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**THE JUDAEAN CULTURAL CONTEXT
OF COMMUNITY OF GOODS IN THE EARLY
JESUS MOVEMENT**

PART II

**II. Jesus, wealth and poverty, and the fully property-sharing
religious life**

In the first part of this study, I have shown how the history of interpretation of the community of goods attested as a part of the life and organization of the early Jesus movement in the New Testament has been dominated by three reader perspectives: 1) the expectation to find in this practice the anticipation and legitimation the sharing of communities of monks and nuns in the historic Christian churches; 2) the inclination to find in the community of property attested of the earliest believers in Jesus in Jerusalem, understood to have extended across the whole community of Jesus' earliest followers in Jerusalem in the initial period of the Church's growth, legitimation for the institution of formal community of property across the whole Christian congregation, as was urged by the extreme Anabaptist wing of the Protestant Reformation; and 3) a modern interest in finding legitimation for socialist and communist theories of state organisation in Jesus' critique of wealth and in the property-sharing of the community of Jesus' earliest followers in

Jerusalem, assumed in some form to have extended for a period across the whole group and to have embraced in some sense the property of all. In this part of my study I will argue that the perspective which has most claim to being borne out by both historical study of the sources which allow us to discern the ancient context of these events, and reflection on the (admittedly limited) primary Christian evidence, is the first of these approaches. Formalised community of property, after the manner a group chooses, may be an historically legitimated, voluntary practice for particular sectors within the Christian church.

Such property-sharing groups *within* the larger congregation of the Christian faithful, have, traditionally, taken the form of religious orders. They have been acknowledged by the wider community of the Christian faithful to be pursuing a social lifestyle legitimate for some, but not all, Christian believers. Such groups also, necessarily, agree that their chosen social expression of Christian faith, while legitimately expressing a Christian vocation, is not incumbent on all Christian believers. Their form of intensely integrated social community has its most direct and authoritative precedent in the settling of the peripatetic, shared purse and communal fellowship of Jesus and his disciples in Jerusalem after his trial, execution and resurrection.

Jesus sometimes appears to have condemned wealth and possessions absolutely. He proclaimed that the service of God and Mammon are mutually exclusive (Matthew 6:24). He told a rich man to sell all that he owned, distribute the proceeds to the poor and, bereft of wealth, to follow as a traveling disciple. When the man turned away, Jesus told his disciples, who had left all to follow him, that it is harder for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God (Mark 10:21, 23, 25). He instructed his traveling group of disciples to sell their possessions, making alms of the proceeds

(Luke 12:33). One of his sayings explained: “Whoever does not give up all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). He uttered blessings upon the presently suffering poor while cursing the satisfied rich of this age (Luke 6:20–25).

Jesus not only uttered harsh sayings about wealth and possessions, but also adopted what may fairly be termed extreme personal practice with respect to money and possessions. He appears personally to have carried neither purse nor coins. He lived communally with his twelve traveling disciples from a purse in which their wealth was pooled, administered by Judas (John 12:6; 13:29). Early in Acts we hear that the first community of post-Easter believers in Jesus apparently held their property in common, and frequently liquidated possessions for the common good (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–5:11; cf. 6:1–6). This account is almost universally read with suspicion and regarded as both idealized and barely historical.¹ It is often treated with frank skepticism despite the immediately prior precedent for community of property found in the common purse of Jesus’ traveling party, from which lived Jesus with his

¹ See for example Richard S. Ascough, ‘Benefaction Gone Wrong: The Sin of Ananias and Sapphira in Context’, in Stephen G. Wilson and Michel Desjardins, eds., *Text and Artifact in the Religions of Mediterranean Antiquity: Essays in Honour of Peter Richardson* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2000), pp. 91–110. He largely follows the common, sceptical view. Against Ascough’s turn to Graeco-Roman practice external of Palestine for understanding these practices of the early Jerusalem church, I would set my case for their origins in the Judaeian economic and cultural context offered here and in my earlier treatments, which include: Brian J. Capper, ‘Community of Goods in the Early Jerusalem Church,’ in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, ed. H. Temporini & W. Haase, series II, volume 26, part 2 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995), pp. 1730–1774; ‘The Palestinian Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods,’ in R. J. Bauckham, ed., *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, volume 4 of *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*), pp. 323–356; “‘With the Oldest Monks...’ Light from Essene History on the Career of the Beloved Disciple’, *Journal of Theological Studies* 49 (1998), pp. 1–55; ‘Two Types of Discipleship in Early Christianity,’ in *JTS* 52 (2001), pp. 105–123; ‘The Church as New Covenant of Effective Economics: The Social Origins of Mutually Supportive Christian Community,’ *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 2 (2002), pp. 83–102.

especially chosen twelve disciples, who had left all to follow him (Mark 10:28).²

Thus, while Jesus' concern for the poor is enthusiastically received by his modern interpreters, his occasional theme of renunciation of property and his sometimes seemingly absolute condemnation of wealth often seem both mysterious and rather unpalatable, especially to the Protestant scholarly community which reads these texts in the wake of the Reformation rejection of monasticism. For Protestant sensibility, Jesus' personal practice of carrying neither purse nor coins is, in effect, not really noticed at all, and serves no practical example. While for other traditions, the renunciation and community of life and property of Jesus and his traveling disciples becomes the example and high precedent for the 'apostolic', 'angelic' life of monks and nuns, Protestantism usually denies forcefully that the community of goods of Jesus and his traveling disciples, and of his earliest post-Easter followers in Jerusalem, offers justification or precedent for any practical community of property within the Church, in whatever context. Of course, interpreters are often eager to deny the use these texts have been put to in the service of extreme theories advocating the communalization of property in the state or across the whole Christian congregation. Yet Protestants also usually react against the application of Jesus' theme and practice of renunciation of possessions in Orthodox and Roman Catholic monasticism, despite the occasional generation within Protestantism of religious orders, and even fully property-sharing churches.³ In much popular and scholarly Protestant interpretation, the biblical texts in the Gospels and Acts

² Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1969), p. 130.

³ For a survey of formal property-sharing in Protestant congregations see Trevor Saxby, *Pilgrims of a Common Life: Christian community of goods through the centuries* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987).

expressive of renunciation of property and community of property are, because of the difficulty of accommodating them in both church practice and theology, often evacuated of their seemingly deliberate severity and apparently intended exemplary force. Many modern western interpreters seem to experience these more inaccessible aspects of Jesus' legacy concerning wealth and possessions as from another, strange world, a world which can be neither read about sympathetically nor practically imitated.

As will be outlined in the course of this paper, much progress has been made in recent decades in understanding Jesus' general approach to wealth and poverty by examining his teaching from the perspective of a social-scientific understanding of the pre-industrial, agrarian society which was his socioeconomic context. The specific purpose of this paper is to develop this socio-historical approach through a supplementary socio-religious and macroeconomic explanation of Jesus' more unpalatable theme of renunciation of property and his actual, practiced community of goods, to which the Gospels bear historical witness. This paper will also extend this method of explanation to the Acts account of the apparent community of goods of the first Jerusalem post-Easter believers in Jesus and the specific context of their distinctive economic activity in ancient Judaea. The social-scientific model advanced will be that of *virtuoso religion*. It will be argued that Jesus' traveling party may be characterized as a *virtuoso religious group*, and that he esteemed the wider economic role of *religious virtuosi*, who may both personally renounce property and become incorporated together into property-sharing virtuoso religious communities. I will suggest that Jesus intentionally conceived his group of traveling disciples as such an ideal, virtuoso religious formation, and attempted through its selfless community to stimulate in wider society the realization of his

macroeconomic vision. I will identify grounds for regarding Jesus and his traveling party of disciples, who practiced both renunciation of personal possessions and community of property, and the earliest community of post-Easter Jerusalem believers in Jesus, which seems at least in part to have done likewise, as religious virtuosi who through selfless practice and example were able also successfully to sponsor wider economic redistribution. I will argue that Jesus' approach in employing his virtuoso religious group to stimulate macroeconomic change followed on from significant virtuoso religious development that was already well underway, primarily in ancient Judaea, amongst voluntary Jewish religious groupings, and that some of these virtuoso groups are known to us in the Essene movement. I will suggest that other, similar virtuoso groups probably also existed and furnished a broader context for his mode of action in addressing the social dislocation caused by extremes of poverty and wealth, though these other groups are not well attested in the available historical sources. I will argue that Jesus' virtuoso group found precedent in Scripture especially in the peripatetic virtuoso life of the sign prophets Elijah and Elisha, while Essene virtuosity drew an idealized model of priestly holiness to justify its virtuoso religious practice. In both the Jesus movement and Essenism available traditional resources were developed and shaped into very pronounced virtuoso religious forms which could both claim properly to express Israelite and Jewish ideals and correctly to address the severe economic issues and needs of the age. Moreover, there were points of structural and historical coincidence and confluence between these two virtuoso forms and groups and similarities between their wider social and macroeconomic effects in alleviating poverty in the first century Palestinian agrarian economy.

1. Virtuoso religion and its macroeconomic effect

A definition of virtuoso religion may be approached from the sociological concept of an *elite*. In sociological perspective, groupings of people are usually led by elites.⁴ An elite may be sociologically defined in two ways. From one perspective an elite are those who *de jure* occupy the positions of highest authority within a social grouping or organization. Yet from a different perspective, an elite may be understood as those who have attained the highest levels in the group's most respected and valued activities. What might be termed the "institutional elite" carry the greatest formal authority, while those who might be called the "skill-and-achievement-elite", or the *virtuoso* elite, exemplify the group's highest values and may represent important *de facto* authority for many in the group and sometimes inconvenient competition for its formal leadership.⁵

I hope my reader will forgive the somewhat simplistic example of these two types of social elite I now offer, that of a present-day society of anglers. A fishing club may be managed by an elite of office-bearers who owe their positions to their skills in accounting, readiness to carry mundane administrative burdens, and external social connections. However, the club may also contain an elite of expert anglers who are not necessarily office bearers but who may nonetheless be said to lead, and indeed to define, the group in a different way, offering the most expert judgement, tuition and example in the group's most respected and valued activity, *fishing*.

Jesus, of course, called his accompanying group of disciples to be "fishers of people" (Mark 1:16–20). I would argue that he called them to

⁴ Non-hierarchical social groups are very rare, if they truly occur at all.

⁵ Cf. T. B. Bottomore, *Elites and Society* (London: C. A. Watts, 1964), pp. 1–3; Anthony Giddens, *The Class Structure of Advanced Society* (London: Hutchinson, 1973), pp. 119–120, as used and modified by Stephen Sharot, *A Comparative Sociology of World Religions: Virtuosos, Priests and Popular Religion* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001), pp. 11 and 264 n. 21.

leave all and to accompany him in his peripatetic missionary occupation so that they too might become skilled (i.e. that they might be trained) in the specialist religious task of *mission*, in which he would have them become expert. Jesus' calling of them to their special *apostolic* vocation included a requirement to renounce worldly connections and to share amongst themselves. The mode of life to which Jesus called them was fully defined by its apostolic, or missionary, purpose. This mode of life allowed them constantly to be *with* Jesus and thereby to receive training and teaching both in content and intensity markedly beyond that which Jesus made available to the crowds who heard him and even to his other, locally based disciples (Mark 3:9–19). Jesus' specialist group, his *virtuoso* group of twelve, would find themselves, with him, in conflict with both Pharisees and especially with the Jerusalem-based Sadducees, the elite who held institutional power and preferred, as it were, to retain full control over the fish-stock and to control all angling rights, whatever mastery in the religious realm the ordinary mass of the population ascribed to Jesus and the Twelve. The conflict between Jesus' group and the religious parties with which they found themselves often in conflict was therefore, from this analytical perspective, a conflict between two different *types* of elite for the religious leadership of the nation. While Jesus' group represented a more purely religious type, the Sadducees were a hierocracy whose power rested of ancient religious office, landed wealth and Roman patronage; the Pharisees may be considered essentially part of a 'retainer' class administrative functionaries who ran the day-to-day legal, economic and contractual aspects of the Sadducees' Temple-state.⁶

⁶ Cf. Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1989). James D. G. Dunn sets against Saldarini's analysis of the Pharisees as retainers who served the needs of the wealth-elite, the rulers and governing class, and who were 'therefore to some degree dependent on the rich and

