to the members of a single house church³ or to a cluster of several house churches, or to all of the Christian fellowships in a particular city. But even before the important problem of definition is addressed, should we not require that some justification be given for the supposition that Luke belonged to and therefore addressed a well-defined company of readers? The question is given substance by the circumstance that early Christianity had its fair share of itinerant missionaries, peripatetics who covered large portions of the mediterranean world. One immediately thinks of the apostle Paul. He was frequently on the move (1 Cor.4.11: astatoumen). He visited numerous places. He in fact thought in terms of the evangelization of the entire world (cf. Rom.15.18-24). And in this he was not alone. The quest to take the gospel to the ends of the earth was shared with others. What, then, if there were cause for believing that the author of Luke-Acts,

like the apostle to the Gentiles, was a man with no permanent home, an evangelist whose missionary vision encompassed the known civilized world?

(2) According to early Christian tradition, Luke, the companion of Paul (Col.4.14; 2 Tim. 4.11), composed Luke-Acts.⁴ Many, of course, now reject this traditional identification, and it cannot be accepted without further ado. It nonetheless is not without its contemporary proponents, and one still hesitates to lend it no credence at all. It is, therefore worth observing that the author of Luke-Acts was, according to the tradition, the companion of one whose goal was the preaching of the gospel where Jesus Christ had yet to be named (Rom. 15.20). That is, he was the companion of one whose identity was not bound up with any one church or "community," the associate of one who was interested in the church universal, in Christian fellowships he had never known face to face (Rom. 1.8-15; 15.23-29). Now if Paul had been moved to produce a gospel or a book like Acts, it is not difficult to conceive of it as having been addressed to the church in every place.⁵ And if we can imagine this of Paul, nothing prevents us from proposing that the author of Luke and its sequel could, in writing an account of Jesus and his church, have taken up pen with a large number of readers in mind, for his literary aspirations might plausibly have correlated with his universal evangelistic outlook. Indeed, if Luke had been the man - or like the man - tradition makes him out to be, we are almost compelled to picture him writing with more than just a single "community" in view - for, quite simply he, as a peripatetic, would not have belonged to any one "community". In other words, just as it makes no sense to speak, without qualification, of the "Pauline community", so too would the "Lukan community" be a phrase devoid of meaning (One could, to be sure retort that the "Lukan community" stands for the Lukan home base. In order, however, for this equation to overturn the point I am making, which is that the gospel and Acts may not be addressed to or reflective of any specific "community", it would be incumbent to demonstrate why, in making Luke-Acts, our author was first of all influenced by or concerned

with his home base - and it is hard to fancy how one would go about establishing this. Paul was for a time based in Antioch, but we do not examine his letters in order to reconstruct the situation or theology of the "Antiochian community."⁶

(3) The traditions that ascribe Luke-Acts to a Pauline associate do not constitute the only evidence favouring the judgment that the third evangelist must have been an itinerant. Consider four facts.

(a) In creating his gospel Luke had, if we accept the standard theory, access to Mark, to Q, and to special traditions (usually labelled "L"); and, despite recent skepticism, in order to compose Acts he presumably made use of an Antiochene source, extensive traditions about Paul, a collection of stories about Peter, and assorted other sources. This matters because while it is just possible that the many traditions reflected in Luke's two-volume work managed to pass from mouth to mouth and thence come to the Lukan residence, it is a bit more likely that the sundry sources incorporated into Luke-Acts were gathered by a traveller, by a man who collected stories from different Christian groups as he journeyed from place to place.⁷

(b) The three major characters in Luke-Acts - Jesus, Peter, and Paul, are itinerants, and Luke has obviously been happy to give us the details of their travels. We are informed that Jesus could be found in Nazareth, in Capernaum, in Genneseret, in Nain, in the country of the Gerassenes, in Bethsaida, in Jericho, in Bethany, and in Jerusalem. Moreover, Luke's central section (9.51-18.34) is one long journey to Jerusalem; and the remark that Jesus "went his way through towns and villages" (13.22) accurately describes his major activity (cf. 10.38); 11.1, 53; 13.10; 17.11-12; 18.31, 35; 19.1, 28,41). As for Peter, before Easter he follows his Lord all about Palestine, and the post-Easter period does not find him settling down. He shows up in Jerusalem, in Samaria, in Lydda, in Joppa, and in Caesarea (Acts 1-5; 8.14, 32, 38-39; 10.23-24); and in Acts 9.32 we learn that "Peter went here and there among them all." And what needs to be said about Paul? He is everywhere - in Jerusalem, Damascus, Caesarea, Tarsus, Antioch, Seleucia, Cyprus, Perga, Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra,

