PART I

Summary of the Argument of the Whole Study

Luke’s account of the community of goods of the earliest community in Jerusalem is clearly idealised with popular philosophical catchphrases. However, instances of formal community of property were a pronounced feature of Palestinian Jewish culture, and had persisted for approaching two centuries amongst the sect of the Essenes prior to the events which Luke purports to describe. By New Testament times communities of Essenes which practised complete sharing of property were to be found in most of the villages and towns of Judaea. There was also a significant community of fully property-sharing Essenes by the ‘Gate of the Essenes’ on Jerusalem’s southwest hill, close to the traditional site of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples, the Pentecost events of Acts 2, and the first recorded occasions of the sharing of property and daily corporate spiritual life amongst the early community of believers in Jesus in Jerusalem after his death and resurrection. Features of Luke’s account of property-sharing in Acts 2–6 suggest the employment in the community of believers in Jesus of linguistic usages and organisational forms employed in the legislation for Essene community of goods revealed in the Rule of the Community discovered in Qumran cave 1. Other elements of Luke’s account are illuminated by the practicalities of Essene property-sharing arrangements revealed in the accounts of the Essenes given by Philo and Josephus. These clues point to the probable Judaean origins of the tradition and suggest that a group within the earliest Jerusalem Church practised formal property-sharing. Luke’s portrayal of earliest Christian community of goods can be taken seriously as an historical account.
I. Introduction: Perspectives from the History of Interpretation

Luke, the author of the two-volume work which comprises the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, twice specifically states, at Acts 2:44 and 4:32, that the earliest church in Jerusalem had ‘all things common’. Taken as a whole, the various components of his account, contained within the first six chapters of Acts, of economic sharing in the earliest post-Easter Jerusalem community of Jesus’ followers, convey to his reader the sense that their ‘community of goods’ involved the sale of property and the surrender of the monies thus raised to the apostles (2:44–45; 4:32–5:11), daily meal-fellowship in homes (2:46), and a process of ‘daily distribution’ (6:1) by which the material needs of some widows (6:1–6) and apparently the needs of other underprivileged in the community, indeed the needs of all (2:45; 4:35), were provided for. The consensus of critical scholarship has for perhaps two centuries or more been almost universally against finding any historical phenomenon of actual, formally organised sharing of property which could be called a true, i.e. legally constituted, ‘community of goods’ behind Luke’s account.²

Patristic and mediaeval interpretation: the community of property of the early Jerusalem community as the model for the monastic life. Resistance to a literal historical interpretation (and application) of Luke’s account was common in the Reformation period. Prior to the era of the Reformation, the interpretation of the Church Fathers was usually followed. While the Patristic period was not lacking in commentators recommending the account to Christians as an example of selfless charity, as far as literal, practical imitation of the account was concerned, it provided the precedent and model for monasticism.


3 Notable are Chrysostom’s homilies on Acts with their drive for a comprehensive social programme for the Church; cf. also Homily 12 on 1 Timothy (4). See Martin Hengel, Eigentum und Reichtum in der frühen Kirche: Aspekte einer frühkirchlichen Sozialgeschichte (Stuttgart: Calwer Paperback, 1973), pp. 9–11; Otto Schilling, Reichtum und Eigentum in der altkirchlichen Literatur (Freiburg: Herdersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1908); Ignaz Seipel, Die Wirtschaftsethischen Lehren der Kirchenväter (Vienna: Mayer & Co., 1907).

