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Simon the Samaritan and the Lucan Concept of Salvation History

by John W. Drane

Dr. Drane, a graduate of the Universities of Aberdeen and Manchester, was appointed some three years ago as first Lecturer in Religious Studies in the University of Stirling. He has concentrated his research on the beginnings of Gnosticism, with special reference to the letters of Paul, but here he turns to the writings of Luke and examines the problematical figure of Simon the Samaritan, credited by Irenaeus and others with being the founder of Gnosticism.

ONE of the most obscure passages in the Acts of the Apostles is the story recounted in 8: 4-13, of how a Samaritan magician, Simon by name, was converted as a result of the missionary activities of Philip the evangelist in Samaria. Despite a wealth of imaginative speculation, supported by documentary evidence drawn from sources as varied as Jewish apocalyptic on the one hand, and the *Corpus Hermeticum* on the other, the quest for "the historical Simon" has always proved to be a *non sequitur*. Nor does the sequel to his conversion in Acts help to elucidate the matter, for the subsequent incident in which Peter and John were sent from Jerusalem to Samaria, where they imparted the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands to those who had already been converted and baptized during Philip's ministry (8: 14-24), is likewise one of the most hotly debated sections of the book of Acts. The ending of the account in v. 24 is similarly obscure. Simon, having been rebuked by Peter for his desire to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit, asks the apostle: "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me", and the reader is left with considerable doubt in his mind as to whether Simon was a true convert, or whether he was interested solely in the particular form of religious advancement which has become associated with his name as "Simon".

Not only is there a certain mystery about the historical incident which formed the kernel of the original account; Luke's purpose in recording the incident is also more or less obscure. This is all the more surprising when we realize that, whatever difficulties may be found in Luke's work from a historical point of view, it is usually fairly easy to discern the purpose for which he has preserved the different stories, and to appreciate the lessons which he intended to

teach his original readers by the recounting of these tales of the earliest Christian community. Moreover, when we look for further information about Simon the Samaritan, we find that extra-biblical sources are not reticent about filling in the details that Luke seems to lack, and the occurrence of traditions about Simon Magus (as he was later called) is so widespread that it is all but impossible to think that Luke (who himself was perhaps a native of Syrian Antioch) did not know considerably more about Simon than is related to us in Acts.¹ To suppose that the problem can ever be solved with complete certainty is too optimistic. As long ago as 1895, Sir William Ramsay remarked that "It is impossible to find anything to say about Acts that has not been said before by somebody",² and how much more is this the case today! I make no claim to providing a complete explanation of the matter here, but in drawing attention to some hitherto neglected elements in the context I think we can at least hope to come to some clearer understanding of the narrative and the situation which it records.

One of the most intriguing, and also one of the most neglected contributions to the study of Luke-Acts in recent years has been C. H. Talbert's book *Luke and the Gnostics*, in which the author attempts to prove the thesis that "Luke-Acts was written to serve as a defense against Gnosticism".³ This thesis is worked out with painstaking thoroughness and, for the most part, carries a good deal of conviction, though occasionally one suspects that the evidence, such as it is, is being over-stated to press a particular point of view. One of the great stumbling-blocks which Talbert finds in the way of his thesis is the simple fact that "At the points where he has excellent opportunities to indicate his concern with Gnosticism, the author of Acts is silent".⁴ Thus, the Simon incident of Acts 8 is not developed in this direction, even though the Church Fathers claimed that from this individual "all sorts of heresies derive their origin".⁵ Likewise, the Areopagus incident with its mention of an "unknown god" (Acts 17) has no allusion to the Gnostic idea of an unknown god. The existence of a mythological Gnosis in certain Hellenistic churches, which may be inferred from Paul's letters, is also ignored in Luke's account of early church history.