In the sphere of sociology of religion, Max Weber offered a distinction between *religious virtuosi* and *hierocracy* which parallels these two ways of defining an elite. At the most general level we may view religious virtuosi simply as highly respected, intense practitioners of a religious tradition's highest values whose realization of these values goes beyond what is normal in the religious community which is their wider social context. Hierocrats, while expressing to some degree the same values, derive their authority primarily not from intensity of practice but from institutional legitimation and its concomitant ascribed honour. Weber distinguished between virtuoso religion and mass religion, and noted that religious virtuosi may not hold high positions in the organizational structures of mass religion, and may even make a competing claim for authority over against those we may term hierocrats, clerics, clerisy, or the institutional religious elite. Hierocrats seek primarily to legitimate their authority to bestow sacred benefits through their position within an ancient institutional structure ("office charisma"), while religious virtuosi offer a more experimental claim to access the spiritual realm and to bestow spiritual benefits ("personal charisma"). Mass religion may function, for example, through its clergy's ancient claims to access and bestow spiritual goods through ritualistic and sacramental activities, while virtuoso religion accesses the spiritual realm and bestows spiritual benefits through what are believed to be

powerful', Josephus' depiction of the esteem in which the Pharisees were held by the common people, *Jesus Remembered: Christianity in the Making*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 269. While this observation may somewhat qualify Saldarini's view, it should be remembered that Josephus identified himself as a Pharisee and his view may have been highly partisan. The conflict of Jesus the artisan with at least some Pharisees may indicate a greater tension between the common people and the Pharisees than was the case, or was greater than Josephus was prepared to concede, in the era after the defeat of the nation by the Romans in AD 70 and the destruction of national institutions, including the Second Temple, which caused significant social changes and realignments.

experimentally demonstrable spiritual giftings which may be personally experienced. While hierocrats are legitimated by institutional power and elite patronage, religious virtuosi depend on the esteem of the popular audience. Virtuoso religion both focuses upon intense practice of the ethical and religious values of the common religious tradition, and claims that its experimentally demonstrable giftings (e.g. visions, healing, prophecy etc.) confirm its claim to *more perfectly* translate into practice the ethical and religious values of the common religious tradition. In such circumstances, hierocracy may seek to incorporate religious virtuosity's fuller adherence to its highest ideals for the general good through institutional accommodation, but may also find itself unable to accommodate the competing claims to authority of religious virtuosi, which may be unpalatable because they challenge mass religion's claim about the general accessibility of religious values and benefits. The hierocracy of mass religion may therefore sometimes seek the institutional exclusion of virtuoso religion.⁷

Weber noted a wide range of types of religious virtuosi, extending through socially acknowledged holy persons, pneumatics, healers, ascetics, exorcists, visionary mystics, trance-journeymen, sacred dancers, teachers, hermits, monks, and members of religious orders, including also gnostics, "the pietist ecclesiola," and "all genuine sects." He intended his model to have general applicability so that he could use it comparatively to examine all expressions of religion more intense than mass religion. The continued viability of Weber's classifications is shown by their

⁷ Cf. Max Weber, 'Social Psychology of the World's Religions' in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948), pp. 267–301, see especially pp. 287–288, and Sharot (see next note), *Comparative Sociology*, pp. 11–12, who I follow closely on several points here; Sharot gives useful further references to the work of Weber.

employment in Stephen Sharot's recent comparative sociology of world religions.⁸

Weber's discussion of virtuoso religion focused especially on occidental and oriental monk-traditions and monasticism. He saw the well-known and easily identifiable monk-traditions, mystical asceticism and monasticism of occident and orient as particular manifestations or sub-types of the general socio-religious phenomenon of virtuoso religion, characterizing both as 'extramundane' or 'otherworldly' asceticism. He also included in his purview what he called the intramundane or inner-worldly asceticism of Calvinism, which attempted to create the "holy community" within the world.⁹ It should be stressed that not all religious virtuosi are monks, nuns, or ascetics, though ascetic and non-ascetic virtuosi share loyalty to a religious tradition's core values. The accusation that Jesus was a 'glutton and a drunkard' shows Jesus' opponents surprise that someone taking the role he did as an independent, self-assertive religious virtuoso was not markedly temperate, if not definitely ascetic (Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34; cf. Deuteronomy 21:20). That Jesus parried the accusation by pointing to their mocking of John the Baptist's distinctly rigorous asceticism does not prove that there were no ascetic aspects to Jesus' practice. That Jesus did not inculcate fasting according to the calendar of fasts (Mark 2:18–22) likewise is not evidence of a complete absence of asceticism in his practice.¹⁰

Although not all religious virtuosi are ascetics, virtuoso religion always implies a disciplined application of method. The most useful

⁸ Stephen Sharot, *A Comparative Sociology of World Religions: Virtuosos, Priests and Popular Religion* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001).

⁹ Weber, 'Social Psychology', pp. 287–291.

¹⁰ See the discussion of Dale C. Allison, 'Jesus as Millenarian Ascetic: Deleting a Consensus,' chapter 3 of his *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), pp. 172–216.

current typology of virtuoso religion is that offered by Ilana Silber, which may be summarized as follows:

- 1) Virtuoso religion is a matter of individual choice;
- 2) Virtuoso religion involves an intensification of personal commitment over normal compulsory religious routine norms and behaviour;
- 3) Virtuoso religion involves the seeking of perfection, an extreme urge to go beyond everyday life and average religious achievement;
- 4) The seeking of perfection involved in virtuoso religion is sustained in a disciplined, systematic fashion, a defined rule or method;
- 5) Virtuoso religion implies a normative double standard; its rigour is not only not necessary for all, but also impossible for all;
- 6) Virtuoso religion is based in achievement and nonascriptive criteria, and is in principle an option for all, although in practice only achieved by an 'heroic' minority.¹¹

As may be seen from these features, the religious virtuoso is intensely preoccupied with ultimate concerns and values. Within the wider religious community, religious virtuosi are perhaps most distinguishable

¹¹ Ilana Silber, *Virtuosity, Charisma, and Social Order: A comparative Sociological Study of Monasticism in Theravada Buddhism and Mediaeval Catholicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 190–194.

by their intense seeking to express ultimate values and concerns through the employment of discipline and method (point 4 above), by which their religious focus becomes comprehensive, embracing very visibly all life and activity.

Unlike Weber, who included sects within his category of virtuoso religion, Silber regards virtuoso religion as operating as a part of the wider religious community, and tends to distinguish it from sectarianism. “Virtuosi represent something that is considered potentially disruptive, yet has a place in the collective set of values.”¹² Points 5 and 6 above assume this connection to and acceptance within the wider religious community. Thus virtuoso religion is able to sustain liminal social structures; virtuoso groups, while retaining a connection with the wider religious community, also have a distinctive inner life. The internal economic and social life of communities of religious virtuosi may even represent a reverse image of the values and normal behavior or the surrounding religious community. Monks and nuns, for example, usually limit contact with surrounding society, emphasize personal possessionlessness and operate an entirely communal economy. Their daily routine usually differs markedly from surrounding society, with a pronounced focus on worship and spiritual disciplines. Silber makes use of Victor Turner’s social concepts of “structure” and “antistructure” and argues that religious virtuosity has the capacity to create permanent antistructure, entailing elements such as egalitarianism and status leveling which are not found in society external of the group.¹³ Silber’s observation that virtuoso religion has the capacity to preserve

¹² Silber, *Virtuosity*, p. 44.

¹³ Silber, *Virtuosity*, pp. 40–41, 53; Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), chapter ‘Metaphors of Anti-Structure in Religious Culture,’ pp. 272–300; Timothy J. M. Ling, *The Judaean Poor and the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) pp. 70–74.

“antistructure” within its liminal but permanent social forms appears highly relevant for the study of Jesus’ traveling disciple group, which seems to have captured in its social pattern ideals of mutual service, personal possessionlessness, and the reversal of the norms of hierarchy which pertained in the world outside the group. Jesus taught that his senior disciples must be servants and the most senior a slave of all (Matthew 20:26–27; Mark 9:35; 10:43–44; Luke 22:26, cf. 14:11, 18:14b).

Virtuoso religion does not demand a complete separation from the surrounding world, but exists, as noted, in a liminal social position. Indeed, while sometimes appearing separate from wider society, religious virtuosi may exercise disproportionate and considerable influence upon their surrounding religious community and social world. Weber noted that because of its peculiar and highly concrete forms, the religiosity of virtuosi has often been “of decisive importance for the development of the way of life of the masses. This virtuoso religiosity has therefore also often been important for the economic ethic of the respective religion. The religion of the virtuoso has been the genuinely ‘exemplary’ and practical religion.” He pointed out that laypersons could be subject to a certain ethical regulation by virtuoso religion because the virtuoso was often the layperson’s “spiritual adviser” and spiritual director. “Hence, the virtuoso frequently exercises a powerful influence over the religiously ‘unmusical’ ...”¹⁴ Such influence may extend not merely to the ordinary mass of the population, but as far as the political elite and, within monarchic social organization, even to the ruler.

To illustrate the potentially disproportionate wider social and economic influence of religious virtuosi, I offer a modern example which is pertinent to my argument. A front page of the *Wall Street Journal*

¹⁴ Weber, ‘Social Psychology’, p. 289.

carried, in 2005, a report which pointed to the leverage (I choose this metaphor from the world of finance deliberately) exercised by religious virtuosi. It discussed the activity of two white-robed Catholic Sisters of the Poor at a New York food market, whose beaming smiles were captured for readers in a photograph of them standing beside plentiful displays of fruit and vegetables. These nuns were neither buying nor selling. They were, in fact, begging. The elderly for whom they cared in their nursing home had insufficient resources to fund their own food and lodging. The two nuns successfully cajoled traders and warehouse-owners into generous food donations, which kept the home's kitchens and communal meals well supplied. The nuns' regular appeals for open-handed redistribution of wealth from traders to needy elderly was distinctly successful because, as religious virtuosi of a highly ethical religious tradition, they were understood to be of impeccable character. Both their requests and their use of acquired resources could be trusted by the traders, who would not so naturally have trusted the requests of non-religious or of street beggars. The nuns could not be accused of seeking their own material benefit, since they did not even own the clothes they wore. Their voluntary personal poverty, regular religious practice and uniform, and known charitable service—which together constituted their communally acknowledged identity as religious virtuosi—*enabled* these nuns to become a trustworthy conduit for the redistribution of material resources from some who had more than enough to some who had insufficient.¹⁵ Moreover, since these nuns were highly honoured within the wider religious community, refusal of their requests might involve loss of honour. The nuns' high religious status is an asset which is used to 'leverage' economic redistribution. Similar regular requests from

¹⁵ Clare Ansberry, 'Sister Rosemarie Wants You, *The Wall Street Journal* CCXLVI.132 (December 17–18, 2005), pp. A1 and A6.

institutional clergy may not have fallen on deaf ears, but probably would not have been so successful.

In the following I will suggest that religious virtuosi in first century Palestine might both develop precedents offered by earlier, ancient forms of virtuoso religion in Israelite and Jewish history, and create virtuoso patterns out of other traditional social forms. Jesus developed the mode of virtuoso peripatetic prophecy, while the Essenes constructed a new pattern of virtuoso religion based primarily on a reinterpretation of priestly holiness. Both of these forms of virtuoso religion adapted their differing primary precedents to express in their own social structures both forceful symbolic statements of values opposite to those of the reigning, exploitative form of agrarian economy and practical modes of economic sharing. The distinctive social forms and exhortation of these differing religious virtuosi both precipitated and facilitated actual economic redistribution in the wider Jewish religious community.

2. Traditional Jewish resistance to the extremes of wealth and poverty and the development of virtuoso religious forms in the Greek period.

Jesus lived in a society of massive wealth differentiation between the political elite and the mass of ordinary people. This kind of bifurcated social pattern is visible in Israelite society from around the beginning of the first millennium BC, and again asserted itself very forcefully in Jewish life in the Greek period. The agrarian society of antiquity manifested the essential social and wealth bifurcation common to all pre-industrial societies, shared too with many currently industrializing societies, between a narrow governing class or wealth elite, numbering less than one or two per cent of the population, “the few” [*hoi ologoi*],

“the notables” [*hoi gnorimoi*], “the rich” [*hoi plousioi*], “the powerful” [*hoi dynatoi*], and the large mass of small tenant farmers, laborers, servants and city or rural artisans, commonly and contrastingly called “the many” [*hoi polloi*], “the people” [*ho demos*], “the poor” [*hoi penetai*], and even “the weak” [*hoi asthenai*].¹⁶ Most people, some ninety per cent of the population, lived in rural villages, were engaged in agricultural production, and faced pressing economic problems including land shortage, land exhaustion, land parcelisation caused by overpopulation and frequently divided inheritances, and frequent land loss to the elite through indebtedness and high taxation, which often amounted to as much as a half to two thirds of all agricultural production. Most of the population received only a meager, subsistence diet while an underclass of perhaps five to ten per cent often fell below subsistence level and lived brutal, short lives. As the biblical book of Proverbs declared, the need of food drove women to prostitution: ‘For the price of a prostitute is only a loaf of bread.’¹⁷ Prostitution was the common fate of the women of the ancient world’s underclass; according to Herodotus even the women of the wider lower class of Lydia earned their dowries by prostitution (*Histories* 1.93). Ancient society contained no broad middle class after the manner of modern western-style economies, but instead only a narrow ‘retainer’ class of petty officials, estate stewards and middle and lower-ranking military officers, numbering less than five

¹⁶ Cf. on some of these terms Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982), pp. 121–143; further below, section 4 and note 67.