Historical scepticism in the service of Protestant resistance to both ‘extreme anabaptist’ and ‘monastic’ interpretations. As Protestantism followed and universally applied Martin Luther’s rejection of monasticism, it also cut loose, necessarily, from the longstanding interpretation that the ‘apostolic life’ of the early Acts community was realized in the property-sharing life of Christian monks and nuns. Enthusiasm for the literal application of community of goods in the life of the gathered community of believers emerged within limited parts of the Anabaptist movement and was opposed with considerable verve and hostility after the Münster debacle of the 1530s. Menno Simons, the most influential Anabaptist, commented that the sharing of the Jerusalem church was neither universal nor permanent, and insisted that his movement had never taught nor practised community of goods. After the Reformation, the Roman Catholic...
church continued in its view that the community of goods of the early chapters of Acts was an historical reality and gave precedent for the full property-sharing of monasteries and convents, the ‘apostolic’ and ‘religious’ life, while Protestant scholarship persisted in its rejection of both the practice of monasticism and generally of the historical reality of earliest Christian community of goods as recorded in Acts. A representative writer in this regard was the reputed scholar and French Benedictine Dom Antoine Augustin Calmet (1672–1757). An English version of his comment on the account of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1–11 rendered his words, apparently with momentary inaccuracies, ‘Many of the ancients thought, that when the first Christians resolved to sell their estates, this resolution included a kind of [at least implicit] vow to reserve nothing [but to make all things common]; and that Ananias and Sapphira having violated this vow, were guilty of perjury and sacrilege…’ Calmet accepted an historical reality of a real community of goods in the early community of believers in Jesus in Jerusalem, based in a vow of poverty which was at least implicit. By way of
contrast, we may cite the opposing interpretation of Calmet’s younger contemporary, the German Lutheran church historian Johann Lorenz (von) Mosheim (1693–1755). In 1733 Mosheim wrote an extensive and forceful dissertation against the ‘common opinion’ that understood the early Jerusalem church to have practised the full and compulsory sharing of property. His essay demonstrated his familiarity with many of the relevant classical sources. He averred: ‘It is an ancient opinion, though not older than the fourth century, that in the church of Jerusalem there was such a community of goods, as existed among the ancient Essenes and now among the monks; but this opinion is destitute of any solid foundation, resting solely on the declaration of Luke, that they had all things common. Mosheim stressed that Peter’s emphasis on the voluntary nature of Ananias and Sapphira’s donation of property at Acts 5:4 show that Luke’s statements that the community had ‘all things common’ ‘should not be understood, as it generally has been, of their possessing in common, but only of their using in common’. In Mosheim’s lengthy treatment we can detect his firm opposition to the Roman Catholic opinion, as represented by Calmet, that the communal life of the early Jerusalem believers in Jesus gave precedent for the religious life of monks and nuns in community of property, and to the

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occasionally strong Anabaptist interpretation and desire to apply the Acts account of community of goods to the life of the whole Christian congregation, as persisted amongst the Hutterites, and the continued general reaction amongst both Roman Catholics and Protestants against the disastrous attempt by some early Anabaptists to create, in 1534–1535, a utopian commune in the city of Münster which abrogated the holding of private property.

However, notwithstanding the diversity of opinion about the legitimacy of Christian monasticism and earnest pleadings against what was often perceived to be a dangerous minority voice within Anabaptist opinion, these passages continued to be greeted with considerable interest in their practical imitation by some interpreters. One enthusiast for the detachment from personal possessions within the Christian congregation which the Acts account seemed to encourage was John Wesley. The theme of ‘community of goods’ is frequent in his writings. In his Notes on the New Testament Wesley found that even Peter’s emphasis on the voluntary character of Ananias’ and Sapphira’s intended surrender of property to the nascent Jerusalem church did not contradict the communal holding of property implied at Acts 2:44–45 and 4:32–35. Wesley took the view that Ananias and Sapphira had at the point of seeking to surrender their property not yet received baptism. Hence they were not yet fully a part of the community which was ‘of one heart and soul’ and held ‘all things common’. Had Ananias made the commitment and decision to be a believer, he would have withheld nothing of his property, for the community of good was universal in the community, an expression of the universal reign of the spirit of love in the community. Wesley’s unusual interpretation may have originated with his Moravian associates.