Two possible explanations of this supposed discrepancy present themselves:

- 1 Cf., *inter alia*, Eusebius *H.E.* II. i. 10-12, xiii; Justin, *Apol.* I. xxvi, 1vi; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I. xxiii.
- 2 *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, London, 1895 (1st ed.), p. viii.
- 3 C. H. Talbert, *Luke and the Gnostics*, Nashville, 1966, p. 16. Referred to below as *LG*.
- 4 *LG*, p. 84.
- 5 Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I. xxiii. 2.

1. Neither Simon Magus nor the Athenian "unknown god", nor again the mythological language alluded to in the Pauline letters, had any truly Gnostic significance at all in the first century A.D., or at least not in the period with which the book of Acts purports to deal (c. A.D. 30-62).

2. Luke was himself aware of the true significance of such episodes as those described in chapters 8 and 17 of Acts, but chose to disguise their real import for other reasons: either (a) in order to suggest that the apostolic age was a time of complete unity within the churches, in which case Luke would become the first representative of emergent *Frühkatholizismus*, which is "nothing other than the churchly reaction against Gnosticism";⁶ or (b) in order to facilitate his own purpose in writing his two-volume work. This would assume that the opposing of Gnosticism was not the *main* purpose of Luke's work,⁷ and that the explanation for his suppression of the Gnostic connotations of these incidents is to be sought elsewhere within the theological framework of *Heilsgeschichte* as Luke presents it.

The first explanation is untenable on any theory. While it is conceivable that the individual episodes concerning Simon the Samaritan and the Athenian "unknown god" may not have been Gnostic in their original context, it is widely acknowledged that there was a heresy with some kind of Gnosticizing content in the apostolic age. The real choice, therefore, lies between 2 (a) or (b). Talbert chooses (a), and explains Luke's peculiar treatment of these incidents on the assumption that he was "writing the history of the primitive community according to the tenets of later ecclesiastical conceptions".⁸ Two particular examples are cited to show the Lucan tendency to idealize the early church:

(i) Acts chs. 1-6, which consists of Lucan summaries,⁹ displays the absolute unity of the church.

(ii) The parallels suggested between the experiences of Peter and Paul in Acts are also said to suggest the same tendency.¹⁰

Because of this idealizing tendency Luke omits Paul's Gentile controversies, for "The author of Acts wanted to portray the church of the apostolic age as free from internal conflicts, possessing an inner unity".¹¹ We must accept this judgment with a certain caution.

⁶ *LG*, p. 14.

⁷ This does not, or course, rule out the possibility that it may have been a subsidiary consideration.

⁸ *LG*, p. 85.

⁹ Cf. *LG* p. 85, referring to H. J. Cadbury in *The Beginnings of Christianity* V, pp. 392-402.

¹⁰ *LG*, pp. 85 f.

¹¹ *LG*, p. 88.

It is quite evident that Luke has chosen his source materials with great care in order to present the particular interpretation of the apostolic age which would serve his purpose in writing. To say this is to make no judgment one way or the other on the historical value of what Luke records. Any historian, no matter how "objective" he tries to be, must in the very nature of the case make his own evaluation of the significance of what he relates; indeed, he is under an obligation to make such evaluation if he would claim to be a historian at all.¹² But the real problem here arises when we look for the *Sitz im Leben* which would best fit the facts of the case we are considering.

Before drawing our own conclusions, three points demand further examination in this context:

a. Talbert's interpretation begins from the assumption that Luke-Acts is a part of the developing catholicism of the first-century church. Though he accepts this as a stated premise, this is far from being a universally recognized principle of exegesis. Not all scholars would date Acts as late as Talbert does (A.D. 75-100),¹³ and though he says that the question of date can "hardly affect the present thesis",¹⁴ this cannot be accepted, for date is of crucial importance for any adequate understanding of Gnostic ideas and their development in the early church. But even if we accept this late date for Acts, it by no means settles the problem of *Frühkatholizismus*, as Talbert seems to imagine, and indeed, the wedge that this assumption drives between primitive Christianity and the later New Testament documents seems to many scholars to be a wholly artificial one.¹⁵ It certainly cannot be taken as a basis on which to interpret the supposed Gnostic context of Luke-Acts or, for that matter, of any other part of the New Testament.

b. Talbert supports his own interpretation by reference to two principles laid down by Tertullian (c. A.D. 200):¹⁶

(i) The Lord's apostles constitute the church's only authority.

