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# Did Luke Know the Letter of James?

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The letter of James is very seldom considered to be one of Luke's sources. However, particularly three parallels between Luke and James suggest that this is a real possibility: (1) the reference to the "three years and a half" of famine in Elijah's time in Luke 4:25 and Jas 5:17, (2) the woes in Luke 6:24–26 and Jas 4:9; 5:1, together with the Lukan and Jamesian contrast between a rich man and a poor man (Luke 16:19–21 and Jas 2:1–7); and (3) the speech of James in Acts 15:13–21 (cf. Jas passim). While my analysis may not suffice to prove Luke's use of James, the mere possibility opens up important wider issues concerning the sources and traditions behind Luke-Acts.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Luke 4:25 and Jas 5:17

Both Luke (4:25) and Jas (5:17) refer to the "three years and six months" of famine in Elijah's time. This is significant because neither the Hebrew Bible nor the Septuagint gives this precise figure. Most commentators still rely on Strack-Billerbeck (SB) – the influential but problematic sample of rabbinic parallels to the New Testament – in explaining this parallel.<sup>2</sup> SB first observes that 1 Kings 17:1 and 18:1 only indicate that the famine must have endured one whole year and parts of the preceding and the following years (cf. 17:1 "this year" and 18:1 "in the third year"). SB then mentions two later documents that calculate that the period of fame was either 14 or 18 months, while *Seder 'Olam Rabbah* 17 – according to one manuscript tradition – speaks of a three year long famine. The commentary warns that these numbers should not be pressed ("nicht zu pressen sind") because in all cases the principle is the same: the second, whole year is of course 12 months, while the first and the third year may be es-

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<sup>1</sup> The present article is a reworked version of a paper read at the SBL Annual Meeting, San Francisco, Nov 2011.

<sup>2</sup> H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, vol. 3 (München: Beck, 1929), 760–761 (ad Jas 5:17).

timated as 1 month each (1 + 12 + 1 = 14 month) or 3 months each (3+12 +3 = 18 months) or as full years (=3 years). This then corresponds to the various ways to count, for example, the time interval meant in the expression “on the third day”: the maximal duration is three whole days while the minimum is slightly more than a day.

All this is obvious enough but does not explain the “three years and six months” in Luke 4:25 and Jas 5:17. Now SB notes that according to Ber Ratner’s 1897 edition of *Seder ‘Olam*, the Oxford manuscript does not read “three years” but “three and a half years.” With reference to a number of rabbinic texts, SB then concludes that the expression in Luke and James simply means “a long time” (“geraume Zeit”).

There are, however, two major problems with this explanation. First, the value of the variant reading in *Seder ‘Olam Rabbah* is very limited. The document in its original form dates from the second century CE but the variant reading may well be much younger.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the suggested paraphrase “a long time” may be questioned. As Robert Gordis pointed out in a 1943 article, the number “three and a half” – i.e., half of seven or “a broken seven” – is used predominantly, if not exclusively as a symbol of evil and tragic events and only subsequently, if at all, became a round number in a neutral sense.<sup>4</sup> More precisely, the broken seven is an apocalyptic sign of hardship, occurring, e.g., in Dan 7:25; 9:27 and Rev 11:1–6; 12:14.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The Oxford manuscript – there are actually two of them, but the other text is less important – to which Rathner referred was written in the Jewish year 5075 (1315 CE). According to A. Marx’s doctoral thesis, *Seder ‘Olam (Cap. 1–10) nach Handschriften und Druckwerken herausgegeben, übersetzt und erklärt* (Berlin: H. Itzkowski, 1903), xii, xxi–xxiii, this manuscript represents a “French” line of textual tradition and contains a number of interpolations (“offenbar an manchen Stellen interpoliert,” p. xii). The biblical quotations have also been corrected throughout to correspond to the Masoretic text.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Gordis, “The Heptad as an Element of Biblical and Rabbinic Style,” *JBL* 62 (1943): 17–26, here 18.

<sup>5</sup> B. E. Thiering, “The Three and a Half Years of Elijah,” *NovT* 23 (1981): 41–55, rightly points out the weaknesses of SB’s explanation and concludes that the Danielic figure of “half a week” lies behind the “42 months” or “1260 days” in Rev 11:2–3. Thiering also sets the interesting question of how the Danielic figure came to be combined with the Elijah story (a combination which is evident in Rev 11:6). Her general idea that the combination has to do with the identification of John the Baptizer or Jesus with Elijah may be on the right track; if so, the combination might well be specific to the early John/Jesus movement. However, the further “preliminary suggestions” (p. 55) in Thiering’s article are all too speculative and she does not discuss Jas 5:17 at all.