¹⁷ Proverbs 6:2, English Standard Version. Cf. the New International Version, ‘For a prostitute can be had for a loaf of bread’; also the Contemporary English Version, ‘A woman who sells her love can be bought for as little as the price of a meal’; and the Christian Standard Version, ‘For a prostitute’s fee is only a loaf of bread’. All these translations correctly point, with several other versions, to the poverty which drives prostitution, against the older understanding that the proverb rehearses the lesson that traffic with prostitutes reduces the whoremonger to poverty.

per cent of the population, who operated the machinery of taxation on behalf of the elite and were well rewarded, but only on condition of absolute loyalty.¹⁸

A focus of the Israelite ethical tradition was the maintenance of a free peasantry and resistance to the typical claim of the agrarian political elite to ownership of all resources. The Mosaic Covenant defended the ordinary population against the typical rapacity of the agrarian governing class and ruler through legislation insisting on the regular release of debt, prevention of unreasonable pursuit of debt, prohibition of interest (inhibiting peasant land loss to the governing class through accumulating debt), freedom from work on the Sabbath, and denying the alienability of peasant land, preventing permanent loss of land.¹⁹ The Israelite and Jew were not to imitate the typical agrarian elite in ruthlessly expanding their landholdings—they were not to covet their neighbor’s smallholding (Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21).²⁰ The historians of Israel pointed to the sometimes dire consequences of the rise of monarchs and a governing political wealth-elite in heavy taxation, corvée and land-grabbing, impoverishing the peasantry and splitting the nation.²¹ The prophets proclaimed the hefty divine critique of the pre-exilic governing class’s mistreatment and land-grabbing dispossession of the peasantry, to

¹⁸ Cf. Gerhard E. Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1966 and 1984), pp. 189–296; Patricia Crone, *Pre-Industrial Societies* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1989 and 2003). See further below, section 4.

¹⁹ Exodus 20:8–11; 22:25–27; 23:6–12; Leviticus 25; Deuteronomy 5:12–15; 15:1–18; 23:19–20; 24:6, 10–15, 17–22.

²⁰ Cf. Marvin L. Chaney, ‘You shall not covet your neighbour’s house,’ *Pacific Theological Review* 15 (1982), pp. 3–13.

²¹ 1 Samuel 8:1–18; Solomon’s heavy taxation: 1 Kings 4:7–8, 22–28; 5:13–18; 7; 12:1–11; the paradigm narrative of the seizure of Naboth’s vineyard: 21; 22:34–40; 2 Kings 9:25, 38.

achieve which they corrupted traditional justice and from the proceeds of which they financed luxurious living.²²

The exile was understood as the divine punishment not only for idolatry but also for the elite's neglect of Yahweh's covenant, their social failure in adopting not only the religion, but also the sharply stratified social structure of the Canaanite city-states and imitating the rapacity of pagan agrarian rulers and elites. After the exile, the social fragmentation of Yahweh's people again into landless, disenfranchised poor and wealth elite was for a time prevented by the vigilance and covenant renewal of Nehemiah, who insisted on cancellation of debt and redemption of debtors sold into slavery by their well off creditors.²³ Yet by the mid third century BC, the rapacity of Greek colonial rule extracted enormous resources from the land, clearly the cause of the author of Ecclesiastes' disillusioned complaints against social injustice and his own political impotence. Work dominates his book because the Jewish people were forced to work hard for their gentile masters. To withstand the 'money-making machine machine'²⁴ of Ptolemaic taxation was impossible.²⁵ Towards the century's end, the ruthless, super-rich tax-collector Joseph son of Tobiah summarily executed city elders who resisted his demands.²⁶ Extreme social bifurcation is attested late in the second century BC in the apocalyptic world-view of sections of the Enoch literature, in which woes are pronounced against the self-indulgent, land-robbing governing class,

²² Cf. especially Amos 2:6–8; 3:9–11, 15; 4:1; 5:11–12, 15, 24; 6:4–7, 11–12; 8:4–6; Isaiah 1:10–17, 21–23, 29–31; 3:1–3, 9, 14–24; 5:1–9, 13–14, 22; 10:1–2; 32:7; Micah 1:3–7; 2:1–5; 3:1–4, 9–12. See D. N. Premnath, *Eighth Century Prophets: A Social Analysis* (St. Louis, MI: Chalice Press, 2003).

²³ Nehemiah chapters 5 and 9–13.

²⁴ W. W. Tarn and G. T. Griffith, *Hellenistic Civilisation* (London: 3rd edition, 1952), p. 179.

²⁵ Ecclesiastes 2:14–24; 3:1–10, 16, 22; 4:1–4, 8; 5:7, 10–12. Cf. F. Crüsemann, "The Unchangeable World: The 'Crisis of Wisdom' in Qoheleth," in W. Schotroff and W. Stegemann, eds., *God of the Lowly* (New York: Orbis, 1984), pp. 57–77.

²⁶ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 12.4.2–5 §§160–165.

whose wealth will be unable to save them in God's great coming judgement.²⁷

By the beginning of the second century BC we find evidence of the beginnings of an ideal of renunciation and the possibility that poorer students of the Law who sought to obey God completely might forgo family life. In order to avoid calamity in the coming judgement the faithful must fully embrace the suffering of the present evil age. Indeed, the coming of God's Kingdom would be hastened by such perfect obedience, explored in close-knit conventicles of teachers and students (disciples) which arose within the ordinary mass of the population. Soon after we see the birth of the Essene covenant, which represents both a reaction to the greed of the age and an intense devotion aimed at seeking the God of Israel's help. Essenism contained celibate groups which are easily clearly recognizable as a form of virtuoso religion.

A text from Qumran which is usually classified as 'pre-sectarian' reveals how material hardship interacted with the desire for study and perfect obedience to the Torah. *4QInstruction* dates from c. 200 BC and was found in multiple copies, indicating that it was a valued document for the inculcation of piety. The phrase 'wisdom of the hands', (*chokhmath yadhîm*), i.e. 'manual skill', appears with reference to the addressee (4Q418 frag. 81 ll. 15, 19). Uniquely within literature of the Jewish Second Temple period, this collection of instruction addresses the tutee repeatedly with the phrase 'You are poor...', using the Hebrew terms *rosh* and *evyôn*, giving us insight into both the typical poverty and diligent piety of Judaeans, artisans, smallholders and labourers. In the fragments, the term 'need' (*machsôr*) appears eight times. This contrasts with only five appearances in the whole Hebrew Bible and suggests acute poverty. A previously unattested Hebrew phrase appears, *terem*

²⁷ Cf. 1 Enoch 91–92; 95:7; 96:3–8; 97:1–2; 98:11–15; 100:6–7; 107.

machsôrcah, ‘the food of your need [i.e. the food which you need, your subsistence diet].’²⁸

Within such circles, in which both student and teacher were reduced to subsistence, were generated ideals of celibacy and of the renunciation of property. Despite difficult circumstances, to taint the soul by avoiding the consequences of economic deprivation through any dishonest act in a matter of property (e.g. theft, breach of trust concerning a deposit, etc.) remained unacceptable and immoral, and was to be avoided at all costs. Indeed, heightened consciousness concerning the woes caused by economic injustice means that dishonesty in money matters is presented as the nemesis of existence.²⁹ God’s coming judgement upon present economic dislocation meant that the faithful must be scrupulous to keep far from their souls any stain of dishonest dealings in property (cf. Acts 5:1–11). The student’s economic poverty may seem to render problematic his desire perfectly to know and obey God’s Law: ‘You are poor. Do not say: I am poor, I cannot become wise...’ The teacher who commented ‘You have taken a wife in your poverty...’ could easily advise that time be made for study, leading to perfect obedience, by restraint in procreating children, which meant less time would be needed for garnering wages, or even celibacy (cf. Matthew 19:10–12). The statement appears to point forward to the later Essene practice of celibacy, when many Essene disciples gave up the unequal struggle to maintain a family of their own and incorporated themselves

²⁸ 4Q417, frag. 1, col. I, line 17; cf. the appearance of the phrase ‘money of your need [i.e. for your needs]’, in the wisdom fragment 4Q424, frag. 1, line 8. My teacher Otto Betz suggested that this phrase is related to the cooperative economic structures of Essenism, and points forward to the principle of distribution according to need in the descriptions of the community of goods of the early Jerusalem church in Acts 2.45 and 4.35, ‘Kontakte zwischen Christen und Essenern,’ in Bernhard Mayer, ed., *Christen und Christliches in Qumran?* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1992), pp. 157–175, see p. 165.

²⁹ 4Q416, frag. 2, col. I, lines 5–7, col. III, lines 3–7; 4Q417, frag. 1, col. I, line 21.

together in celibate male conventicles for mutual support.³⁰ This work recasts the fifth commandment (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16) in order to stress that limited material means do not excuse the support of parents in their old age: ‘Honour your father in your poverty, and your mother in your low estate...’³¹ Similar thinking is expressed in Jesus’ refusal to allow the legal fictions of the Pharisees to circumvent material care for parents and other social obligations, sullyng the human heart (Matthew 15:1–20; Mark 7:1–23, cf. Luke 16:10–15).

Thus, through the era of the Jewish people’s impoverishment at the hands of Greek, Hellenistic and Roman overlords, the era which saw the rise of apocalyptic and the growth of the Essene movement, forms of virtuoso religious piety such as those practised by the Essenes, by John the Baptist, by Jesus and his traveling disciples and within the earliest Jerusalem church, expressed heightened sensitivity to issues of wealth and poverty. Such virtuoso forms expressed a powerful critique of current economic relationships and became a lever for redistribution. The difficulties of poverty and the desire for study and perfect obedience led to the generation of virtuoso religious forms which included celibacy, renunciation of property, community of goods and renunciation. These forms of virtuoso piety expressed the reaction of many of the pious towards the greed, land accumulation, and luxury of the political elite; it becomes *holy* and *honourable* to express the opposite of acquisitive elite behavior by espousing poverty and even celibacy. This reversal of external values within the virtuoso group allowed it to consider itself the true elite of the nation, and to compete before the populace for reputation

³⁰ Cf. Brian J. Capper, ‘The New Covenant in Southern Palestine at the Arrest of Jesus,’ in James R. Davila, ed., *The Dead Sea Scrolls as Background to Postbiblical Judaism and Early Christianity* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003), pp. 90–116, see pp. 95–104.

³¹ 4Q416 frag. 2, col. III, lines 12–13, 15–16, 20.

and power over against the institutional hierarchy of the Jerusalem Temple.

3. Essene *virtuosi* and their associates: a binary Judaeian mode of piety aimed at solving the problem of poverty

As is reasonably well understood by modern Biblical scholarship, there were active in ancient Judaea, contemporary with the missions of John the Baptist, Jesus and the early Jerusalem church, intensive forms of Jewish piety which embraced strongly communitarian elements. We know about this phenomenon from the classical notices about the *Essene* movement and from the Qumran scrolls, many of which most scholars regard as deriving from a form of Essenism. The celibate, property-sharing upper echelon of the Essene movement is easily recognized as a form of virtuoso religion. There may have been other groups not known to us by name which included those who pursued similarly intense forms of virtuoso piety, who would not have been identified as ‘Essenes’ by their contemporaries. Martin Hengel wrote of Palestinian Judaism in the aftermath of the successful Maccabean revolt: ‘It is very probable that in addition to the Essenes and Pharisees, there were other pietistic and conventicle-like splinter-groups who emerged from the Hasidim but who are unknown to us, combining apocalyptic tendencies with a rigorous view of the Law.’ ‘The conventicles of Jewish ‘pious’ who were not established as parties are probably very significant for later Palestinian Judaism. Groups like this may³² have produced writings which have not been found in Qumran like the Similitudes of Enoch (chapters 37–71), the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs apart from Levi and Naphtali... the

³² I give my own translation of Hengel’s verb at the point; translation with ‘may’ rather than ‘could’ is more faithful to the German original.

Assumptio Mosis and perhaps even the Ascension of Isaiah. We might consider whether they did not later produce men like John the Baptist and [Josephus' claimed wilderness teacher³³] Bannus.³⁴ E. P. Sanders has similarly emphasized the presence and importance of 'pietists' who are not identifiable with the known Jewish parties. He notes the Psalms of Solomon, which betray a marked communal emphasis and self-identification as 'the poor', and the Assumption of Moses.³⁵ Such pietist groups would be, or would contain, *religious virtuosi*.

