

Christian apocalypse (Mark 13), the evangelist metaphorically writes of the one to come as "the master of the house" (Mark 13:35). The figure serves as an image of Jesus, the Parousiac Lord.

At the present time biblical scholars see in these many references to Jesus at home a reflection of Mark's own experience. It was at home that the Christians of his day gathered to discourse and ask questions about Jesus. It was at home that they were touched by his life-giving ministry. It was at home that they broke bread in memory of him. It was at home that they awaited him as Parousiac Lord.

Little more need be written about the importance of the home for the early Christian experience. The home was not only a convenient place to meet, the home was actually the place where the church came into being. That domestic experience of the early Christians provided a structure not only for their own internal organization but also for their social outlook. One should really say that, on the basis of the New Testament writings, the early Christian experience of Jesus the Christ and Lord was an experience at home.

The Community Addressed by Luke-Acts ¹

by Herman Hendrickx

1. Luke wrote for a Christian Community

Scholars who attribute to Luke an apologetic desire to convince the pagan authorities of Rome that Christianity was politically harmless imply that Luke-Acts was meant for non-Christians as well as Christian readers. But a number of considerations mitigate against the view that any part of Luke's audience was pagan. The most important of these arguments is that Luke exposes his readers to an atmosphere of Judaism and the Old Testament from the beginning of his gospel until the end of Acts. He often alludes to the Greek Old Testament in a way which would have been unintelligible to someone unfamiliar with its language and contents.²



Unlike a good number of scholars who opine that Luke, as opposed to the other evangelists, had many communities rather than a single community in view³, we believe with Philip E. Esler that Luke "did have a specific Christian community in mind."⁴ One of the places in Luke-Acts where one gets the impression that - via the character of Paul - Luke is "speaking to the present situation of his own community,"⁵ is Paul's address to the elders of the Ephesian ekklesia (Acts 20:17-35). He refers to the community as a "flock" (poimnion; Acts 20:28,29). The same word is found in Lk 12:32, "Fear not, little flock, for it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." "This repeated use of the flock image suggests that Luke found it appropriate to the circumstances of his own readers, in other words, that they were members of a small Christian community beset by difficulties from within and without."⁶

2. When and Where

The most likely date for Luke-Acts appears to lie in the mid-to late eighties or the early nineties of the first century A.D.

The place of composition of Luke-Acts was most probably a city. Henry J. Cadbury has convincingly shown that Luke must have written his work in an urban context.⁷ He substantiates his view by referring to editorial additions of the word "city" to proper place-names and to the focusing of the teaching of Jesus and of the early Christian missionaries almost exclusively in cities. In fact, the only time that there is missionary teaching in the countryside in Acts is in the area around Lystra and Derbe (Acts 14:6-7). It is safe to conclude that Luke wrote for a Christian community established in a city of the Roman empire - probably in the eastern part of the Mediterranean - where Hellenistic culture was strong or even dominant, as evidenced by Luke's apparent immersion in the Hellenistic culture of his day.⁸

3. Jewish and Gentile Christians in Luke's Community

There are three possibilities for the Jewish-Gentile mix in the Lukan community. Firstly, it was totally or predominantly made up of Gentile-Christians, with Jewish Christians absent or representing only an insignificant minority. Secondly, it was a mixture of Jewish and Gentile Christians, in which each group is significant. Thirdly, it was totally or predominantly Jewish-Christian, with Gentile Christians absent or present only as an insignificant minority. While the vast majority of scholars favor the first option, we take the view that the second option is the nearest to the truth.⁹

The Jewish Christians in the community "may well have been ostra-

cized by their fellow-Jews for endangering Jewish ethnic identity by sharing table-fellowship with Gentiles,¹⁰ and they may even have been the target of a Jewish campaign to have them abandon the Christian community. Faced with such pressures, they must have required considerable reassurance that their decision to convert . . . had been the correct one. One of the aims Luke had was to provide such reassurance - or . . . 'legitimation' - to the Jewish members of the community."¹¹

On the other hand, an analysis of conversion accounts in Acts (e.g., Cornelius in Acts 10:1-11:18) leads to the conclusion that the Gentiles whom Luke describes as becoming Christians are almost exclusively drawn from among the ranks of the "God-fearers," that is, Gentiles whose devotion to Judaism, especially its monotheism, led them to attend Jewish synagogues, but without becoming circumcised.