Rev 11:1–6 is especially interesting, as it combines the Danielic figure of a half week with a reminiscence of the Elijah story (the two prophets have authority “to shut the sky so that no rain may fall during the days of the prophesying”). In Jas 5:17, we see a similar combination, but now with an explicit reference to the famine in the days of Elijah. Not only a God-sent disaster for the sins of the Israelites, the famine was also a limited period after which things turned out better again. If seven is a round figure, often carrying with it positive connotations, then the broken seven indicates a limited period that leads to a turning-point. In Jas 5:17, the stress is laid on this turning-point. Elijah prayed that it would not rain; then after the three and a half years, he prayed again “and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.”

The near context of Jas 5:17 is not directly apocalyptic but emphasizes the power of honest prayer. However, the larger section beginning at 5:7 is surely end-time oriented, and the reference to the earth producing its crops in 5:17 refers back to 5:7: “Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.” There is, then, an associative connection between Jas 5:7 and 5:17: one should patiently wait for the turning-point where hardships come to an end and heavenly blessings are poured down. There is some tension between patient waiting for the appointed time and active prayer for God’s intervention, but such a tension is typical of apocalyptic literature at large. The associative glue between Jas 5:7, 17 might suggest that the author of the letter was familiar with a tradition where Elijah’s prayer was connected with end-time issues.

In Luke 4:25, there is no such eschatological undercurrent. There is a strong sense of a turning-point in the story of Jesus’ rejection in Nazareth, but the envisaged turn concerns salvation history at large rather than end-times. The famine in Elijah’s time serves to show that God sends salvation to the elect. In typical Lukan fashion, another example is added in v. 27 to make the same point (Elisha and Naaman the Syrian leper). Interestingly, a comparison between the two parallel examples shows that the mention of the famine and its duration is an excessive detail:

*Luke 4:25–27*

<sup>25</sup> I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time,

*when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land.*

<sup>26</sup> Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.

<sup>27</sup> And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet,

yet not one of them was cleansed – only Naaman the Syrian.”

This surplus information and particularly the mention of “three and a half years” would become more understandable if Luke was memorizing the Jamesian example, where the duration of the famine was topically relevant (both by emphasizing the effectiveness of the prayer, 5:16, and by recalling the eschatological expectation, 5:7). My conclusion, then, is that Luke's knowledge of James is possible, although not provable. If Luke was here affected by the letter of James, he took just a tiny detail from his source and rephrased it to enrich his narrative.

## 2. Luke 6:24–26 and Jas 4:9; 5:1

While regularly noticed in commentaries, this parallel has hardly received serious consideration as a possible sign of literary dependence. Customary scholarly discussions take other paths: either the Lukan woes are claimed for the Q sermon, or at least for Luke's form of Q,<sup>6</sup> or else it comes from Luke's “special material” or is his creation. Most Q scholars would not include the woes in the sayings gospel. To my mind, the most plausible reconstruction of the Q sequence behind Matt 5:3–12 // Luke 6:20–23 reckons with three short beatitudes – to the poor, the hungry, and the weeping – to which the Q redactor added a fourth, longer beatitude to the persecuted followers of Jesus. Unlike the philosophical “beatitudes of the wise man,” the Q macarisms are unconventional, eschatological wisdom

<sup>6</sup> Thus, e.g., H. Schürmann, *Lukasevangelium*, vol. 1 (HTKNT, 3; Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1982), 339–341; Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 575.

sayings that promised a better future for the have-nots.<sup>7</sup> Matthew, probably guided by his community's oral teaching, reworded the Q material and added new sayings to create a series of more conventional, ethically oriented beatitudes. The eschatological promise was still vital, but in Matthew's sermon it concerns those who by their moral behavior are worthy of the heavenly reward. This is a relatively simple explanation for the emergence of Matt 5:3–12 on the basis of Q 6:20–23. The process would be more complex, thus more difficult to explain, if Q had contained the woes in Luke 6:24–26. This is so because the neat and balanced Lukan juxtaposition of macarisms and woes, if original to the form of Q known to Matthew, does not naturally invite to reflect on just the beatitudes and to develop these into a new self-containing series.