Since our records only allow us to analyze Essene virtuosi, we will focus our attention here on the 'upper' echelon of Essenism. The Essene fraternity was led by celibate males who renounced personal property to live in full community of property. The closest literary analogues to the Rule-type documents which legislate the way of life for Essene celibate male communities, the *Rule of the Community* and related texts (1QS, 1Q28a, 1Q28b, 4QS255–264, 5Q11, cf. 11Q29), are the later Christian monastic rules. Indeed, the very use of the term *Rule* to define these documents derives from the correspondence of their *Gattung* with that of later Christian monastic rules, as may be perhaps most easily seen through a comparison with the rules of Benedict. That such documents are defined in this way as rules, implying virtuoso religious discipline and method, shows the appropriateness of regarding those who constituted the upper echelon of the Essene movement as religious virtuosi.

I have come to believe that the common life of Jesus' traveling party and of the earliest community of his post-Easter followers described in Acts had its roots with primarily *Judaeen* practice. Jesus was linked to

³³ Josephus, *Life*, 2 §11

³⁴ Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (London: SCM, 1974), Vol. 1, p. 179 and Vol. 2, p. 120, n. 480.

³⁵ E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 B. C. E.–66 C. E.* (London: SCM, 1992), cf. Ling, *The Judaeen Poor and the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 93–96.

the Judaeen group of John the Baptist immediately before bursting onto the Galilean scene in public ministry (cf. Matthew 3; Mark 1:1–20; Luke 3:1–22; John 1:19–43). As we will see, there are hints of communal sharing in the accounts of the ‘sons of the prophets’ overseen by Elisha and Elijah, John’s scriptural model. Although we have no specific evidence, I think it is very likely that the group of John the Baptist’s disciples shared their property in a common purse, following the practice of other Judaeen pietistic groups. John presented himself as a prophetic figure on the lower Jordan river, not many miles from the site of Qumran on the north-west of the Dead Sea. He had a reputation as an extreme ascetic; his honour-claim in this regard may have demanded that he outdid the renunciation of the strictest Essenes. John’s explanation of the ‘fruits of repentance’ which he demanded focused, according to Luke 3:7–14, on righteous dealings in matters of material goods. Tax-collectors should not defraud, and soldiers should not extort. “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise” (v. 11). It is likely that an ascetic religious virtuoso, who pressed such (presumably informal) material sharing on his audience, would within his disciple-group have practised personal possessionlessness and community of property. In his way, by creating a lived, virtuoso image of the *perfect* expression of his ideal about righteous dealings in matters of property, a virtuoso such as John acquired the leverage effectively to move his audience to the informal performance of his ideals.

As we have noted, it is easier for a religious virtuoso who is publicly known not to own personal possessions to move others to sharing than a property-owning administrator of institutional religion. It is interesting to compare John’s demand concerning the sharing of coats and food sounds with descriptions of the sharing of Essene virtuosi: “Their

clothes and food are also held in common, for they have adopted the form of common messes” (Philo, *That Every Good Man is Free*, §86); “And not only do they have a common table, but common clothes. In fact, they have at their disposition thick coats for the winter, and inexpensive tunics for summer; so it is simple and lawful, for whoever desires to do so, to take the garment he wishes...’ (Philo, *Apology for the Jews*, §12). In these descriptions Philo is emphasising the good provision made for all in the Essene property-sharing group. If John’s group was frequently mobile, it may have been compelled to share in a more intense and less well-supplied fashion, but this does not exclude the possibility of required, formal community of property. We need not make John a former Essene, as some interpreters have, to accept the possibility that his group of disciples may have shared its property.

As *eschatologically oriented* religious virtuosi, both John and Jesus may within their disciple groups have sought to realise whatever pattern of life they anticipated after the coming judgement of God, to proleptically realise, as it were, an image of heaven on earth. Jean Seguy has observed that virtuoso groups may model in their structure an alternative, perfect society, a “utopia” which, since it exists permanently within society and the established order, offers a permanent critique of that wider society.³⁶ Both John and Jesus were celibates; Jesus explained that there would be no marriage in the afterlife, but all would live ‘as angels in heaven’ (Matthew 22:30; Mark 12:25 ; cf. Luke 20:36 [*isangelos*]), as Jesus presumably thought he already lived. The Qumran

³⁶ Jean Seguy, ‘Une sociologie des sociétés imaginées: monachisme et utopie,’ *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 26 (1971), pp. 328–354, and ‘Pour une sociologie de l’ordre religieux,’ *Archives des Sciences Sociales des Religions* 57 (1984), pp. 55–68; Silber, *Virtuosity*, p. 40.

community sought to imitate the angelic pattern of life.³⁷ Essene community of property sought to imitate the absence of personal possessions amongst priests on service in the Temple, and saw itself as realising the landlessness of ideal priests (cf. Numbers 18:20).³⁸ If both Jesus and John the Baptist believed that after the resurrection there would be no personal property, perhaps a natural concomitant of all-sufficient divine supply, and of the expansion of God's glory from the sanctuary to fill the whole land, then it is possible that both John and Jesus saw the possessionlessness and community of property of their groups as an anticipation of the perfect, holy future that God would bring.

In my view Jesus 'took north' the essentially, indeed possibly previously exclusive, Judaeian concept and practice of an intensely integrated social and religious life. He gathered, through the extraordinary force of his own person, chosen Galileans into a traveling group of disciples which every day shared meals and received instruction. Such 'common life' appears not to have been a particularly well established Galilean practice, if formal community of goods was ever previously to be found there, in the northern reaches of Jewish settlement, as a social or formal legal reality. There are no other attested contemporary examples unless one assumes the existence of Essene settlements in Galilee prior to AD 70 from ambiguous later references. By contrast, the practice of common life is well attested amongst the Essenes of Judaea, where explicit source references locate Essene property-sharing communities³⁹ and attest the appearance of individual

³⁷ Cf. Otto Betz, art. 'Isangelie,' in Ernst Dassmann et al., eds., *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, Vol. XVIII, (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1998), pp. 945–997.

³⁸ See further below on the view of my teacher Otto Betz.

³⁹ Philo, *Apology for the Jews*, §1

Essene figures and use of the phrase ‘of the Essenes’ to describe a gate of Jerusalem.⁴⁰

In my view the Essenes were in the main concentrated in the Judaeen heartland, which included the original *temenos* associated with the building of the Second Temple after the exile. It is not possible to find certain reference to Essenes in the Synoptic Tradition, in which most of the action takes place in Galilee, despite attempts to read the Herodians (Mark 3:6 [Galilee]; 12:3, cf. Matthew 22:16 [Jerusalem])⁴¹ and the ‘sons of light’ in a parable of Jesus (Luke 16:8)⁴² as Essenes. If such texts refer to Essenes, references remain very infrequent. This seems to me evidence that the Essenes were located mainly in the south, in Judaea, rather than widely spread across all areas of Jewish settlement. Conversely, the light/darkness dualism of John’s Gospel, in which much more action takes place in the south, including Jesus’ repeated presence at Temple feasts, has frequently been compared with Essene light/darkness dualism. John’s Gospel also shows amongst the Gospels special topographical knowledge of the Jerusalem area and Judaea.⁴³ John, admittedly, also does not mention Essenes; but he makes too no mention of Sadducees,

⁴⁰ Cf. Josephus’ accounts of the appearance of the Essene prophet Judas at the Jerusalem Temple, *Jewish War*, 1.3.5 §§78–80 and *Antiquities*, 13.11.2 §§311–313, his reference to the Jerusalem ‘Gate of the Essenes’, *Jewish War*, 5.4.2 §145, and his accounts of the appearance of Essene prophets at the royal courts of Herod the Great (the Essene prophet Menahem, *Antiquities*, 15.10.4–5 §§ 372–379) and Herod Archelaus (the Essene prophet Simon, *Jewish War*, 2.7.3 §113, *Antiquities*, 17.8.3 §§345–348. Note also how Pliny the elder specifically locates the Essenes to the west side of the Dead Sea, in Judaea, *Natural History*, 5.17 or 29, in other editions 5.15 §73.

⁴¹ Joan E. Taylor, *The Essenes, The Scrolls, and the Dead Sea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chapter 4, ‘The Herodians of the Gospel of Mark’, pp. 109–130.

⁴² David Flusser, ‘The Parable of the Unjust Steward: Jesus’ Criticism of the Essenes’, in James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), pp. 176–197.

⁴³ Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London: SCM,), pp. 110–111; J. A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John* (London: SCM, 1985), pp. 48–59; C. H. H. Scobie, ‘Johannine Geography,’ *Studies in Religion* 11 (1982), pp. 77–84.

despite his special knowledge of the high priesthood.⁴⁴ This raises interesting questions about what kind of ‘insider perspective’ John may represent. I have argued that the origins of the Johannine tradition are related to a Jerusalem form of Temple-friendly ascetic communal life with ultimate roots in Essenism, located on the south-west hill of Jerusalem.⁴⁵ The common view that Essenes were found in all areas of Jewish settlement depends on Josephus’ statement that the celibate male Essenes, who held their property in common, dwelt “in no one town, but settle in large numbers in every one.”⁴⁶ However, Josephus wrote after the massive upheaval of the Jewish revolt against Rome (AD 66–70), which led to huge dispersal of population from Judaea, especially during the long siege of Jerusalem (AD 68–70). I am inclined therefore, in view of the many specific connections of Essenes to Judaea in ancient sources, to lay more weight on the earlier description of Essene settlement of Philo (d. AD 45). Philo wrote that the celibate male Essenes lived “in many towns of Judaea, and in many villages in large and numerous societies.”⁴⁷ I therefore take the view that Essenes dwelt mainly, or perhaps even exclusively, in Judaea.⁴⁸

Closely communitarian forms of living had developed in Judaea because its social, economic and religious world was somewhat different

⁴⁴ Cf. John 18:10, 15–17, 26 (only John knows the name of the high priest’s servant Malchus and about a kinsman of Malchus; the Beloved Disciple was known to the high priest), etc. Cf. Capper, “With the Oldest Monks...”, pp. 8–10.

⁴⁵ Capper, “With the Oldest Monks...” Cf. Eugen Ruckstuhl, ‘Zur Chronologie der Leidensgeschichte Jesu, I–II’, in *Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt*, 10 (1985), pp. 27–61, and 11 (1986), pp. 97–129, reprinted in *idem, Jesus Im Horizont der Evangelien* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1988) pp. 101–184; see also John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), p. 237, cf. p. 205 and the powerful argument of pp. 234–236.

⁴⁶ Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.4 §124

⁴⁷ Philo, *Apology for the Jews*, §1

⁴⁸ On this see especially Brian J. Capper, ‘Essene Community Houses and Jesus’ Early Community,’ in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Jesus and Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 472–502, esp. pp. 473–479; and ‘The New Covenant in Southern Palestine at the Arrest of Jesus.’

from that of Galilee. The differences emerged from the more isolated, inland character of Judaea, combined with its ancient historic importance as the homeland of the Jews and its sanctity as the *temenos* of the Temple, where God dwelt among his people. Jerusalem and Judaea exercised a centripetal attraction to those Jews who sought a higher, virtuoso form of piety, while this attraction conflicted with the normal hardships of agrarian life. Agrarian society is typically subject to overpopulation and land shortage. Overpopulation tended to disperse the ancient Jewish people, who refused to practise infanticide, to the trading centres of the coast and wherever else in the world outside Palestine economic opportunities presented themselves. The community of property of the early Jerusalem church reflects this specifically Judaeian social milieu and the ways through which many Judaeans had long responded to the economic problems of the age. The land of Galilee was more fertile than Judaea, and its trade routes and good connections to the coast afforded more opportunities for economic expansion, for example through Herod the Great's nearby construction of the seaport of Caesarea. By contrast, Judaea was a land-locked, rugged, semi-arid inland region. A relatively small area geographically, off the major trade routes, its religious and social world was dominated by its massive Temple. It had a long history as a Temple state, ruled by its clergy.⁴⁹ I would argue that in consequence ideals of holiness and consecration dominated the Judaeian religious and social world in an almost totalitarian fashion, more extensively than they did the Galilean milieu. In Judaea, rather than in Galilee, the high honour attaching to forms of virtuoso religion led many

⁴⁹ The consequences of this socio-geographic differentiation were worked out by my student Timothy Ling, *The Judaeian Poor and the Fourth Gospel*, see esp. pp. 78–97; cf. also his 'Virtuoso Religion and the Judaeian Social World,' in Louise J. Lawrence and Mario I. Aguilar, eds., *Anthropology and Biblical Studies: Avenues of Approach* (Leiden: Deo Publishing, 2004), pp. 227–258.

readily to participate in a socio-religious exchange which yielded the possibilities of family life and personal economic advancement for acceptance into the elite of virtuoso paragons of piety and sanctity.