12 Wesley finds a real sharing of property based in spiritual love commenting on Acts 2:45: ‘And sold their possessions - Their lands and houses; and goods - Their movables. And parted them to all as any one had need — To say the Christians did this only till the destruction of Jerusalem, is not true; for many did it long after. Not that there was any positive command for so doing: it needed not; for love constrained them. It was a natural fruit of that love wherewith each member of the community loved every other as his own soul. And if the whole Christian Church had continued in this spirit, this usage must have continued through all ages. To affirm therefore that Christ did not design it should continue, is neither more nor less than to affirm, that Christ did not design this measure of love should continue. I see no proof of this.’ His comment on 4:32 is in the same vein: ‘And the multitude of them that believed - Every individual person were of one heart and one soul - Their love, their hopes, their passions joined: and not so much as one - In so great a multitude: this was a necessary consequence of that union of heart; said that aught of the things which he had was his own - It is impossible any one should, while all were of one soul. So long as that truly Christian love continued, they
The French revolution and the rise of socialism: The primitive community as a model for the modern state? The events of the French revolution of 1789 and the rise of the socialist critique of both the rentier and industrial forms of capitalism gave a new political dimension to the interpretation of Jesus’ sharper statements in the Gospels concerning property and the Acts account of community of goods of the early believers in Jesus in Jerusalem. Might not the Acts report of early property-sharing in Jerusalem offer scriptural precedent for the new theories advocating the communalization of property across the whole of the state, rather than simply amongst the believing Christian community or the smaller intentional communities of monks and nuns?

At the time of the French revolution, there were attempts to link Christianity with sympathy for ‘the plight of the industrial working classes’ and the critique of the vast landed estates and extraordinary wealth of the French aristocracy. In the early nineteenth century the ‘utopian socialist’ Charles Fourier (1772-1837) proposed the organization of society in communities with 1600 individuals in each, in which property was held in common, and in which there were no private capitalists. Robert Owen (1771–1858) made similar ‘utopian’ proposals and

could not but have all things common.’ On Acts 5:1 he comments: ‘But a certain man named Ananias — It is certain, not a believer, for all that believed were of one heart and of one soul: probably not baptized; but intending now to offer himself for baptism.’ Thus Wesley resolves the apparent contradiction between a universal community of goods in the church and its apparently voluntary nature by deducing that Ananias was not yet a believer, nor baptized. Had Ananias been a believer and baptized, he would have acted as all others in the community and withheld nothing. On Acts 5:3 Wesley comments: ‘To lie to the Holy Ghost - Who is in us. And to keep back — Here was the first instance of it. This was the first attempt to bring propriety of goods into the Christian Church. On Acts 5:4 he comments: ‘While it remained, did it not remain thine? - It is true, whosoever among the Christians (not one excepted) had houses or lands, sold them, and laid the price at the feet of the apostles. But it was in his own choice to be a Christian or not: and consequently either to sell his land, or keep it. And when it was sold, was it not in thy power? - For it does not appear that he professed himself a Christian when he sold it. Why hast thou conceived this thing in thy heart? - So profanely to dissemble on so solemn an occasion? Thou hast not lied to men only, but to God also. Hence the Godhead of the Holy Ghost evidently appears: since lying to him, ver. 3, is lying to God.’ Here Wesley contrasts the universal character of Acts 4:34 (understanding Luke’s ‘as many as’ to imply ‘not one excepted’) and makes Ananias’ choice ‘to be a Christian’ (or not) equivalent to the choice open to Ananias ‘either to sell his land, or keep it.’


experiments in England and in the USA, but his ideas had as little general effect as Fourier’s in France. However, after around 1830 the ideas of other socialist theorists and reformers began to have serious political effect. Louis Auguste Blanqui (1805-1881), who formulated the theory of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ used by Karl Marx, sought to stir working class insurrection and spent a total of 33 years in prison; Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-65) condemned all property as theft and sought the organization of mines and factories by workers themselves; Louis Blanc (1811-1882) demanded the establishment by the state of workshops to be run cooperatively by the workers. The profits of workers’ labour were to be shared amongst them.