A further telling observation is that the woes are a digression from the flow of thought in the Lukan sermon, necessitating the new introduction in Luke 6:27a. If we omit 6:24–26, 27a, there is a smooth transition from the fourth beatitude to the section on enemy love.<sup>8</sup> If the woes are a secondary formation, the next question is whether Luke found them in his special tradition as a ready-to-use unit or formed them himself. The latter answer is nearer at hand, because the woes are clearly formed as a counterpart of the Q macarisms and hardly existed as an independent unit apart from these. The Lukan woes are for the most part formed simply as the opposite of the corresponding beatitudes, so the redaction was relatively simple. But whence did Luke get the idea to add the woes in the first place, and whence come the details not directly derived from the Q macarisms? The idea of an eschatological reversal of fortunes is common to much of the early Jewish and Christian tradition, and the juxtaposition of macarisms and woes is also attested before Luke. In addition, Luke was certainly attuned to criticism of the rich, which included the Pharisees who according to Luke 16:14 were *φιλάργυροι*. Most of the ideation lead-

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<sup>7</sup> Though unconventional, the Q beatitudes should not be called “anti-macarisms” (*pace* Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985], 33). There is nothing inherently paradoxical about the Q macarisms, because the eschatological *promise* (the Kingdom of God, etc.) fully motivates the blessing. The term “antimacarism” is more appropriate to describe a beatitude with an ironic or satiric twist, as in *1 En.* 103:56 (“Blessed are the sinners!”). See Oliver O. Nwachukwu, *Beyond Vengeance and Protest: A Reflection on the Macarisms in Revelation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 28–29.

<sup>8</sup> Thus for example Erich Klostermann, *Das Lukasevangelium* (HNT, 5; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1929), 78–79.

ing to the Lukan woes is thus explainable. Still a comparison with the letter of James may be helpful here.

Jas 4:9

ταλαιπωρήσατε καὶ πενθήσατε καὶ κλαύσατε· ὁ γέλως ὑμῶν εἰς πένθος μετατραπήτω καὶ ἡ χαρὰ εἰς κατήφειαν·

Jas 5:1

Ἄγε νῦν οἱ πλούσιοι, κλαύσατε ὀλολύζοντες ἐπὶ ταῖς ταλαιπωρίαις ὑμῶν ταῖς ἐπερχομέναις.

The polemic against the rich and the merchants, here and elsewhere in James, is thematically so conspicuous and stylistically so tense and powerful that any reader or hearer of the letter is sure to recognize and even memorize elements of it. If Luke was among the readers or hearers, we would understand better the direct *address* to the rich (“you”), the eschatologically motivated νῦν in Luke 6:25 (*bis*) and the phrase πενήθησατε καὶ κλαύσατε.

These observations are far from being evidence that Luke was influenced by James. However, the interesting point is that the analysis suggests we should pay more attention to the parallels between Luke and James *apart* from questions concerning the contents of Q and the proclamation of Jesus. While many of the parallels do raise such questions, it may also be that some observations are more telling of Luke’s use of his variegated sources. Not all forms of usage result directly in borrowed vocabulary; the dependence may also be on the level of imagery and ideation.

If we are attuned to such “subliminal” points of contact, we are able to discern at least one further case where the influence of James on Luke’s writings may be suspected. This parallel, too, contains polemic against the rich. Although there are no precise verbal resemblances between Luke 16:19–21 and Jas 2:1–7, the idea of taking *one* rich man and *one* poor man to illustrate the contrast between two classes of people may be a borrowed feature. Also, the vivid description of the rich man’s clothing (Luke: ἐνεδιδύσκετο πορφύραν καὶ βύσσον / James: ἐν ἐσθήτι λαμπρᾷ; cf. λαμπρῶς in Luke) may be a sign of imagistic dependence, that is, the concrete image of a rich man in fine clothes left a mark in Luke’s memory.

### 3. Acts 15:13–21, 23 and Jas (passim)

Luke's skill in providing his characters with appropriate individual traits is well known, and the speeches in Acts gave him great opportunities to exert this skill. Most of the seemingly individual and life-like traits do not require first-hand knowledge of the speaking person. However, in order to "personalize" a speech, Luke had to have some general knowledge of the speaker. Some details in James's speech in Acts 15:13–21 suggest that the letter of James might have helped Luke in making the speech sound like a speech by James, the brother of Jesus. Henry J. Cadbury listed four parallels:<sup>9</sup>

(1) Acts 15:13 the address Ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί, ἀκούσατέ μου; cf. Jas 2:5 ἀκούσατε, ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί

(2) Acts 15:14 πρῶτον ὁ θεὸς ἐπεσκέψατο λαβεῖν ἐξ ἐθνῶν λαὸν τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ; cf. Jas 1:27 ἐπισκέπτεσθαι ὀρφανούς καὶ χήρας