The particular Judaeian response to the common problems of subsistence in the ancient agrarian world took a highly distinctive form. In Judaea, the Essene movement developed widespread and well understood forms of regulated economic sharing, in which many laypersons held no personal property, imitating an ideal of priestly holiness. Priests, the descendants of Aaron, were not to have an inheritance in the land, but to live from the sacrifices and offerings to the Temple (Numbers 18: 8–13, 20). Ezekiel’s ideal description of the heavenly Temple emphasises that the priests have no ‘possession’ apart from God (44:28–45:5); Numbers 18:20 has ‘portion’ where Ezekiel speaks of ‘possession’ (NRSV ‘holding’).⁵⁰ Real priests while on service in the Jerusalem Temple lived a common life, eating from the common sacrifices and wearing vestments from the common treasury (cf. Ezekiel 44:19).⁵¹ Most priests did not own land in the second Temple period, though we know of exceptions such as the wealthy Josephus (cf. his *Life*, §422).⁵² Such glaring exceptions amongst the elite may have contributed to a rigorous view amongst pietist groups. Only a small proportion of

⁵⁰ Cf. Otto Betz, ‘Le ministère cultuel dans la secte de Qumran et dans le Christianisme primitif,’ in J. van der Ploeg, ed., *La Secte de Qumran et les origines du Christianisme* (Brussels: Desclée de Brouwer, 1959), pp. 163–202, see pp. 177–179.

⁵¹ The earliest evidence is from the Palestinian Talmud, *Shekalim* 4:1, where a garment made for a priest to officiate at Temple services must be donated to the congregation of priests before he may wear it. Maimonides comments that even salt or wood used in offerings, if brought by the individual priest from his home, had first to be donated to the congregational treasuries before it may be used: *The Code of Maimonides* VIII, *The Book of the Temple Service*, translated by M. Lewittes (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1957), pp. 71 and 149 (Treatise II:8:7 and Treatise IV:5:13). Cf. Exodus 29:24; Leviticus 2:2–3; 1 Samuel 2:12–17.

⁵² Cf. Sanders, *Judaism*, pp. 77 and 503 n. 1.

Essene celibate, property-sharing males were priests,⁵³ but in their many small communities no one owned personal property and ideally all ate from a sacred meal communally, following ritual purification, like the priests in the Temple.⁵⁴ The common stores of garments in the small Essene virtuoso communities⁵⁵ may be compared with the common stock of priestly garments in the Temple treasury. The community of goods of Essene virtuosi, which owed much in its motivations to the economic difficulties of the age, found scriptural and traditional legitimation for its economic form in this creative synthesis, imitation and development of scripture and traditional patterns of priestly religious action. Essene virtuosi, many of whom were laypersons, became ideal priests.

This pattern of social organisation was long established in Judaea by the first century AD. A prestigious ‘upper echelon’ of more than four thousand celibate male Essenes, lived with each other, I believe mainly in Judaea, in full community of property.⁵⁶ On most days they worked as labourers and artisans in the fields of local estate owners.⁵⁷ They shared common meals with each other in the evenings,⁵⁸ open-handedly entertaining members of the order from elsewhere, who may have travelled to find work or disseminate news.⁵⁹ Since the poor might become ‘ideal priests’, we observe again virtuoso religion’s capacity to create within its liminal social structures a reverse image of the social and

⁵³ 1QS VI: 3–4; Josephus *Jewish War*, 2.8.9 §146.

⁵⁴ Cf. Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8 §§129–133; 1QS V:13–14; VI: 2–6, 16–17, 24–25; VII: 18–20; 1Q28a II: 11–22.

⁵⁵ Philo, *That Every Good Man is Free*, §86; *Apology for the Jews*, §12

⁵⁶ Philo, *That Every Good Man is Free*, §75; Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.1.5 §§20–21. Although these texts clearly enumerate only *male celibate* Essenes, they are often wrongly taken to number the *whole* Essene movement at ‘over four thousand’. This misreading drastically diminishes appreciation of the scale and importance of Essenism in the Judaeian social and religious world.

⁵⁷ Cf. Philo, *Apology for the Jews* §§4–9; cf. Capper, ‘The New Covenant in Southern Palestine,’ pp. 95–98.

⁵⁸ Philo, *Apology for the Jews*, §§10–11.

⁵⁹ Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.4 §§124–125.

economic relations in surrounding society. While according to Ezekiel and the Law of Moses priests should have no land, now the poor who have no land become ‘priests’. This ‘holy core’ of Essene *virtuosi* was probably distributed most densely through the perhaps two hundred villages and towns of the Judaeian landscape in small communities of ten or more.⁶⁰ It seems also to have occupied an important centre on the southwest hill of Jerusalem, the traditional location of the “Upper Room” where Jesus ate his last supper with his disciples, where Holy Spirit came upon post-Easter believers in Jesus at Pentecost, and the central location of the first Jerusalem Church and its reputed property-sharing practice – a highly suggestive coincidence.⁶¹ The order of Essene *virtuosi* was associated with a ‘second order’ of marrying Essenes,⁶² which was probably much larger. The ancient sources give us no figures for this group, but since celibacy is always a less popular option than marriage, it may have numbered several tens of thousands, perhaps more.

Hartmut Stegemann, one of the principal early researchers of the Dead Sea Scrolls, came to conclude that the Essene movement was the ‘main Jewish union of the second Temple period’.⁶³ I have argued, by a

⁶⁰ 1QS VI.3–4; Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.9 §146.

⁶¹ Cf. Otto Betz and Rainer Riesner, *Verschönerung um Qumran. Jesus, die Schriftrollen, und der Vatikan*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Knauer, 2007), pp. 226–238; Riesner, ‘Essener und Urkirche auf dem Südwesthügel Jerusalems (Zion III),’ in Nikodemus C. Schnabel, ed., *Laetere Jerusalem* (Münster: Aschendorf, 2006), pp. 200–234; Riesner, *Essener und Urgemeinde in Jerusalem* (Giessen: Brunnen, 1998), pp. 2–55; Riesner, ‘Jesus, the Primitive Community, and the Essene Quarter of Jerusalem,’ in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), pp. 198–234. See also Brian J. Capper, ‘The Palestinian Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods,’ pp. 341–350, “‘With the Oldest Monks...’” pp. 19–36, and ‘The Holy Congregation in Jerusalem,’ in Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam, eds., *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), Vol. 1, pp. 369–370.

⁶² Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.13 §§160–161.

⁶³ H. Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 140–153, and his ‘The Qumran Essenes – Local Members of the Main Jewish Union in Late Second Temple Times,’ in J. Trebolle Barrera and L. Vegas Montaner, eds., *The Madrid Qumran Congress* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), Vol. 1, pp. 83–166.

statistical method, that Essenism was probably the dominant social and religious force amongst the labourers, artisans and needy of the villages and towns of rural Judaea. I would also suggest that the Essenes were well represented amongst the poor urban population of Jerusalem.⁶⁴ In the following I adhere to my case, fully argued elsewhere, for the widespread and predominant position of Essenism in the religious landscape of rural Judaea, and its high significance for the care of the poor and economic redistribution in the Jerusalem area and Judaea. The sociological analytical perspective of virtuoso religion helps us to understand that there were similarities between Essenism and the Jesus movement in both their binary economic structures and their sensitivities towards the poor.

In my view we may observe that distinctive forms of virtuoso religious life, which reduced the production of children while making available extra resources for the nurture of adoptees, functioned within the macroeconomy of Judaea and had importance too for the economic life of the Jewish people in the adjacent regions, and perhaps even more widely. Overpopulation and scarcity of resources characterised the ancient agrarian economy. The needy were frequently compelled to migration, perhaps to seek work in the large coastal cities, to soldiering, or to work on large estates as servants or slaves. Women were frequently forced into prostitution. Essene virtuosity offered different options for the needy. Children who could not be fed in poor families could be adopted into Essene communities, where they received training in work, economic security, and education in holy tradition.⁶⁵ By this route many male children of the poor came as adults to renounce the pleasures and social standing of normal family life, enjoying instead highly honoured status as

⁶⁴ See Capper, 'Essene Community Houses and Jesus' Early Community,' and 'The New Covenant in Southern Palestine at the Arrest of Jesus.'

⁶⁵ Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.2 §120.

Essene *virtuosi* and a replacement form of fictive kinship in an extensive and loving brotherhood.⁶⁶ Since numerous males did not father children, but cared for those of others, Essenism, perhaps alongside other virtuoso groups unknown to us, came to function, I believe mainly in the Judaeen heartland, as an important economic compensating mechanism against overpopulation and undernourishment. There may also have been honoured Essene orders for widows and life-long celibate women.⁶⁷

The population of Jerusalem in the first century AD was c. 60,000–80,000.⁶⁸ The population of rural Judaea was of a similar size, the two hundred or so villages and towns averaging a few hundred souls each, including children.⁶⁹ I would judge that Judaeen Essene communities contained at least the larger portion of the more than four thousand celibate male Essenes. Three thousand would have been sufficient to form viable communities of between ten and fifteen in most, if not all, of the towns and villages of the region. Along with their adopted trainees, such highly distinctive communities may have numbered several per cent of the Judaeen population. If we estimate the Judaeen population at c. 140,000, two to three thousand celibate males with one to two thousand trainees would number about three percent of the region's population, a strikingly large proportion. This powerful, firmly united 'core' of over four thousand skilled, educated and highly disciplined male celibates was supported by, I would suggest, at least several thousand families whose

⁶⁶ Josephus tells us that the Essenes were 'lovers of each other' (*philalleloi*) more than other Jewish groups, *Jewish War* 2.8.2 §119. Philo emphasizes mutual service in menial tasks, care of the sick, and care of the old by the young, *That Every Good Man is Free*, §§79, 87–88.

⁶⁷ Cf. the 'mothers' of the community in 2Q270 7.i.13–14.

⁶⁸ Cf. Wolfgang Reinhardt, "The Population Size of Jerusalem and the Numerical Growth of the Jerusalem Church," in Bauckham, ed., *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, pp. 237–265.

⁶⁹ Cf. Capper, 'Essene Community Houses,' in Charlesworth, ed., *Jesus and Archaeology*, pp. 473–476 and 492–493.

male heads belonged to the second Essene order. For every male child adopted by the Essenes, a reciprocally grateful local family may have attached itself to the Essene movement. It would not be surprising if most rural clans and families had come to express gratitude to the Essene movement (or similar communitarian groups unknown to us) by such secondary association. In my view the two main Essene orders, acting in concert, may have dominated the social, political and religious world of Judaea's towns and villages. The surplus wages of only two to three thousand virtuosi (who had no children of their own to feed) combined with contributions from the second Essene order and perhaps patronage too from some local wealthy families would probably have been enough to support the indigent five to ten per cent of the Judaeian population, the probable typical size of the underclass in agrarian society.⁷⁰ The longstanding, honoured presence of the celibate male Essene order throughout Judaea, its intimate connections through adoption with the local population, and its willingness to assist rural families facing economic crisis when there were too many mouths to feed,⁷¹ may indeed mean that much of the married rural population, and a goodly portion of the married labouring and artisan population of Jerusalem, had been absorbed into the second Essene order by the time of Jesus.

When we find, therefore, in the *Acts of the Apostles*, the early church of Jerusalem sharing their property and joining together in daily common meals, we are observing a well established feature of Judaeian cultural and economic life, practised by the primary Essene order and perhaps other groups too. It was, of course, a 'virtuoso' way of life practised by only a very small minority of Judaea's inhabitants. None the

⁷⁰ Cf. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, p. 283; Capper, 'The New Covenant in Southern Palestine,' pp. 104–108 and 'Jesus and Essene Community Houses,' pp. 492–496.

⁷¹ Cf. Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.2 §120 (adoption) and 2.8.6 §134 (almsgiving and assistance outside the individual Essene's group).

less, it was a mode of life, expressive of complete personal consecration and holiness, which most Judaeans will have respected and understood, and with which many had personal connections through membership in the secondary Essene order or awareness of through connections with similar groups not directly known to us. This form of holy, communal life had been lived out, before the eyes of all, by the influential, venerable order of celibate male Essene *virtuosi*, and perhaps by others too, for approaching two centuries at the time the Christian church began. Shared property and common meals, along with regular prayer and study at the feet of esteemed teachers who held no personal property, were aspects of a social form widespread in Judaea which expressed an ideal of complete holiness and personal consecration, offering the possibility of high honour to the poor who committed to the virtuoso life. Such Judaeans had long had the capacity to stimulate generosity on the part of the wealthy towards the poor; I would suggest that in particular the Essene work of taking in, feeding and teaching children from destitute families may have frequently attracted elite patronage.