¹² The preface to the gospel (Lk. 1: 1-4), which may in some respects also be regarded as an introduction to both volumes of the Lucan history, explicitly says that Luke has compounded his own account out of other materials, in order to emphasize those aspects of the story which he sees to be of special significance. There is no reason to doubt that, working as he was within the traditions of the classical historian, he has done the same with his materials in Acts.

¹³ T. W. Manson (*BJRL* xxviii, 1944, pp. 382-403) argued on the basis of the assumption that the book was written as a defence for Christians at the time of the Jewish wars that it must be dated c. A.D. 66-70. F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, London, 1951, p. 14, dates it not long after A.D. 61. *LG*, p. 15.

¹⁴ Cf. J. H. Elliott, "A Catholic Gospel: reflections on 'early catholicism' in the N.T.", in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* xxxi (1969), pp. 213 ff.

¹⁶ *Praescr. adv. haer.* vi, xx, xxi.

(ii) Truth precedes its copy, therefore the Christian system of doctrine existed prior to heresy.

Thus, "If a Christian set out to write a history of the apostolic age . . . it would be natural for him to present heresy as a post-apostolic phenomenon".¹⁷ Talbert recognizes the difficulty of arguing from a late second-century source back to the kind of methodology likely to have been employed by a first-century writer, though he does claim to have found the same axiom ("Truth precedes its copy") in 1 Clement 44: 1-3 (c. A.D. 95-96): "In 1 Clement we find an excellent expression of the axioms voiced by Tertullian".¹⁸ But to speak of an axiom in relation to this passage is hardly apposite. Clement is here suggesting that, just as Moses had been given foreknowledge of the divine will,¹⁹ so the apostles of the early church had learned from Jesus that there would be dissension at a later date over the question of the episcopacy. Such predictions as those of Acts 20: 29 f., Jude 18, 2 Pet. 2: 1-3, 1 Tim. 4: 1-7, and 2 Tim. 3: 1-9, 4: 3-4 readily spring to mind as possible parallels here but, as R. M. Grant points out,²⁰ we should also consider in this context Mk 13: 22 and its parallel passages—and this, of all parts of the gospel tradition, must be seen to derive not from a developing catholicism but from a distinctly Jewish background. The idea of apostasy before the end of the age is well attested from Jewish apocalyptic sources. 1 Clement 44: 1-3 is not therefore an axiom for the interpretation of apostolic history in the same sense as is Tertullian's statement, and it may well be alluding to a genuine piece of early tradition.

c. It is a recognized principle of interpretation that, where two different theories may be chosen, the simpler is to be preferred over against the more complex, unless there are very good reasons to the contrary. In this particular context, two very much simpler facts suggest themselves as viable explanations of the idealizing tendency which we often find in Acts:

(i) It is variously suggested that the purpose of Luke's writing the Acts was to commend the gospel to cultured people in the Roman empire, or to show that Christianity was harmless and should be a *religio licita* in the empire, or even to serve as a defence of Paul and his ministry at his trial before the emperor in Rome. On any of these explanations, it would obviously suit Luke's purpose better to portray a unified picture of early church history.

¹⁷ LG, p. 89.

¹⁸ LG, p. 91.

¹⁹ Cf. 1 Clem. 43.

²⁰ R. M. Grant and H. H. Graham, *First and Second Clement*, New York, 1965, p. 73.

(ii) It is a main purpose of both the gospel of Luke and the Acts to show that the Christian church is the fulfilment of the message of the Old Testament, and that in Christ all men, whether Jews or Gentiles, find their true destiny and brotherhood.

We may illustrate this last point from the narrative which sparked off our discussion here, the story of Simon the Samaritan in Acts 8 and, at the same time, we may find an explanation for Luke's peculiar treatment of this incident.