Derbe, Bithynia, Troas, Neapolis, Philippi (Acts 9.1, 19, 30; 13.1, 4, 13, 14; 14.1, 6; 16.7, 11-12) - and the list goes on and on. Now if a book's heroes inevitably mirror an author's self-conception and his ideals, we must find in the movements of Jesus and Peter and Paul reason to suspect that Luke himself was all over the map. That is, given that the story of Luke-Acts is so much about the travels of three men who never put down roots, the possibility that Luke himself was personally committed to the missionary road strongly asserts itself.⁸ (Luke also underlines the missionary movements of men besides Jesus, Peter, and Paul; see Acts 8.4, 14, 25, 30; 11.19).

(c) There are three standard explanations for the origin of the so-called we-sections in Acts (16.10-17; 20.5-15; 21.1-18; 27.1-28:16). (i) Their author was the author of Luke-Acts. (ii) The author of Luke-Acts incorporated into his work a source (travel diary?) composed by one of Paul's companions. (iii) The first person plural is to be explained as a fictional literary device. In the first instance there would be no doubt about Luke's status as an itinerant missionary. But even if one accepts the second or third option, it is all but impossible to avoid the inference that our writer at least wished to create the impression of his being a widely travelled man.

(d) Closely related to point (b) is another: the plot of Luke-Acts moves forward with the geographical changes. Jesus' journey to Jerusalem leads to the climax that is the passion narrative; and the spreading of the gospel from Jerusalem to other places supplies the outline which the narrative of Acts follows (note especially Acts 1.8: "and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth"). So when Luke thinks of the church and her story, he thinks in terms of geography, in terms of people moving from here to there. What more natural, then, than to think of him as a traveller, as one who missionized in different locales?

(4) Luke 1.1-4 reads as follows:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those

and about this "community" some plausible conjectures may be offered, such as that it was intensely engaged with emergent rabbinic Judaism. One can also plausibly defend the idea of a "Johannine community" - defined as those churches directly influenced by the "Johannine school"; and speculation about this "community" has seemingly borne fruit. Concerning Mark, however one hesitates. As with Luke, the tradition assigns this gospel to an itinerant, John Mark (Acts 12.12, 25; 15.37, 39; 2 Tim. 4.11). Beyond this, and notwithstanding much recent work on the issue, the purposes of Mark remain mysterious, his intentions hidden away. Whether the second evangelist penned his gospel with a particular group of Christians (the "Markan community") in mind, or whether he was an itinerant missionary who had wider ambitions, is a problem I for one do not see how to resolve. But whatever one makes of Mark, matters are clearer with Luke. As has been argued, the third gospel and the Acts of the Apostles give every impression of having been written without much special concern for some "Lukan community", and all the evidence indicates that Luke was a peripatetic. If, therefore, scholars are going to persist in writing about the "Lukan community" they owe us some detailed explanation. Simple assumption and reassertion will not persuade.

Notes:

1. Luke Timothy Johnston, "On Finding the Lukan Community: A Cautious Cautionary Essay," in Society of Biblical Literature 1979 Seminar Papers, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1979), I, pp.87-100. To illustrate his major point, Johnson inquires into what Luke's emphasis upon prayer might mean. Does it imply that Luke belonged to a "community" which prayed a great deal? Or does it imply precisely the opposite, that Luke took it upon himself to show his lax and unfaithful readers the importance of prayer? According to Johnston, there is no way to determine which one of these two very different alternatives is closer to the truth.