Socialist ideas and economic grievances motivated many of the revolutionaries of the ‘year of revolutions’, 1848. The radical political activist Wilhelm Christian Weitling (1808–1871) made, in the years leading up to the revolts, extensive use of the Biblical text. His book The Gospel of the Poor Sinner was political propaganda published as Christian literature and Bible exposition in order to avoid suppression. Weitling made much of the critique of property in the eighth century BC Israelite prophets, Jesus’ critique of wealth, and the community of property of the early Jerusalem church. The British politician Tristram Hunt has observed that Weitling’s ‘doctrine encompassed a highly emotional mix of Babouvist communism, chiliastic Christianity, and millenarian populism… Weitling revived the apocalyptic politics of the sixteenth-century Munster Anabaptists and their gory attempts to usher in the Second Coming.’

Following the overthrow of Louis Philippe of France revolution spread to Germany, the Austrian Empire and Italy. None of these revolutions against monarchy and its aristocratic, estate-owning supporters enjoyed lasting success, and most were violently suppressed within a few months. Their relevance to study of the theme of property in the New Testament around the middle of the nineteenth century is seen in the offer by the Académie Française, in the aftermath of the 1848 revolutions, of a prize for the best essay on the theme of charity in the New Testament. The Académie sought to establish a flawless scholarly refutation of the apparently frequently advanced opinion that the

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16 Pierre Joseph Proudhon, Qu’est-ce que c’est la Propriété/What is Property? (1840) and Philosophie de la Misère/Philosophy of Poverty (1846).
The primitive church had recommended or practised communistic sharing of property. It was deemed desirable that a scholarly work of the highest quality demonstrate that the true social principle of Christianity was voluntary charity, not the equal sharing of property.\textsuperscript{20} The Swiss Protestant scholar Étienne Chastel won the prize with an extensive and influential historical monograph, \textit{Etudes Historiques sur l’influence de la Charité}, published in French in 1853 and in English, in the United States of America in 1857, as \textit{The Charity of the Primitive Churches}.\textsuperscript{21} Chastel was unwilling to find any sharing of property beyond generous charitable giving in the early Jerusalem church, and emphasised that Peter had insisted to Ananias and Sapphira that their donation of property was voluntary. He took this to mean, with all scholarly exegetes of the time, that there was no formal sharing of property nor abrogation of private property within the community the couple had sought to join.

It is unsurprising that, as the powers that reigned Europe in the nineteenth century forcefully resisted the restructuring of society according to socialist ambitions, the historically sceptical side of nineteenth century German Protestant biblical scholarship should furnish further skilled historical rejections of the supposed community of goods of the first congregation of believers in Jesus in Jerusalem. In 1884 Heinrich Julius Holtzmann, professor ordinarius and rector (1878–1879) of the University of Strasbourg, from 1871 a city of the German empire, furnished perhaps the classic case against Luke’s account.\textsuperscript{22} Holtzmann argued forcefully that no organized community of property had ever existed in the Jerusalem church. Holtzmann’s case was largely a restatement of Mosheim’s sceptical arguments, and was repeated by many scholars through much of the twentieth century. In the new century German form-criticism supplied a supplementary argument, namely that the general statements concerning ‘all things common’ and the frequent donation of property for the common good found in the ‘summary’ reports of Acts 2:42–47 and 4:32–35 should be demoted as secondary and later tradition, merely Luke’s own generalizing and idealizing deductions from the older, individual reports of rare occasions of property donation such as those undertaken by Barnabas and Ananias and Sapphira (4:32–5:11).\textsuperscript{23}


Grounds for hermeneutical reassessment. The negative historical judgment of the Acts account generally persists in New Testament scholarship despite...
awareness that, according to the ancient accounts of Judaism within its homeland, community of goods was widely practised in first century Judaea, in those communities of ‘Essenes’ which fully shared their property in a formal manner which may properly be termed ‘communitarian’, ‘communistic’ or ‘monastic’. Is the typical recent scholarly rejection of recent centuries, within Protestant biblical scholarship, however, any more than the echo within biblical interpretation of the three great ideological turns we have described — the Reformation rejection of both monasticism and extreme Anabaptist utopianism, and the hefty reaction of conservative Christian scholarship against the later rise of socialist/communist ideas on the organisation of the state, played out in the purportedly neutral-minded, ‘objective’ field of ‘historical biblical study’? Might it not be wise to stand aside, for the purposes of deeper discovery, from these perhaps externally motivated, historically sceptical studies to weigh again the possibility that the patristic interpretation that the Acts community of goods gives legitimate precedent for the communal lifestyle of voluntarist religious communities and points to the influence of an ancient form of monasticism, Essene Jewish monasticism, known to have existed in the same era in ancient Judaea, on the nascent Jerusalem church?