(3) Acts 15:17 ἐφ' οὗς ἐπικέκληται τὸ ὄνομά μου ἐπ' αὐτούς; cf. Jas 2:7 τὸ καλὸν ὄνομα τὸ ἐπικληθὲν ἐφ' ὑμᾶς

(4) Acts 15:23 the epistolary formula χαίρειν; cf. Jas 1:1; not to be found again in the New Testament except the letter of Claudius Lysias at Acts 23:26

It's a pity that, apart from his general appreciation of Luke's creative ability, Cadbury did not explain how these parallels came into being. Conservative scholars have found some more parallels, which they believe show that Luke was faithfully rendering the speech of the historical James, or more vaguely, that "the same mind" was at work in both instances.<sup>10</sup> In his introductory material to the New Testament, Barry D. Smith offers a list of "some remarkable parallels" between James's speech with the ensuing apostolic decree and the letter of James. After this rather comprehensive list, the student reading the workbook is asked, "What do these linguistic parallels imply about the authorship of the Letter of James?" The model answer, which the student is expected to give, is as follows:

<sup>9</sup> Henry J. Cadbury, "The Speeches in Acts," in F. J. Foakes-Jackson and K. Lake (eds.), *The Beginnings of Christianity*. Part I, vol. 5 (London: Macmillan and Co, 1933), 402–427, here 411.

<sup>10</sup> James B. Adamson, *James: The Man and his Message* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 22–24; for the parallels, see esp. p. 22, n. 111. Adamson rightly points out that there are stylistic coincidences in addition to verbal agreements. However, Adamson makes too much of the "vivid" verb ἀνασκευάζειν in Acts 15:24 – a verb *not* found in James.

These linguistic parallels imply that the author of the Letter of James is the same person who delivered the speech in Acts 15:13–21 and had a hand in composing the letter sent by “the apostles and elders” in Jerusalem to gentile believers, a copy of which is found in Acts 15:23–29. In other words, the linguistic evidence suggests that James the brother of Jesus wrote the Letter of James.<sup>11</sup>

Is this conclusion warranted? The parallels observed by Smith are more numerous and detailed than those listed by Cadbury. One pertinent additional observation is that the idea of “name” is a typical and conspicuous feature in James. Therefore the Luke-James parallelism in the use of the “name” is not wholly explained by Luke’s OT citation, where the same feature is found. Another pertinent observation is that the address *ἀγαπητοί* occurs only here in the Acts but thrice in James. However, the conclusion that James would be the author of the speech and the decree in Acts 15 is certainly not compelling. For one thing, parallels with the letter of James are found both in the Jamesian speech and in the apostolic letter, both of which are recorded by Luke. The letter, if authentic, might have been Luke’s source, but how probable is it that Luke also attended the Jerusalem meeting and heard James’s speech? The rest of the Lukan double work does not give the impression that the author was personally acquainted with James the brother of Jesus. Considering James’s relatively early death, that is not to be expected, either.

If, instead, we assume Luke’s familiarity with the letter of James, we at once see that Luke is here using his well-known rhetorical skills, particularly the technique of speech-in-character (*prosopopoiia*, *ethopoiia*).<sup>12</sup> Clearly Luke was striving at an idiomatic presentation of James’s style of speaking, as already the use of *Simeon* for Peter (v. 14) shows. Moreover, the beginning of a speech is always crucial for creating a touch of lifelikeness. The address, Ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί, ἀκούσατέ μου then appears to be a free

<sup>11</sup> The list and the concluding statement are found in Prof. Barry D. Smith’s introductory course to the New Testament and its context, given at Crandall University, see [www.mycrandall.ca/courses/NTIntro/Jas.htm](http://www.mycrandall.ca/courses/NTIntro/Jas.htm) (cited 2 April, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> For a definition of *prosopopoiia*, see David E. Aune, *The Westminster Dictionary of New Testament and Early Christian Literature and Rhetoric* (Louisville and London: WJK, 2003), 383. Later rhetorical theory distinguished between *prosopopoiia* and *ethopoiia*, depending on whether the introduced speaker is an animated thing or a person; the use of James in Acts 15 would thus be an instance of *ethopoiia*. The term “speech-in-character” was suggested by S. K. Stowers in his 1994 book, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).