The earliest post-Easter group of Jesus' followers had, according to Acts, experienced a massive outpouring of God's Spirit, enjoying across its whole community inspirations of prophecy and glossolalia (2:1–41). It is hardly surprising that we find the expanding community of believers, recently impressed with an extraordinary sense of God's holiness and powerful presence, implementing the local Judaeans ideal of communalised, holy living, renouncing personal possessions and devoting themselves, after their working day, to prayer, study and common meals (Acts 2:42–47; cf. 1QS VI: 2–3, 6–7). This development was also the appropriate way to continue the common life initiated by Jesus' formation of his traveling disciples, with its renunciation and common purse, in a local, settled community.

4. Jesus' critique of wealth and poverty

From the understanding of the typical social pattern of agrarian society outlined above, much in Jesus' teaching about possessions becomes accessible.⁷² Jesus' view was framed within the simple contrast of "rich" versus "poor" (cf. Luke 6:20–26), reflective of the essential social bifurcation between unjust rich and struggling poor which had already characterized strands of Jewish apocalyptic, in which terrible judgement awaited the land-grabbing and luxuriously living wealth-elite who had forfeited their place within God's covenant by their wicked exploitation of the Jewish peasantry (cf. 1 Enoch 91–92; 95:7; 96:3–8; 97:1–2; 98:11–15; 100:6–7; 107). Jesus, too, spoke therefore of "unrighteous mammon" and (Luke 16:9, 11) and of the punishment in fiery *She'ol* of an owner of great estates who has indulged himself in the fine garments and rich feasting of the elite while neglecting a poor sick man who had languished at his courtyard's gate (Luke 16:9, 11, 19–31, cf. 1 Enoch 21–22; 63:10). Perhaps most modern western readers of Jesus would locate themselves in a middle class of intermediate wealth, the nearest ancient equivalent of which (the "retainer" class) was far too small and too lacking in independence, over against the wealthy landed elite that it served, to

⁷² For further background on the comparisons in this section see Brian J. Capper, art. 'Wealth,' in Leslie J. Houlden, ed., *Jesus in History, Culture and Thought: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA/ Denver, CO/ Oxford: ABC Clio, 2003), Volume 2, pp. 864–869, and 'The Church as New Covenant of Effective Economics: The Social Origins of Mutually Supportive Christian Community', pp. 83–102; Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of its First Century* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999); William Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994); R. David Kaylor, *Jesus the Prophet: His Vision of the Kingdom on Earth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994); Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1987/ Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993); Donald E. Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day* (Lewiston NY, Edwin Mellen, 1986).

figure in simple social description, which spoke merely of the ‘rich’ and the ‘poor’ (*hoi plousioi/hoi penetai*) or in such parallel typical word-pairs as ‘few/many’ (*hoi oligoi/hoi polloi*) and ‘powerful/weak’ (*hoi dynatoi* [or *dynatotai*]/*hoi asthenai*). Mere retainers did not count in the elite class who were lauded with such descriptions as the ‘worthy’ (*hoi chrestoi*), the ‘notables’ (*hoi gnorimoi*), the ‘well-born’ (*hoi gennaioi, hoi eugeneis*), the ‘finest’ (*hoi aristoi*), and ‘the best off’ (*hoi dexiotatoi*). Indeed, we find that Jesus framed a parable around a disloyal, dishonest estate steward who, on losing his status as a trusted retainer, had to contemplate his looming, rapid, indeed potentially instant descent to poverty below the level of subsistence laborers, whose physical he could not imitate, to the feared state of begging along with others of the completely disenfranchised underclass (Luke 16:1–15).⁷³

Jesus expressed his concern for those desperately seeking subsistence, illustrated God’s graciousness, and encouraged landowners to similar graciousness, by speaking of a vineyard owner who generously assisted some impoverished day laborers. These had waited at the market for work for much of the day, finding none, yet he gave them a full day’s pay so that both they and their families could eat that evening (Matthew 20:1–15). Within the clearly stressed Galilean subsistence economy, Jesus taught his disciples a prayer which included a prominent petition for a “daily ration of bread” sufficient for survival (Greek *arton*, “bread”, and *epiousion*, perhaps “daily”, “needful”, Matthew 6:11; Luke 11:3). He was remembered for his striking willingness to dine with prostitutes, brutalized women of the Galilean underclass (Matthew 9:9–13, cf. 21:31–

⁷³ For some account of this typical ancient terminology see Polly Low, *Athenian Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), pp. 257–259. In connection with this terminology Low comments on ‘the basic division of the Greek states into two broad economic and social categories’ (pp. 258–259).

32; Mark 2:13–17; Luke 5:27–32 cf. 7:36–50).⁷⁴ Through his parable of the rich fool he urged the well off to avoid hoarding and to share with the poor (Luke 12:16–21, cf. Gospel of Thomas 63). He counseled the rich to generous meal fellowship with those who could not reciprocate their generosity (Luke 14:1–12), and urged all to generous and unostentatious, honour-forsaking almsgiving (Matthew 6:2–4). He seems to have urged generous release of the hopelessly indebted (Matthew 6:12 and 18:21–35). In Jerusalem he overturned the tables of the Temple’s moneychangers and drove out waiting, expensive sacrificial beasts, apparently in protest against the avarice of the Temple hierarchy, which demanded payment of the Temple tax in pagan coinage of exceptionally high silver content and profited from the monopolistic Temple trade in sacrifices.⁷⁵ To understand more fully, however, Jesus’ theme of renunciation of property and the community of property of his group of traveling disciples, we must assess his practice from the point of view of virtuoso religion.

5. Jesus’ traveling disciples as prophetic virtuoso group

If we ask what was the precedent in Old Testament and Jewish tradition for the formation of virtuoso religious groups, we find a model which clearly gave both John the Baptist and Jesus scriptural precedent for forming the virtuoso circles of assistant-disciples with whom they seem to have lived in permanent close fellowship of life. In Israelite and older

⁷⁴ Cf. K. E. Corley, art. ‘Prostitute,’ in Joel B. Green et al., eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 643.

⁷⁵ Cf. Richard J. Bauckham, ‘Jesus’ Demonstration in the Temple’, in Barnabas Lindars, ed., *Law and Religion: Essays on the Place of the Law in Israel and Early Christianity* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1988), pp. 72–89 and 171–176; Marcus Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994), pp. 112–116.

Jewish tradition, the religious virtuosi who regularly stood in opposition to the hierocrats of ritualistic religion, and the political elite's tendency to accumulate all land and resources, were the prophets. The early Israelite prophets formed guilds which may fairly be termed virtuoso religious groups; their religious practice was different from that normal for the populace, and though they did not hold institutional religious office they functioned, on account of their acknowledged, experimentally demonstrable spiritual giftings, as an accepted part of the wider religious community.

The early bands of prophets used musical instruments and probably dance techniques to enter the prophetic mode (1 Samuel 10:1–13; 19:18–24). In this we see a demonstration of the intensity of practice and perceived spiritual giftings which give religious virtuosi reputation in the eyes of their popular audience. Elisha too used music to induce prophecy (2 Kings 3:13–20). While some biblical scholars will accept the view of the text that such techniques genuinely brought on the activity of the God's Spirit, others will side with the more anti-supernaturalist stance of the translators of the New Revised Standard Version, who understand the verb 'prophecy' in these early texts to indicate a self-induced psychological state of 'prophetic frenzy' (10:5–6, 10, 13; 19:20–21, 23–24). There may of course be truth in both positions. What is significant for our present purpose is that these incidents of virtuoso religious practice were presented as legitimate in received Scripture. Around the time of Jesus and John the Baptist there were attempts within Jewish pietist groups to imitate the model of the prophetic guilds offered by Scripture, especially the groups around the powerful peripatetic 'sign prophets' Elijah and Elisha, which seem to have offered models for both John the Baptist and the traveling disciple group of Jesus himself. Jesus'

group seems to have sought intensely to imitate the charismatic practice of Elijah and Elisha.

I would suggest that a primary purpose of the intense fellowship of life Jesus created in his traveling party was intensive training in the virtue and understanding he thought necessary for the development of spiritual powers like those of the Old Testament sign prophets. Jesus intended his trained disciples to perform the works of power that characterized his own activity, and sent them out to do such works once trained. Their training was served by separation from secular work and renunciation of personal property, and an intense fellowship of life which extended from common prayer, worship and teaching to common meals arising from the sharing of property in a common purse. Jesus' well-remembered focus on questions of wealth and poverty strongly suggests that Jesus intended the practices of renunciation and sharing of his traveling party to serve the ideological purpose of emphasizing to his audience the need of the age for selfless sharing and economic redistribution.

Jesus' calling of his disciples, an important locus of his call to renunciation, is closely modeled on Elijah's call of Elisha. Just as Elijah called Elisha from his secular work and forbade him to return to it, so Jesus called disciples away from their previous work as fishermen or collectors of tolls. The called 'follow.' Occasionally those Jesus called hesitated or refused. The choice of joining Jesus' virtuoso lifestyle was therefore in all cases voluntary (Mark 1:16–20; 2:13–14; 10:17–31; cf. 1 Kings 19:19–21; Matthew 8:19–22; Luke 9:59–62; John 1:35–51). As with Elijah's call of Elisha, the bond between caller and called in the Gospels is lifelong and itinerant, unlike the association of discipleship in

Rabbinism, which was temporary and located in the stable abode of the house of study.⁷⁶

Like Elijah and Elisha, the disciples whom Jesus sent out to preach, heal, and exorcise demons were to operate as peripatetics dependent on the hospitality of others (Mark 6:6b–13; Matthew 10; Luke 9:1–6, 10; 10:1–20; cf. 1 Kings 17:9). The disciples Jesus sent out on mission were certainly conscious of the model in Scripture of the early peripatetic sign prophets. This is most clearly apparent in the question James and John put to Jesus when some Samaritans rejected his message. They believed that Jesus had so completely equipped them in the exercise of miraculous spiritual power that they could, at Jesus' command, imitate Elijah's most spectacular and powerful sign, the calling down of destructive fire from heaven (Luke 9:51–56; cf. 1 Kings 18:20–40; 2 Kings 1:9–14).

The activities of Elijah and Elisha provided extensive, wider legitimating background in Scripture for the formation of first-century virtuoso prophetic groups. Elijah, Elisha, Jesus and John the Baptist were all celibates. Both Jesus (Matthew 16:24, 21:11, 46; Mark 6:15, 8:28; Luke 7:16) and John the Baptist (Matthew 21:26; Mark 11:32) were identified by their popular audience as prophets because of their personal charisma. Jesus' miraculous powers confirmed him as a prophet in popular understanding. John the Baptist's use of Elijah symbolism in his garb was accepted by his audience. John the Baptist imitated Elijah in his rough clothing (Mark 1:6; cf. 2 Kings 1:8; Zechariah 13:4); Jesus identified him as a prophet (Matthew 11:7–10) and compared him with Elijah (Matthew 11:14; cf. Malachi 4:5). Neither possessed high official status; both found themselves in opposition to institutional religious and

⁷⁶ Martin Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and His Followers* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), pp. 4–5, 16–18, 31–32, 42–57; cf. Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (London: SCM, 1998), pp. 213–217.

political power. While John and his group apparently did no miracles (John 10:41) Jesus compared himself, on account of his works of power, with the great Old Testament sign prophets Elijah and Elisha (Luke 4:24–27). The range of miracles performed by Elijah and Elisha forms a close analogy to the range of Jesus’ attested miraculous powers, which included supernatural knowledge at a distance (Mark 2:5; Luke 9:47; John 2:24–25; cf. 2 Kings 5:26; 6:8–12), prophecy of future events (cf. 2 Kings 7:1–20; 17:14–19) numerous miracles including healings (cf. 2 Kings 5), multiplication of food (Mark 8:1–10; cf. 2 Kings 5), power over nature (Mark 4:35–41; 5:45–52; John 6:16–25; cf. 1 Kings 18:36–39; 2 Kings 1:8–15) and raisings from the dead (Mark 5:35–43; Luke 7:11–17; cf. 1 Kings 17:17–24; 2 Kings 4:8–21; also Matthew 27:52 cf. 2 Kings 13:21) and apparently visionary experience, ecstasy and hearing God’s voice (Mark 3:10–11; 9:1–13; Luke 10:17–21; cf. 1 Kings 19:7–18; 21:17; 22:19–24; 2 Kings 1:3–4, 15; 2 Kings 6:13–17). Jesus identified himself as a prophet (Matthew 13:57; Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24) and his disciples sent out on mission as his prophetic servants (Matthew 10:40–42), whose precursors were the persecuted ancient prophets (Matthew 5:12). He once instructed those he sent out to greet no one on the road, as Elisha had bade his servant Gehazi when on an urgent mission (Luke 10:4; cf. 2 Kings 4:29).