The following are the principal arguments raised against the claim of Acts that the earliest Christian community had ‘all things common’.

i) Acts 2:44 and 4:32 reflect the language of Greek philosophising about the ideal society. The usage ‘all things common’, πάντα (or ἅπαντα) κοινά [panta koina] (cf. 2:44, εἶχον πάντα κοινά, [eichon panta koina, ‘they had all things common’], cf. 4:32, ἦν αὐτοῖς ἅπαντα κοινά [en autois hapanta koina, ‘there were to them all things common’]) is found in Plato’s Republic, a Utopian scheme, and in other literature which emphasises the philosophical ideal; it is found, for example, in praise of the tribal economy of the primitive Scythians or in connection with the renunciation of the ideal philosopher. David L. Mealand noted that the phrase ‘no one called anything... his own’ at Acts 4:32, oude heis... elegen idion einai, ‘no one said anything was his own/private to him’, recalls the usage ‘to call nothing one’s own’, frequently found in Plato’s Republic and

piece will demonstrate between the social forms of Essenism in ancient Judaea and the early Jesus movement in Jerusalem and its environs.


26 E.g. Plato, Critias, §110D; Republic, 3.22 §416D; 5.10 §462C (also §463B–C, E); Laws, 5 §737C, Republic, 5 §464D; Philo, Counsels (Hypothetica), 11.4 on the property-sharing Essenes; Arrian, Discourses of Epictetus, 3.24 §68; Iamblichus, Life of Pythagoras, 18 §30, 30 §167; Aristophanes, The Assemblywomen, §§590–595; Aelius Aristides, Panegyric in Kyzikos, 24; Lucian, On Salaried Posts in Great Houses §§19-20.
other writings in conjunction with the ‘all things common’ *topos*.27 A Greek proverb about friendship, ‘friends have all things in common’ (koina ta [ton] philon, literally ‘the things of friends [are] common’), is preserved from antiquity with extraordinary frequency.28 It is found in conjunction with another proverb,
bestow, rejoicing and grieving at the same things, and that they honor with all their heart those laws which render the State as unified as possible,—no one will ever lay down another definition that is truer or better than these conditions in point of super-excellence. In such a State,—be it gods or sons of gods that dwell in it,—they dwell pleasantly, living such a life as this.'); Aristotle, Politics, 2.5.1263A (‘Property should be in a certain sense common, but, as a general rule, private; for, when everyone has a distinct interest, men will not complain of one another, and they will make more progress, because every one will be attending to his own business. And yet by reason of goodness, and in respect of use, ‘Friends,’ as the proverb says, ‘will have all things common.’ Even now there are traces of such a principle, showing that it is not impracticable, but, in well-ordered states, exists already to a certain extent and may be carried further. For, although every man has his own property, some things he will place at the disposal of his friends, while of others he shares the use with them.’), Eudemian Ethics, 1237B (‘At the same time it is manifest that this friendship does not occur between base people either; for the base and evil-natured man is distrustful towards everybody, because he measures other people by himself. Hence good men are more easily cheated, unless as a result of trial they are distrustful. But the base prefer the goods of nature to a friend, and none of them love people more than things; and so they are not friends, for the proverbial ‘common property as between friends’ is not realized in this way—the friend is made an appendage