adaptation from Jas 2:5 ἀκούσατε, ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί, from a section that Luke may already have been memorizing in his Gospel (see above). Similar expressions are found in the opening chapter of James, where also the repeated use of ἀνὴρ (Jas 1:8, 12, 20) may have guided Luke. Luke leaves out the adjective ἀγαπητοί here, but uses it a little later in the apostolic letter, v. 25. The OT citation gives Luke the opportunity to set James's decision and the apostolic decree in a broad salvation-historical context. Luke was obviously well versed in the Septuagintal form of the Old Testament. However, that he chose precisely Amos 9:11–12 is interesting, because some crucial catchwords seem to come from James, namely ἐπισκέπτεσθαι (Jas 1:27), ὄνομα (Jas 2:7; 5:10, 14) and the whole phrase τὸ ... ὄνομα τὸ ἐπικληθὲν ἐφ' ὑμᾶς (Jas 2:7). The argumentative force of this quotation is a bit unclear, as is also the reference to the synagogues in Acts 15:21. But then again, the OT quotation highlights the salvation-historical continuity from Israel to the Gentiles, and the mention of the synagogue in James 2:2 may have inspired Luke. The verb ἐπιστρέφειν in Acts 15:19 is relatively common in Luke-Acts, but here it may have been suggested by the concluding verses of James, where it occurs twice and in a way sets the tenor of the whole letter.

While the linguistic details are telling, we should not overlook the theological aspects of Luke's speech-in-character technique. Since this technique, by definition, implies that "the speaker or writer produces speech that represents not himself or herself but another person or type of character,"<sup>13</sup> it is clear that Luke is not directly exposing his own viewpoint. Rather, he aims at delivering a "Jamesian" speech. Much of the judicious and moderate theological reasoning in James's speech might indeed represent the standpoint of the historical James, as well as the tenor of the letter of James. In the end, however, the speech renders *Luke's* portrait of James. It suits Luke's purposes very well that James – who in the letter that bears his name has the appearance of being an authoritative speaker for the whole dispersed Christian church and already by virtue of his *name*, Jacob, represents the continuity between Israel and the church – in Acts 15 grants the mission to the Gentiles and articulates its salvation-historical basis. Also, if one compares Luke's portrait of Paul with Paul's

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., S. K. Stowers, "Romans 7.7–25 as a Speech-in-Character (ΠΡΟΣΩΠΟΠΙΑ), in T. Engberg-Pedersen (ed.), *Paul in His Hellenistic Context* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 180–202, here 180 (referring to James R. Butts).

authentic letters – many of which I think Luke very likely knew and utilized in the Acts<sup>14</sup> – then Luke’s theologically harmonizing effort is all the more evident.

## 4. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I admit that the observations discussed in this paper fall short of proving Luke’s dependence on James. The hermeneutical circle is operative here, too, in that our overall understanding of Luke-Acts and James may preclude the mere possibility of such a hypothesis. Even if we are willing to consider this hypothesis, Luke’s possible use of Jas may seem too subtle to meet the criteria of literary dependence. Such obstacles notwithstanding, I contend that this hypothesis may prove fruitful in assessing Luke’s sources in a wider tradition-historical perspective. Intertextuality thus may lead to questions *beyond* the texts. While the explanatory power of the Q hypothesis is slightly diminished if some of Luke’s material supposedly derived from Q in fact comes from other sources, in return the Luke-James connection may help explain the provenance of parts of Luke’s special material. If Luke knew the letter of James, he may have had access to other related Jewish Christian traditions, too, which even more than Q were polemical against the rich and the powerful, as well as against wealthy merchants. Those from whom Luke learned to know the letter of James may have introduced him to other traditions as well. Obviously I am here thinking of such groups as the Ebionites or those whose teaching is reflected in some Thomasine sayings. This in turn might suggest that Luke was acquainted with traditions that were especially favored in the Syrian churches in the beginning of the second century. Of course, the place of origin of Luke’s two-volume work need not be there. Here I must stop speculating. What is clear is that the texts remain, and that their interrelations continue to call for literary, theological and real-life explanations.

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<sup>14</sup> See L. Aejmelaeus, *Wachen vor dem Ende: Die traditionsgeschichtlichen Wurzeln von 1. Thess 5:1–11 und Lukas 21:34–36* (Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society, 44; Helsinki: The Finnish Exegetical Society, 1985); idem, *Die Rezeption der Paulusbriefe in der Miletrede (Apg 20:18–35)* (AASF, B:232; Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1987); idem, “The Pauline Letters as Source Material in Luke-Acts,” in K. Liljeström (ed.), *The Early Reception of Paul* (PFES, 99; Helsinki: The Finnish Exegetical Society, 2011), 125–147.