We know little about the inner operation of the ‘sons of the prophets’ of the time of Elijah and Elisha, but there are at least two hints of communal economy. According to 2 Kings 6:1–2, a group of ‘sons of the prophets’ lived in a common house under the charge of Elisha. At Gilgal, Elisha commanded the guild who sat under his charge to “Put the large pot on, and make some stew for the sons of the prophets” (2 Kings 4:38–41). Elijah and Elisha appear not to have depended on personal property, but to have lived by the generous patronage of their supporters

(1 Kings 17:8–24; 2 Kings 4:8–37). We have noted above that Jean Seguy observed how virtuoso groups may model in their structure an alternative, perfect society. In my view, as Jesus sought to address the Jewish people, he developed the scriptural model of a peripatetic prophetic group to suit his purposes, also selectively drawing upon elements of virtuoso practice amongst his contemporaries, including the Essenes. Jesus' disciples James and John reveal the challenge of virtuoso religion to hierocracy in their request to Jesus that they might occupy the best thrones next to his when Jesus established his kingdom in Jerusalem (Mark 10:35–37). This question shows that the Twelve understood themselves as an elite who paralleled the phylarchs.⁷⁷ Jesus deliberately chose twelve disciples in order to press an eschatological claim to address the twelve tribes,⁷⁸ and to set a picture of perfect relations in matters of property at the heart of his vision for the renewed nation. In this the pattern of his group goes beyond the scriptural model of prophecy, and complements the absolute claim he makes for himself in other ways over against the sequence of mere prophets (cf. Mark 12:1–12).⁷⁹ Renunciation of property and practical community of goods figure more prominently in the depiction of his traveling party than in the scriptural presentation of the similar practice of the early Israelite prophetic group. These differences show the adaptation of the scriptural model to Jesus' own purposes and to the needs of the age, and the prominence of the problems of poverty and wealth amongst those needs. Jesus pressed his points about wealth, possessions and poverty upon his audience with a lived,

⁷⁷ Cf. William Horbury, 'The Twelve and the Phylarchs,' in his *Messianism amongst Jews and Christians* (New York: T. and T. Clark, 2003), pp. 157–188.

⁷⁸ Cf. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Vol. 3, *Companions and Competitors* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2001), pp. 125–197.

⁷⁹ Cf. Martin Hengel, 'Das Gleichnis von den Weingärtnern Mc. 12, 1–12 im Lichte der Zenonpapyri und der rabbinischen Gleichnisse,' *ZNW* 59 (1986), pp. 1–39.

ideal alternative in the distinctive social pattern of his traveling group, an antistructural utopia served as an observable critique of greed.

6. The Jesus movement's binary mode of practice with respect to property

Jesus proclaimed in a memorable saying: 'You cannot serve God and mammon' (Luke 16:13; Matthew 6:24). Martin Hengel has suggested that 'Jesus attacks mammon with the utmost severity where it has captured men's hearts, because this gives it demonic character by which it blinds men's eyes to God's will – in concrete terms, to their neighbour's needs.' Hengel emphasises the preservation of the Aramaic *mammon* in the Greek sayings tradition: 'Perhaps the early church left this Semitic loan-word untranslated because they regarded it as the name of an idol: the service of Mammon is idolatry.'⁸⁰ We may compare how Paul calls greed 'idolatry' (Colossians 3:5).⁸¹ Possessions may seduce human beings away from the exclusive worship of which only God is worthy. Jesus emphasised that the 'deceitfulness of wealth' (Mark 4:19) might choke his word of repentance. However, while renunciation of property was definitely a part of the movement Jesus began, he did not require renunciation of property of all who believed in him. Only those he chose for the spiritual calling of teaching, healing and wielding authority over the demonic world were to renounce property. Such disciples were to give up all that they had, selling their possessions and giving away the proceeds to the poor (Luke 12:32–34, 14:33). They left all to follow him (Mark 1:16–20, 2:13–17; Luke 5:1–11). Like Jesus on his preaching

⁸⁰ Martin Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church* (London: SCM, 1974), pp. 24 and 30.

⁸¹ Cf. Brian S. Rosner, *Greed as Idolatry: the origin and meaning of a Pauline metaphor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

tours, their connections with the ordinary world were in effect to be severed (Matthew 8:19–22; Luke 9:57–62).

As we have noted, we find in the Essene movement too a binary social structure, comprising both marrying groups and the ‘upper echelon’ of male celibates who renounced property. These, as the *Rule of the Community* shows, were more intensely involved with study and prayer.⁸² Josephus tells us that the celibate male Essenes when traveling from one place to another would be welcomed and offered complete hospitality by the community of celibates they found at their destination. He explains that *in consequence* of the certain provision which awaited them they carried ‘nothing whatever with them on their journeys, except arms as a protection against brigands’ and goes on to emphasize the frugality of these celibate males in changing neither garments nor shoes until they are worn with age.⁸³

Josephus’ description of the male celibate Essenes’ mode of travel and frugal dress is a very close analogue to the ‘mission charge’ passages of the Gospels. Jesus forbade those who preached his message to carry food, money, wallet and changes of garments and shoes.⁸⁴ Nothing in Jesus’ instructions definitely suggests that he desired onlookers to note any distinction between the mode of travel of those who proclaimed his message and traveling celibate male Essenes.⁸⁵ We may fairly conclude that Jesus’ instructions concerning possessionless travel for the purpose

⁸² Cf. 1QS VI.6–8.

⁸³ Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.4 §§124–127.

⁸⁴ Mark 6:8–9; Luke 9:3, 10:4 and 22:35; Matthew 10:9–10.

⁸⁵ Josephus says the celibate male Essenes always wore white; we do not know if Jesus’ disciples always wore white when on mission. At Matthew 10:10 and Luke 9:3 Jesus’ missionaries are not to travel with a staff, while at Mark 6.8 they are allowed a staff. It is likely that the earlier version is correct, the staff being carried as protection against attack. As noted above, Josephus explains that the traveling male celibate Essene carried arms for protection. At Luke 22:38 Jesus’ traveling group show him two swords they evidently carried for protection.

of preaching expressed largely the same values with respect to property as the possessionless travel of Essene renouncers, perhaps practiced by other Jewish virtuosi too, and may have imitated such Jewish models rather than the Cynic mode of travel, as is currently often claimed.⁸⁶

Jesus allowed those not called to wield spiritual authority to retain private property. Such supporters were to be generous and unostentatious in their almsgiving, and to lend willingly to those who asked (Matthew 5:42; 6:2–4). Implicit in the Gospel narratives are local supporters who offered hospitality to Jesus and his traveling party, and whose houses often became the venue for teaching. Such local figures of good standing (Matthew 10:11, cf. Mark 6:10) also hosted those disciples sent out by Jesus in pairs (Mark 6:7; Luke 10:1) to preach, heal and exorcise demons.

According to Luke, Jesus was supported on his own preaching tours by the patronage of women of means, who comprised part of his traveling party. These included Joanna the wife of Chuza, senior steward of the estates of Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee (Luke 8:1–3). Jesus demanded that those with wealth generously assist the destitute and undernourished. The position of Jesus and the Twelve as religious virtuosi who practised renunciation of property and community of goods enabled their successful exhortation of those who had to share with those who had not. We see the success of Jesus in sponsoring such sharing in the story of Zacchaeus, who, gladdened by Jesus' presence in his house, both repented of his misdealings as a senior tax-collector and made restitution, and gave half his wealth to the poor (Luke 19:1–10). As one who practised renunciation and community of goods, Jesus was able to

⁸⁶ Comparison is often made between the wandering Cynic philosopher and Jesus' mission charge. It is worth noting that several descriptions of the Cynics garb include mention of the wallet, into which alms begged of hearers would be placed. Cf. Arrian, *Epictetus*, 3.22 §10. The traveling Rabbi took bag, staff and cloak, *pYeb.* 16.7, *bBaba Bathra* 133b.

employ the sharpest devices in his exhortation of the wealthy to sharing without fear of rebuke. Though engaged in full-time religious activity, no longer practising his craft as a *tektôn* and supported by wealthy patrons, Jesus was never accused of hypocrisy, except perhaps on the occasion of the ‘glutton and drunkard’ accusation, perhaps meant to accuse him of the despised luxury of the wealthy with whom he sometimes associated. This accusation was easily parried and never stuck (Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34). Jesus always successfully maintained his honourable reputation as a religious virtuoso of impeccable character. Hence he was able powerfully to rebuke with his parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16–21, cf. Gospel of Thomas 63) the greed of a farmers who selfishly hoarded surplus grain and other goods, looking forward to a life of easy luxury. From justified moral high ground, he threatened owners of great estates who indulged themselves the fine garments and rich feasting with his parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). Despite the strictures of the Law and the Prophets, the parable tells of a rich man who ignored the needs and appeals of a poor sick man who has languished at his gate. He is condemned to unmitigated torment, while awaiting resurrection and final judgement, in a fiery corner of the place of the dead (cf. 1 Enoch 21–22).

Such firm teaching means that we should expect, as we see the transition from Jesus’ traveling party in the Gospels to the settled church of Acts, to find a continuation of virtuoso practice including renunciation of property, community of goods, and generosity from the wealthy patrons around Jesus’ growing group, which is what we appear to find (Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–36).⁸⁷

⁸⁷ For an analysis of the community of goods of the early Jerusalem church from the point of view of patronage, see Richard S. Ascough, ‘Benefaction Gone Wrong: The Sin of Ananias and Sapphira in Context.’

We have noted that the disciple Judas administered the common purse of Jesus' traveling group of disciples (John 12:6; 13:29). We may assume that the monetary support of Jesus' wealthy and high status women patrons (Luke 8:1–3) was received into this purse. Disbursements for the poor appear to have been made from this common purse during Jesus' ministry. According to Mark, some present at Jesus' anointing at Bethany imagined that the costly perfumed oil poured over Jesus might have been sold and the proceeds donated to the poor, probably through the auspices of Judas as the group's treasurer (14:4–5). Matthew tells us these detractors were disciples (26:8–9), while John identifies Judas as the lone, or perhaps principal, scolding voice. John tells us that at Jesus' last supper some of his disciples, after Judas' departure following Jesus' cryptic words to him, thought Jesus had instructed him to make purchases for the group's needs at the feast, or to give alms to the poor. This suggests a pattern of both common expenditure on the virtuoso group's behalf and disbursements for the poor from the common purse (12:4–6). When Jesus asked Philip where bread might be purchased to feed a large crowd near Passover, Philip exclaimed that two hundred *denarii* would not suffice. Jesus' question was intended to test Philip (John 6:5–7), perhaps because it was not usually beyond the financial resources of the common purse to aid the needy in Jesus' audience.

We may assume that Jesus frequently sanctioned expenditures for the needy outside his immediate group from his group's common purse. Very substantial benefactions would have been within the means of Jesus' wealthy elite women patrons. Jesus often appears dining and teaching at meals; the existence of the common purse suggests that his traveling disciples did not always dine at others' expense. I would take the view, rather, that the needy probably received assistance at open meals financed from the traveling group's purse, though certain meals

were private to Jesus and his traveling group. We may assume that Jesus was able to offer more assistance to the needy than food alone, through the resources of the common purse, and that he was often influential enough to precipitate generosity from local (and perhaps distant) benefactors when resources proved too little to meet all legitimate needs. The complete consecration to service in God's Kingdom of Jesus' mobile party of disciples was expressed, in part, by their possessionless travel and generous common life.

As we have noted, the Essene movement also embraced both religious virtuosi and many who both retained property and married. Josephus called these a 'second order' of Essenes.⁸⁸ Their way of life was regulated by the document known as the *Code of Damascus* (CD) or *Damascus Rule*. The two orders of Essenes together comprised the Essene covenant, which was termed in the *Damascus Rule* the 'new covenant'.⁸⁹ According to the *Rule of the Community* the 'instructor' (*maskîl*) was to 'welcome into the covenant of kindness all those who freely volunteer to carry out God's decrees.'⁹⁰ These marrying members of the wider Essene covenant accepted mutual economic responsibility for each other, to which aim they contributed substantial sums to a central fund regularly:

And this is the rule of the Many, to provide for all their needs: the wages (13) of at least two days each month they shall place into the hands of the Overseer and of the judges. (14) From it they shall give to the injured and with it they shall strengthen the

⁸⁸ Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.13 §§ 160–161.

⁸⁹ CD VI.19; cf. VIII.21; XIX.33–34; XX.10–12.