2. Typical as the following: Chas H. Talbert, Literary Patterns, Theological Themes and Genre of Luke-Acts, SBLMS (Scholars Press 1974) p.135; R.J. Karris, Poor and Rich: The Lukan sitz im leben" in Perspectives on Luke-Acts, ed. C.H. Talbert (Edinburgh, T&T. Clark 1978), p118; D.L. Tiede, Prophecy and History in Luke-Acts (Fortress 1980) p129; J.B. Chance, "Jerusalem and the Temple in Lucan Eschatology" (unpub. Dissertation, Duke Univ., 1984), p415; Wm R. Long, review of Robert Maddox, The Purpose of Luke-Acts, in JBL 103(1984), p486; and J.A.T. Robinson, The Priority of John, (London 1985), p80. The list could easily be extended. (While in the article cited above RJ Karris refers to Luke's "Community", in "Missionary Communities: A New Paradigm for the Study of Luke-Acts" (CBO 41(1979) pp 80-97, he uses the plural "communities", these being defined as "the main missionary community and daughter missionary communities" (p.96) But on p.86 he has the singular "Luke's Community")
3. Perhaps this is what Ulrich B usse, Die Wunder der Propheten Jesu: Die Rezeption, Komposition und Interpretation der Wundertradition im Evangelien des Lukas, FB 24 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1977) p.463 is thinking when he writes of a "small community".
4. The evidence is collected in Henry J. Cadbury, "The Tradition" in The Beginnings of Christianity, Part 1, The Acts of the Apostles, Vol II, Prolegomena II, Criticism, ed. F.J. Foakes-Jackson and Kirsopp Lake (London: Macmillan 1922), pp209-245.
5. Romans and the pseudonymous Ephesians, it should be remembered, have sometimes been thought of as encyclicals to be sent around to several churches; and the authors of the Pastorals, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter and 2 Peter probably hoped that their compositions would be circulated far and wide.
6. It is, of course, possible to make some concrete statements about the "Pauline communities" if one is attempting to characterize the social world of the Gentile mission or if one is trying to reconstruct the situation of the Christians in a particular city, such as Corinth. But the first of these approaches is not what scholars have in mind when they set about reconstructing the "Lukan community"; and the second is irrelevant because after all the situation in Galatia or Philippi, which is to say: the Pauline churches were in important ways very different from each other, and we have no reason to suppose matters were different with the churches known to our itinerant author. The problems and concerns and even theological tendencies of one group of Christians known to Luke may not have been the problems or concerns or theological tendencies of another, so generalization about the Lukan "communities" will have to be truly general.
7. Cf Ernst Haenchen, The Acts of the Apostles, A Commentary, trans. B. Noble et al. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971) on the possible ways Luke might use for collecting information from the various Pauline churches., by letter or visit for example
8. Against this it should not be asserted that Luke's knowledge of the lands he writes about is inferior and unambiguously that of an armchair geographer. See Martin Hengel, "Luke the Historian and the Geography of Palestine in the Acts of the Apostles", in Between Jesus and Paul. Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia; Fortress 1983)

pp.97-128

9. Luke-Acts could have been directed to two circles of readers, Christians and non-Christians; cf Schuyler Brown, "The Role of the Prologues in Determining the Purpose of Luke-Acts", in Perspectives on Luke-Acts pp.99-111. Martin Dibelius, "The Text of Acts", in Studies in the Acts of the Apostles, ed. H. Greeven, Tr. M. Ling (NYork: Chas Scriener and Sons, 1956), p.88: "When an author writes a dedication like Luke 1.1-4 - a dedication whose style and character of words are akin to the opening of many literary, secular writings, he has in mind readers who will understand and appreciate such a prologue. Few, if any, of the rank and file of the early Christians belonged to this class of readers."
10. On this see now Maddox, The Purpose of Luke-Acts(Edinburgh, T&T Clark 1982
11. Krister Stendahl, The School of Matthew and its Use of the Old Testament, 2nd ed (Fortress 1968) first popularized reference to the "Matthaeian School". For refinement of the term"school", see R. Culpepper: The Johannine School, SBLDS 26 (Scholars Press 1975)
12. In addition to Raymond E. Brown, The Community of the Beloved Disciple(NYork, Paulist 1979) esp.,noteworthy J.Louis Martyn, History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel, rev.ed (Nashville, 1979)