4. Table-Fellowship in Luke-Acts

There is a wealth of evidence, both from classical authors and Jewish sources,¹² for the fact that the Jews were zealous in keeping themselves apart from the Gentiles by means of definite boundaries which were perceived as originating in the Mosaic law. Although Jews were happy to mix with Gentiles in synagogues, eating with them was a very different matter. Eating was an occasion fraught with the possibility of breaking the purity code, one of the most crucial aspects of the Mosaic law for the maintenance of the separate identity of Jewish ethnicity. The antipathy of Jews towards table-fellowship with Gentiles, in the literal sense of sitting around a table with them and sharing the same food, wine and vessels, was an intrinsic feature of Jewish life for centuries before and after the writing of Luke-Acts.¹³

The most important evidence in Luke-Acts of the author's interest in Jewish-Gentile table-fellowship is found in the account of the events surrounding the conversion of Cornelius, the first Gentile convert, by Peter in Acts 10:1-11:18. The central issue in this narrative is apparently not that the gospel has been preached to Gentiles, but the far more particular fact, of great ethnic and social significance, that Peter has lived and eaten with them. This is, after all, the substance of the complaint against Peter by members of the Jerusalem church in Acts 11:3.¹⁴ What matters to Luke is the legitimation of complete fellowship between Jews and Gentiles in the Christian community, not just the admission of the Gentiles to those communities.¹⁵

But, in spite of the legitimation of the practice by the Jerusalem church in Acts 11 and 15, the subject was still problematic for Luke. Therefore, he takes up the issue again in Acts 27:33-37, the fourth

occasion in Acts in which Paul enters into the table-fellowship with Gentiles, thereby necessarily raising once again the problems for Jewish ethnic integrity which such behavior entails. Paul's exhortation to everyone on board - Jews as well as Gentiles - to take food, for this pertains to their salvation (soteria; Acts 27:33-34), reinforces Luke's persistent emphasis on the fact that the old barriers between Jew and Gentile have been decisively shattered in the eucharistic fellowship of the Christian community and that an era of salvation for all humanity has now been inaugurated.¹⁶

Yet how was this table-fellowship question relevant to Luke's own community? In his community there were apparently Jewish and Gentile Christians who did sit down to table together and who were attracting criticism because of it. This threatened the unity and even the existence of Luke's community and constituted one of the prime motivations for the unique way in which he presents his material, in other words, to serve his theology. A legitimation of table-fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians forms a vital arch in the symbolic universe which Luke created for his community. It was this issue which, in the early history of Christianity, had led to the development of a distinct Christian identity vis-a-vis Judaism, and it was still central to the life of Luke's Christian contemporaries.¹⁷

5. The Rich and the Poor in Luke's Community

There is a fairly general agreement that the account of Jesus' inaugural speech at Nazareth (Lk 4 :16-30) serves a programmatic function within Luke-Acts as a whole. Thus the proclamation of good news to the poor (ptochois "beggars") seems to figure prominently in Luke's work. But considerable disagreement exists among Lukan commentators on the question of whether the evangelist did have his own special interest in the issue of poverty and riches, or was he merely repeating the emphasis already present in his sources. David L. Mealand offers a recent and extensive case against the existence of a special interest in poverty and riches in Luke-Acts.¹⁸ But a number of serious objections can be made to Mealand's position, and an independent assessment of the texts leads to the conclusion "that Luke does intensify what his Marcan and Sayings sources, especially the former, have to say on riches and poverty."¹⁹ Indeed, "the only plausible conclusion to be drawn from an examination of Luke's redaction of Mark and Q and his introduction of a large body of material relating to the question of riches and poverty is that this was a matter of vital concern to him. In other words, it represents an important element in his theology."²⁰