⁹⁰ 1QS I.7–8. The theme of covenant reappears several times in column I; columns I–III legislate a covenant renewal ceremony, cf. also 4Q255–257, 4Q262 and 5Q11. The version of the Rule reflected by 2Q258 does not include the covenant renewal ceremony. Cf. James C. VanderKam, art. 'Covenant,' in Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam, eds., *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), Vol. 1, pp. 151–155, esp. 153.

hand of the needy and the poor, and the elder (15) who is bowed down, and to the sick and to the prisoner of a foreign people, and to the girl who (16) has no redeemer, and to the youth who has no teacher, and for all the works of the community, and (17) the house of the community (*beth-hacheber*) shall not be deprived of its means.⁹¹

This section of the Essene *Damascus Rule* bears remarkable similarity with a passage from the second century Christian apologist Aristides, who emphasizes the mutual economic support amongst Christians:

Kindliness is their nature. There is no falsehood among them. They love one another. They do not neglect widows. Orphans they rescue from those who are cruel to them. Every one of them who has anything gives ungrudgingly to the one who has nothing. If they see a traveling stranger they bring him under their roof. They rejoice over him as a real brother, for they do not call one another brothers after the flesh, but they know they are brothers in the Spirit and in God. If one of them sees that one of their poor must leave this world, he provides for his burial as well as he can. And if they hear that one of them is imprisoned or oppressed by their opponents for the sake of their Christ's name, all of them take care of all his needs. If possible they set him free. If anyone among them is poor or comes into want while they themselves have nothing to spare, they fast two or three days for him. In this way they can supply the poor man with the food he needs.⁹²

We may note that those whose high degree of mutual economic commitment Aristides describes in such remarkable terms understood themselves to be co-members of a *new covenant*. Paul emphasized, when horrified that some drank while others went hungry at the Christian meal in Corinth, that all were members of a covenant, sealed with Jesus' own blood.⁹³ We would be incorrect to divorce entirely the high degree of

⁹¹ CD XIV.12–17.

⁹² Aristides, *Apology*, 15.

⁹³ 1 Corinthians 11:20–34; cf. especially Luke 22:14–20 (v. 20 also 'new covenant'); also Mark 14:22–25 and Matthew 26:26–29.

economic commitment which emerged amongst the early Christians from its antecedent in social form and high mutual ethical commitment within the covenanted, communitarian form of Judaism we know of as Essenism, with its binary socio-economic pattern. Local Christian congregations too formed only a part of the total social structure of early Christianity through its first century or more. They were served by peripatetic missionaries who appear to have renounced all for the sake of preaching the message of Jesus, and were the founders and spiritual authority over the local congregations, capable of successfully exhorting local wealthy figures, such as these misdemeanants in Corinth, to generosity towards the poor.

7. Community of property in Acts: a home base for apostolic missionaries, focus of virtuoso religious life and centre of ongoing care for the poor.

The Gospels, then, bear witness to receipts from wealthy patrons into the common purse of Jesus' disciple-group, and probably to disbursements for the needs of both Jesus' traveling party and the needy outside this group. We probably find, early in Acts, a continuation of this pattern. All who believed and joined the expanding group of Jesus' disciples 'had all things in common'. Believers sold their possessions; distributions were made to meet the needs of all (2:44–45). We learn that 'as many as owned lands or houses sold them', laying the proceeds at the apostles' feet (4:34–35). The Levite Barnabas sells land (4:36–37), which may indicate a pietistic insistence that Levites and priests should own no land, as in the Essene movement. These events occurred only weeks after Jesus' death and resurrection. Since these accounts appear in Acts, it is easy to conceive them primarily as part of 'Church History', and to look

forward to the later chapters of Acts and the letters of Paul for analogies to help us understand their pattern, rather than to look back to the ministry of Jesus in order to find their direct root in the practice of his traveling party. During the period between Jesus' last Passover and the subsequent Pentecost feast, his disciple-group, according to Luke-Acts, settled in Jerusalem and followed a life of intense, continuous prayer and worship. The group of Jesus' followers, gathered from Galilee and planted in Jerusalem, were somehow billeted together in the guest premises of 'the room upstairs where they were staying'. There, they lived a communal life together, 'constantly devoting themselves to prayer', and so continued the communal sharing initiated by Jesus, their now heavenly master (Acts 1:13–14; cf. Luke 24:49–52; Acts 1:1–5). Their economic pattern of life – based around a common purse into which large donations were received from wealthy patrons, a common purse from which the group lived, a common purse from which the needy might receive support – was not a *novum*. This economic way of life bore the stamp of Jesus' authority and practice, and expressed the continued consecration to him of those who proclaimed him as heavenly Lord. It was also analogous to the economic sharing of many respected Judaeans religious virtuosi.

The sceptical view of the 'community of goods' of Acts 2–6 has found various difficulties with the Acts account, which I will deal with fully in the remaining sections of this treatment. I outline now my overall continuing argument in summary form.⁹⁴ A strong, fair, and historically-minded defence of the historical value of these reports may be shaped along the following lines:

⁹⁴ See notes 1, 30, 48, 95 and 96 for my earlier presentations of the case outlined here.

1) ‘Utopian’ stylizing of these passages in phrases such as holding ‘all things common’ and calling ‘nothing one’s own’ is clearly present, but does not undermine the historical value of the accounts. Philo and Josephus stylize their accounts of Essene virtuosos with a wide variety of motifs drawn from philosophical reflection on the ideal society, but since the discovery of the *Rule of the Community* from Qumran, which shows us from an internal perspective the extensive formal legislation of Essene community of property, such stylizing is no longer taken as a sound argument against the existence of Essene communities which fully shared their property. I would argue that in Acts, too, stylizing after the model of high Greek ideals of sharing cannot disprove the essential historicity of the original formal community of goods of the earliest post-Easter followers of Jesus in Jerusalem.

2) Peter’s challenge to Ananias and Sapphira emphasised that their property donation was voluntary (Acts 5:3–4). This is often taken as an argument that there was no universally practised community of property within the group. Despite the extraordinarily frequent repetition of this argument, it is fallacious. Community of goods when practised by virtuoso religious groups is always undertaken on a voluntary basis; as we have seen above, virtuoso religion is a voluntary phenomenon. However, those who voluntarily choose to join a ‘common life’ are obliged to fully follow whatever rule and range of obligations are the norm. Moreover, in Peter’s emphasis on Ananias’ property belonging to him equally in two successive stages (‘before it was sold it was yours, and after it was sold it was in your power’), there is an echo of the multi-stage procedures which are typical of groups which practise community of property. The Essene novice handed over his property to the community in the penultimate stage of his entry in the community, but it

still belonged to him until his final examination and permission to enter the community fully (cf. 1QS VI: 13–23. That we find reflected in Acts such a procedure from the immediate local, cultural environment is a very strong argument indeed that there was a formal property-sharing structure in the earliest community of Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem.⁹⁵ In my view, community of goods was the universal or intended universal practice of the first believers in Jerusalem for perhaps the first year of the group’s life, perhaps becoming the practice of only an ‘inner group’ within the community at the time of, and as a result of, the dreadful punishment of Ananias and Sapphira.⁹⁶

3) In Acts 6:1–6 a problem of care for a group of widows emerged “when the disciples were increasing in number” in Jerusalem. This has been taken as an argument that there was no community of goods extending across the whole community, but only charity to underprivileged groups. I would argue, however, that at this point, we witness the spread of the Gospel of Jesus to new types of group in Jerusalem, those called at Acts 6:1 ‘Hellenists’. These were groups growing within the Greek-speaking synagogues of Jerusalem (Acts 6:9). The Hellenist widows were not incorporated into the central property-sharing group; the leaders of the Hellenist Christians appear to have been encouraged to administer almsgiving arrangements within their own communities. Although believers amongst the Hellenists are called ‘disciples,’ they did not

⁹⁵ Cf. Brian J. Capper, ‘The Interpretation of Acts 5.4’, *JSNT* 19 (1983), pp. 117–131; “‘In der Hand des Ananias...’ Erwägungen zu 1QS VI, 20 und der urchristlichen Gütergemeinschaft,’ *RQ* 12 (1998), pp. 223–236; ‘Community of Goods in the *Rule of the Community* (1QS) and Comparative Analysis of the Advanced Probationer’s Renunciation of his Property in Other Fully Property-Sharing Groups’, *Qumran Chronicle* 20 (2012), pp. 89–150.

⁹⁶ Cf. Brian J. Capper, ‘Holy community of life and property and amongst the poor: A response to Steve Walton,’ *Evangelical Quarterly* 80, 2 (April 2008), pp. 113–127.

practice renunciation of property; at the beginnings of the Jesus movement, it appears that only the traveling group of twelve disciples, and Jesus himself, practised renunciation, while local adherents to Jesus. There emerged a pattern of two types of discipleship;⁹⁷ similarly, we find we find mention at Acts 21:16 of the house of the disciple Mnason.

Hence the Acts account of the community of property of Jesus' earliest followers in Jerusalem may be taken as a good historical report.

The cultural and economic context of the community of goods practised by Jesus' traveling party and the earliest group of his followers in Jerusalem was part of the wider response of Jewish pietist groups to the economic problems of the age. The difficulties of providing a subsistence diet for all may lead, especially where the social world is dominated by ideals of holiness and belief in the perfectability of human being, to the ideal of a 'virtuoso' or 'holy' life, where many of the poor may find a place in community with those who serve the poor. Virtuosity may find expression in personal possessionlessness and communal devotion to study, prayer, preaching and charitable works, community of property, and perhaps also to an ideal of frugal consumption. Those most vulnerable in the outer economic world, especially the children of poor families, are often drawn into this life of devotion. While those who become religious virtuosi may forgo the pleasures and status of heads of families, they gain great honour as the preservers, interpreters and ideal practitioners of holy tradition. According to the religious world-view generated, the poor who become religious virtuosi are no longer the 'offscourings of the earth' but those of greatest status within the whole world. The material has been 'traded' for the spiritual in their lived,

⁹⁷ Cf. Brian J. Capper, 'Two Types of Discipleship in Early Christianity.'

respected, reversed image of the social and economic relations of the wider world. Moreover, in view of the high honour paid to the religious renouncer by the whole of society, such figures and communities are not only able to encourage generosity on the part of the rich towards the poor, but are also trusted to administer such redistribution wisely and without self-interest. It would appear that the Jerusalem Church began as such a 'holy community of property and life.' Over time we may assume the property-sharing practice of the first group became reduced to that of an inner group, which continued to operate as a base for 'apostolic operations', a place for the peripatetics to retire to when not on active mission. Perhaps this central group of the Jerusalem church drew in and provided both nourishment and training in the Jesus tradition for many children of the poor of Judaea. Some of these may have become the next generation of missionary apostles, while others probably married and became ardent supporters of the missionaries and their central base, and of its continued work amongst the poor.

The 'community of goods' of Acts 2–6 does not offer 'scriptural legitimization' for those who would extend community of property across the whole of the Christian congregation, or across the state. The Reformation rejection of the 'apostolic life' of religious orders has, however, denied to readers of Biblical scholarship the possibility of plausibly applying the example of the earliest Jerusalem community of believers in Jesus in the life of voluntary virtuoso religious communities. The renunciation of property of Jesus, his traveling disciples, and of early believers in him in Jerusalem offers precedent for voluntary groups within the Christian church who renounce property and practice community of goods, a model especially suited for mission amongst the poor. This may not sound an exciting conclusion for present-day interpreters eager to press a political case concerning world poverty or to

encourage Christians to generosity towards the poor both locally and internationally. However, the models of the common purse of Jesus and his traveling party, and of the first social project of believers in Jesus in Jerusalem have much to teach the modern Church. In the most difficult situations of poverty, voluntary Christian communities achieve an effective Christian response to poverty as their members by personal choice limit consumption to necessities, share property together in an ideal fashion which demonstrates the possibility of handling material wealth altruistically, and form a conduit through which their own resources and those of the wider religious community may flow to the most needy in society. Such groups act for the wider Church and can be richly supported by it. Their mode of life demonstrates a real identification with the poorest in society. Long established religious orders share in this work with other missionaries who live in community and newly founded orders with a strong focus on mission amongst the poor. New forms of the virtuoso religious life which aid the most needy of society include the Missionaries of the Poor founded by Father Richard Ho Lung in the Caribbean,⁹⁸ the ‘Servants of the Word’ in the United States.⁹⁹ and the communities of the ‘New Monasticism.’¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ www.missionariesofthepoor.org

⁹⁹ www.servantsoftheword.org

¹⁰⁰ Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: lessons for the church from MacIntyre's "After Virtue."* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998); Ray Simpson, *High Street Monasteries: Fresh Expressions of committed Christianity* (Buxhall: Kevin Mayhew Publishers: 2009); Graham Cray, Ian Mobsby and Aaron Kennedy (eds.), *New Monasticism as Fresh Expressions of Church.* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2010)