It is clear from even a cursory examination of the gospels that, of the four, Luke has far more interest in the Samaritans than does any of the others, with the possible exception of the Fourth Evangelist. Matthew has but one reference to the Samaritans (10: 5 f.), where the twelve are forbidden to enter any of their towns. Mark never mentions them at all, while John records the incident with the Samaritan woman at the well (4: 7-30). Luke, on the other hand, has no parallel to the Matthean saying, yet in his two-volume work he has more references to the Samaritans than the other evangelists put together, and one can therefore claim with some justification that the Samaritans held a special place in Lucan theology. When we examine the distribution of Luke's mention of Samaritans, this claim is confirmed, for we find that every mention occurs at a strategic point in his presentation of the Salvation History. Thus, in Lk 9: 51-56, at the beginning of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (itself a theme of great importance for Luke) and immediately following the transfiguration incident, at which Jesus' true nature had been revealed to the disciples for the first time following Peter's confession (9: 18-36), we have an incident in which John is rebuked for his suggestion that the Samaritan village which found no room for the dominical band should be consumed with fire. Again, later in the course of the journey to Jerusalem we find that the moral superiority of a Samaritan over the law and the priesthood (the two major elements of official Jewish life) is emphasized in the parable of the Good Samaritan (10: 30-37) and in the healing of the ten lepers (17: 11-19), when the only one who returned to give thanks was a Samaritan. In Acts a similar pattern is continued, with the place of Samaria in the divine plan again being emphasized in 1: 8, and then the unusual interest shown by Luke in the evangelization of Samaria by Philip in 8: 4-25 (Luke's only full account of the missionary endeavour of one who was not an apostle). Although the Samaritan mission must perforce have been much smaller than the mission in Judea which preceded it, the latter is passed over in a single verse (8: 1), while the former occupies what appears to be a disproportionate amount of attention.

The most significant mention of Samaria, however, and the one which seems to be a climax to the whole series, is in Acts 9: 31,

which clearly shows that for Luke this theme occupied a strategic place in his concept of *Heilsgeschichte*: "the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it was multiplied". This constitutes the first climax of the entire Lucan narrative: the moment when Jews and Samaritans could again become one, because they were united in Christ as the only sufficient Mediator.²¹ After this point in Acts we find no further mention of Samaritans; rather does Luke now shape his narrative up to the next climactic series of events when, on the basis of the reunification of Jews and Samaritans in Christ, and the consequent realization of their eschatological role as "a light to the nations" (Isa. 42: 6), the Christian message is extended to the first truly Gentile converts (beginning with Cornelius, chs. 10-11), and ultimately to the centre of the entire known world, imperial Rome itself. It is on the basis of Luke's exposition of this theme that we should look for an explanation of the unusual treatment afforded to Simon the Samaritan magician in Acts 8. It is difficult to think that Luke was unaware of the traditions concerning Simon as the originator of the Gnostic heresy but, to be faithful both to his sources and also to his entire concept of *Heilsgeschichte*, he had to include the Simon incident in his narrative. So he has deliberately omitted the details in order that Simon may be seen as a sincere, if somewhat confused, believer in the Christian message.

In choosing this explanation as a plausible reason for Luke's apparent silence on the church traditions about Simon, we have rejected the other possibility mentioned above, that Luke clothed his narrative in obscurity in order to support the contention of so-called *Frühkatholizismus*, that "Truth precedes its copy". Luke's purpose was not the negative one of concealing the truth. Rather was he concerned that the real significance of God's act in Jesus Christ might be made clear, for this was the only hope of that unity in both church and world which Luke saw as such a desirable goal even in his day.

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²¹ Cf. A. Ehrhardt's comment: "This verse makes it clear that the New Israel of the Church of Jesus Christ had succeeded in bringing the whole kingdom of David under the sway of his Son's sceptre, something the Jews had tried, with much less success, by force of arms during the last five hundred years" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, Manchester, 1969, p. 47).