of the things, not the things of the friends.’), 1238A (‘And it is proverbial that time shows a friend, and also misfortunes more than good fortune. For then the truth of the saying ‘friends’ possessions are common property’ is clear for only friends, instead of the natural goods and natural evils on which good and bad fortune turn, choose a human being rather than the presence of the former and the absence of the latter; and misfortune shows those who are not friends really but only because of some casual utility.’), Nikomachian Ethics, 8.9.1159B (‘For in every partnership we find mutual rights of some sort, and also friendly feeling: one notes that shipmates and fellow-soldiers speak of each other as ‘my friend,’ and so in fact do the partners in any joint undertaking. But their friendship is limited to the extent of their association in their common business, for so also are their mutual rights as associates. Again, the proverb says ‘Friends’ goods are common property,’ and this is correct, since community is the essence of friendship. Brothers have all things in common, and so do members of a comradeship; other friends hold special possessions in common, more or fewer in different cases, inasmuch as friendships vary in degree.’), 9.8.1168B (‘For we admit that one should love one’s best friend most; but the best friend is he that, when he wishes a person’s good, wishes it for that person’s own sake, even though nobody will ever know of it. Now this condition is most fully realized in a man’s regard for himself, as indeed are all the other attributes that make up the definition of a friend; for it has been said already that all the feelings that constitute friendship for others are an extension of regard for self. Moreover, all the proverbs agree with this; for example, ‘Friends have one soul between them,’ ‘Friends’ goods are common property,’ ‘Amity is equality,’ ‘The knee is nearer than the shin.’ All of these sayings will apply most fully to oneself; for a man is his own best friend. Therefore he ought to love himself most.’); Diogenes Laertius 4.53, 6.37, 6.72, 8:10, 10:11; Libanius, Letters, 327.3.2, 1209.4.4, 1236.3.4, 1504.1.6, 1537.5.2; Iamblichus, Life of Pythagoras, 6. §32, 19 §92; Porphyry, Life of Pythagoras, 33; Lucian, On Salaried Posts in Great Houses, §§24-25; Aelius Aristides, Panegyric in Kyzikos, 24; Menander, Sentences, ed. Siegfried Jaekel (Menandri Sententiae Comparatio Menandri et Philistionis, Leipzig: Teubner, 1964), 534, in Menandri quae supersunt , ed. Alfredus Koerte and Andreas Thierfelder (Leipzig: Teubner, 1959), 10.1; Terence, The Brothers, 803–804; Plutarch, Morals, On Brotherly Love, 20.490E; Philo, On Abraham, 235; Seneca, Moral Letters to Lucilius, 6.2–3; Martial, Epigrams, 2.43.1, 16; Dio Chrysostom, Orations, 3.104–111, 37.7; Plutarch, How
‘friends are one soul’ (*mia psyche*, ‘one soul’) in a line of Aristotle’s *Nikomachian Ethics*. The combination of the phrases ‘all things common’ and ‘one heart and soul’ at Acts 4:32 is remarkably similar. Luke seems intent to suggest that the life of the earliest community in Jerusalem realised the vaunted Greek ideal of friendship.

It is therefore clear that Luke presents the early Christians in Jerusalem in the dress of Greek thinking about ideal political organisation, or a state of detachment from possessions realised by the ideally pious. This is often taken as an indication that Luke is *idealising* events of lesser magnitude into a formal sharing

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29 9.8.2 §1116B.