To what extent has this theology been motivated and shaped by the

social setting of Luke's community? As noted above, there is a widespread belief among scholars that Luke-Acts was written in a city of the Roman empire, probably in one of the eastern provinces. What was it like to be poor in such a city? Or rich? Who were the rich and the poor? Did Luke's community provide relief for its poorer members? Timothy Johnson argues that Luke's material on possessions serves merely as a literary function in telling his story of "the Prophet and the People."²¹ Others have investigated the Isaian background of Lk 4:18-19, for instance, as the significance of the "the Lord's year of favor."²² But Third Isaiah (Isa 56-66) was written around 500 B.C. while Luke was writing for urban Christians of the first century A.D. What impact did these words have on the latter? What was it actually like to be poor in the Hellenistic cities of the Roman East? From a brief survey of social stratification and the experience of poverty in the provincial cities of the empire, it is clear that the urban poor suffered extreme forms of economic, social and political deprivation.²³ For them life was a very grim business. Ill-fed, housed in slums or not at all, ravaged by sickness, precluded from all access to social prestige and power over their own destinies, and having practically no hope of improvement in their condition, they went through life with little if any confirmation that they, as much as the tiny elite who lorded it over them, were creatures with personal dignity and respect, entitled to share in the fruits of the earth.²⁴

In a Greco-Roman city in the first century A.D. ptochoi, usually translated as "poor," did mean "beggars." This word was applied to the vast majority of the people in the cities who, having no claim to the income of a landed estate, lacked the leisure and independence enjoyed by the ruling elite.²⁵

From Lk 4:16-30, "it appears likely that Luke's community encompassed individuals from the top and bottom strata of Hellenistic society, but that his presentation of the gospel radically elevates the destitute to a position of pre-eminence. The Lucan Jesus promises to alleviate the extreme physical deprivation suffered by the beggars, the blind, the lame, the imprisoned and so forth, without, however, ignoring the spiritual aspects of salvation."²⁶

Luke's community apparently contained members from both ends of the socio-economic spectrum in the Hellenistic city in which it was located.²⁷ Luke himself probably came from the upper segment of the Greco-Roman society. The literary education displayed in some parts of his work (e.g., Lk 1:1-4; Acts 27) was inaccessible to the lower strata of society.²⁸ He also focused upon converts of elevated status, economic

position and political power (e.g., Cornelius). The presence of rich Christians among Luke's audience is also confirmed by those passages in the gospel where Jesus warns the rich to change their ways (Lk 12:13-21; 14:12-14; 16:9; 16:19-31; 18:18-30). The story of the rich ruler (Lk 18:18-30) is taken over from Mk 10:17-31, but with Lukan changes that place the rich man and his problem within the Christian community itself, (compare Mk 10:22 and Lk 18:23).²⁹

Some scholars deny that Luke was addressing his message to the poor. According to Ernst Bammel, for example, "Luke neither thinks from the standpoint of the poor nor really seeks to address them."³⁰ But an examination of the evidence reveals both that Luke does address the poor, including the utterly destitute, and that they constituted part of his community.³¹ And "there is abundant evidence in the text of the Lucan emphasis on the priority accorded to the utterly destitute in the scheme of salvation."³² A comparison of the apocryphal 1 Enoch 92-105 with Luke-Acts shows that Luke has drawn upon Jewish traditions in his treatment of the poor and the rich, yet he seems to have transcended those traditions in his response to the particular composition of, and the problems besetting his own community.³³

The real cutting-edge of Luke's theology of property is that the elimination of injustice, the alleviation of the sufferings of the poor and the destitute, is not merely an eschatological reality but is a vital constituent of Christianity in this world, here and now. While the reversal of the conditions of the rich and the poor (Lk 1:52-53; 16:19-31) will not occur until "the next world," the process must begin here on earth. Salvation for Luke is not a purely eschatological reality, for the Christian community it begins here and now within the community.