31 On the ancient range of contexts of the theme of community of possessions in antiquity see especially Manfred Wacht, art. ‘Gütergemeinschaft’ in Theodor Klauser et al. (eds.) *Realllexikon für Antike und Christentum*, Vol. XIII (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann Verlag, 1982–1984), pp. 1–59 and Brian J. Capper, ‘Reciprocity and the Ethics of Acts,’ in I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson, eds., *Witnss to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 499–518. Several recent writers offer renewed survey and analysis of the various Greek and Greco-Roman contexts in which the motif of community of property may be found, including its relation to the themes of friendship, the Golden Age, and utopianism. One such study is given by Christopher M. Hays, *Luke’s Wealth Ethics: A Study in Their Coherence and Character* (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2010), pp. 201–211. Hays finds that the ideal of friendship understood that what was privately owned should out of love be shared with friends. ‘The dominant ideology of friendship assumes private ownership alongside the generous shared use of possessions.’ (p. 208) Prior to this study Hays makes only brief reference (p. 199) to the linguistic similarity of phrases in Acts 2:44 and 47 to the *yachadh* terminology of the *Essene Rule of the Community*, curiously thereby making the acceptance of these semitisms in Luke’s Greek by Max Wilcox and Matthew Black (see below), to whom he does not refer, ‘speculative’ (p. 199) and merely attributing their view to the present author. Hays’ monograph also makes no reference to the studies of Bargil Pixner and Rainer Riesner on the possible physical proximity of the nascent Jerusalem church to the ‘Gate of the Essenes’ which may have taken its name from an Essene Quarter located within the walls of Jerusalem on the southwest hill. His seeming lack of study of these important themes means that his conclusions do not give sufficient weight to the evidence for Essene organisational, linguistic and geographic connections with the earliest community of goods of Jesus’ disciples in Jerusalem.
of property, and that the historical reality was only some occasional events of charitable generosity.

   ii) Peter’s challenge to Ananias and Sapphira, who have failed to hand in the full price obtained from the sale of their property, at Acts 5:4, includes the rhetorical questions ‘While it remained (unsold) did it not remain yours, and after it was sold, did it not remain in your power?’ This is taken to indicate that their donation of property was voluntarily undertaken. It is argued that since they were under no compulsion to make the sale, there can have been no formally organised community of property. That Acts remembers only one other example of major property-surrender, that of Barnabas (4:36–37) is thought to indicate that such events were rare. The rare occurrence of large-scale donations of property to the community is taken to weigh against the existence of formal property-sharing arrangements.

   iii) In Acts 6:1–6 care for widows was at issue. This underprivileged group remained identifiable and permanently dependent upon the community, in need as it were of a perpetual ‘dole’. Hence, it is argued, there was no common ownership of property, merely a structure which provided care for the indigent. The widows of the ‘Hellenists’ complain that they are being ‘overlooked’ (6:1). This is sometimes taken to imply that organisation of the community was rudimentary, suggesting that no well-organised community of property existed, but only badly-run charity.

   iv) Property-sharing on a determined model such as Acts seeks to imply does not recur in the New Testament period, and does not reappear until the birth of monasticism (late 3rd century AD). Hence it is unlikely that it was ever a feature of earliest Christianity.

This piece will seek to demonstrate that convincing responses refuting these four major arguments against the historical veracity of Luke’s report of a seemingly formal, Essene-like community of property within the first community of Jesus’ post-Easter followers in Jerusalem may be found through a close examination and comparison of the reports of community of goods in Acts 2:42–47, 4:32–5:11 and 6:1–6 with the textual and archaeological materials concerning the Essenes of ancient Jerusalem and Judaea which have been preserved to the present day. Prior to this analysis, however, I will first note a very important argument already occasionally raised by careful critical scholars in favour of finding an important kernel of historical truth in Luke’s claim that the early church in Jerusalem had ‘all things common’. This argument arises from the testimony of the Fourth Gospel that Jesus’ party of travelling disciples lived from
a common purse, administered by Judas. It is entirely plausible that the post-Easter group of Jesus’ disciples may simply have preserved the communal mode of life in which they had lived previously with their Lord. This communal purse and closely shared social life, involving common meal fellowship, prayer and worship had, after all, Jesus’ own stamp of approval, and to continue as his loyal disciples and representatives would naturally involve the preservation of the common life they had shared before the tragic rejection of Jesus by the Jerusalem authorities. For the core of Jesus’ travelling party to continue in the common life they had shared with Jesus would lend authority to their claim to be his authorized representatives, while to appear less united socially than the group had been prior to Jesus’ arrest, trial and crucifixion by departing from their earlier common life would weaken their claim to be continuing the mission of Jesus as he intended. It appears from Acts 2:42–47 that they not only continued with the daily meal fellowship which Jesus had initiated amongst them (Acts 2:46) but also initiated procedures by which their common life was opened, to those who desired to join them in it, in Jerusalem. Thereafter, as we shall see, it is possible that property-sharing was from the day of their first Pentecost together in Jerusalem effectively limited to an ‘inner group’ within the community, comprising the former travelling party of disciples and those who joined them in their common purse, or that over time comprehensive property-sharing became limited to this inner group although early on there had been a serious attempt to include all believers in their message about Jesus. It is possible that the Galilean travelling party’s habit of living from a common purse may have been opened to those converted on the day of Pentecost without carefully laid plans about what should follow, or that from the outset cultural conditions and expectations naturally suggested that the fully property-sharing group of believers in Jesus would always form an ‘inner group’ within the movement, just as within Essenism fully property-sharing groups comprised only one echelon of a broader, multiform social movement.

I conclude this section by pointing to a general argument in favour of Luke’s account rarely given, in scholarly circles, the weight it deserves. This argument derives simply from the existence of community of goods as an established feature of first century Palestinian culture, amongst those Essene communities

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32 Jn. 12:6; 13:29. Joachim Jeremias, who sought to stress that the community of goods of the early Jerusalem community of believers in Jesus was voluntary, nevertheless strongly resisted the common skepticism applied to the account of property-sharing in Acts 2–6, and gave as positive arguments in favour of a serious historical reality behind the account ‘(a) the repeated challenge of Jesus… to devote possessions to the good of the poor; (b) the example of Jesus and his disciples, who depended on a common fund and forsook all their possessions (John 13.29; 12.6; Matt. 19.29 and par.); (c) the example of the Essenes who, like the primitive community, had communal meals (BJ 2.129f.)’, Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus (London: SCM, 1969), p. 130, n. 19.
which shared their property communally. Scholarly comparisons of Essene practice and the Acts account of Christian community of goods have almost universally found the phenomena vastly different and quite unrelated. The net result of this supposedly valid conclusion is to grant one set of sources largely literal credence, but to throw the face value claims of another other set of sources, especially the statements of Acts 2:44–45 and 4:32–35, largely to the wind. This outcome, because of its unevenness, betrays a certain historical implausibility. Since two sets of sources seem to attribute the same practice to components of two Jewish movements which existed at the same time, in the same very small region of Judaea, the balance of probability is, rather, in favour of some kind of connection between them. Otherwise, we must attribute to mere coincidence that Luke portrays the earliest Christians in Jerusalem operating a practice common in their geographical environment. It is well known that there is also a high degree of idealisation of the Essenes in Philo and Josephus. If Essene community of goods survives, in modern critical analysis, this stylizing aspect of the ancient sources, but Christian community of property does not, are the sources being treated even-handedly? Indeed, although we have no knowledge of the actual practice of community of goods in this period anywhere else in this ancient world, despite much philosophical lauding of the ideal, we have two claimed instances of it in our sources for early first century Judaea. Can the current scholarly consensus be correct to hold the ancient Essene and the early Jesus movement manifestations of community of property quite apart? In the opinion of the present author, there is a manifest unevenness in the treatment of the ancient sources in current scholarship, the Essene materials being awarded credibility and generous, plain-reading acceptance while the sources on the community of property of the early Jesus movement in Jerusalem preserved by the author of Acts are approached with hostility and undue skepticism. I would argue that this unevenness of approach arises from a conditioning of the current hermeneutical perspective by popular present-day resistance to 1) political enthusiasm for the relevance of any ideal of community of property to the organization of the state, 2) to the discovery of any precedent for the practice of the shared common life of monks and nuns with the historical Jesus and in the community of his first post-Easter followers in Jerusalem, and 3) to both the occasional current-day appearances of enthusiasm for the ideal of community of property as a model for the whole Christian congregation and the almost unbroken persistence from the Reformation to the present day of the practice of community of property amongst the Christian congregations of the Hutterites, whose property sharing arrangements represent an unwelcome testimony to the practicality of actual, full property-sharing within intentional communities formed by groups of like-minded believers.