"Luke is addressing both the rich and the poor in his community, but whereas his message for the latter constitutes a form of encouragement . . . his line with the rich is rather different. Luke's message for them is parenthetical as much as legitimatory. While his exposition of the teaching of Jesus and the practice of the early Jerusalem church in the matter of possessions must have served a legitimatory function for some of his wealthier Christian contemporaries with clear consciences on this matter, it is highly likely that behind his continual emphasis on the priority of the poor and the duties of the rich lies a failure by some of the latter to live up to their responsibilities. For people such as these, Luke's attitude is homiletic, not legitimatory; he is not encouraging them that all is well, but warning them that all is not."³⁴

Notes

1. It was Henry J. Cadbury (1926) who insisted that Luke and Acts be interpreted as part of a common endeavor, and following his lead, recent Lukan scholarship has started reading them together. Cadbury's hyphenated "Luke-Acts" is now currently employed to indicate that the Gospel and Acts must be read as a unit.

2. R. Maddox, The Purpose of Luke-Acts (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), p.14

3. E.g. E.A. LaVerdiere and W.G. Thompson, "New Testament Communities in Transition: A Study in Matthew and Luke," Theological Studies 37, (1976), 567-597

4. Ph. E. Esler, Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts. The Social and Political Motivation of Lucan Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 26

5. Ibid., pp. 26,54

6. Ibid.

7. H.J. Cadbury, The Making of Luke-Acts (London: C.P.C.K., 1958), pp. 245-249

8. Esler, Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts p. 30

9. Ibid, p. 31

10. See below

11. Esler, Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts, p. 45

12. Ibid., pp. 76-84

13. Ibid., p. 84

14. Ibid., p. 93

15. Ibid., p. 96

16. Ibid., pp. 103-104

17. Ibid, p. 109

18. D.L. Mealand, Poverty and Expectation in the Gospels (London: S.P.C.K., 1980)

19. Esler, Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts p. 5

20. Ibid, p. 169

21. L.T. Johnson, Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977)

22. J.A. Sanders, "Isaiah in Luke," Interpretation 36 (1982), pp. 144-155.

23. Esler, Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts, pp. 171-179

24. Ibid, p. 179

25. A.R. Hands, Charities and Social Aid in Greece and Rome (London: Thames & Hudson, 1968), p. 62

26. Esler, Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts, p. 183

27. R.J. Karris, "Poor and Rich: The Lukan Sitz im Leben." in Ch.

H. Talbert (ed.) Perspectives in Luke-Acts (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978), pp. 112-125

28. A.H.M. Jones, The Greek City from Alexander to Justinian (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), p. 285

29. S. Legasse, "The Call of the Rich Man," in A. George et al., Gospel Poverty: Essays in Biblical Theology (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977), pp. 53-80, especially 69

30. E. Bammel, "Article on ptochos," in Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), pp. 886-912, especially 888

31. Esler, Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts, pp. 185-186

32. Ibid., p. 187

33. Ibid., pp. 189-193

34. Ibid., pp. 197-198

Small Faith Communities – A Preliminary Theological Inquiry

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On Pentecost Sunday 1989 Hong Kong's Cardinal John B. Wu promulgated his pastoral letter, March into the Bright Future, which set a clear-cut course for the diocese to follow during the next decade. The Bishop has directed his diocese to make every effort to work for reconciliation and set about the task of establishing 'small faith communities' as key priorities in the future development of the Church in Hong Kong. The process of reconciliation is to begin with each individual Christian, gradually extending

itself to include the local community and eventually the nation itself. The pastoral letter pointed out that each parish as well as the diocese as a whole is to promote the setting up of 'small faith communities' as