

The Disciples' Inspection of the Empty Tomb

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SUMMARY

There are three alternatives concerning the relation of Luke and John's stories of the disciples' inspection of Jesus's empty tomb: (1) Luke is dependent upon John, (2) John is dependent upon Luke, or (3) Luke and John are dependent upon a common tradition. (1) is not a plausible hypothesis because in light of Luke 24:24, a later scribe borrowing from John would have had another disciple accompany Peter. (2) is not plausible in view of the non-Lukan elements in 24:12 which are characteristic of Johannine tradition. Moreover, good grounds exist for positing pre-Lukan tradition. (3) is most plausible in view of its ability to explain all the relevant data, the improbability of Luke's dependence on John, and the improbability of John's dependence on Luke.

THE DISCIPLES' INSPECTION OF THE EMPTY TOMB

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The brief story of the disciples' inspection of the empty tomb (Lk 24,12.24; Jn 20,1-10) has been touted as "the most impressive test case" for the relationship of John and the Synoptics. [1] According to both Luke and John, Peter and at least one other disciple, upon hearing the women's report, ran to the empty tomb and, stooping to look (or, peering) in, saw Jesus' graveclothes there; then they returned home. In this short paper, my primary interest is to explore the interrelationship between Luke and John with regard to this text by examining the arguments advanced by two exponents of opposite persuasion.

Most critics today would hold that regardless of whether John knew the Synoptics, there probably lies a common tradition behind Lk 24,12.24 and Jn 20,2-10. Of course, as with almost all questions of this sort, there is ample room for disagreement. At the simplest level, there are three alternatives with regard to this story: (I) Luke is dependent upon John, (II) John is dependent upon Luke, or (III) Luke and John are dependent upon a common tradition.

I

The first alternative is exemplified by Westcott and Hort's characterization of Lk 24,12 as a Western "non-interpolation" based on John's account. However, the presence of this verse in the

later discovered P75 has convinced an increasing number of critics of its authenticity. Still, Robert Mahoney disputes the authenticity of the verse on the basis of internal criteria [2] :

(A) Grammatico-verbal evidence indicates a link between John and Luke. Mahoney notes that: (1) "Peter" is at the beginning of each verse. (2) Peter runs to the tomb. (3) both mention unhuei'on. (4) Both use the aorist participle parakuv (5) Both use the historical present blevpei. (6) Both have the same object of blevpei, o[qovuia. (7) The phrase, found elsewhere only in LXX Num 24,25, ajph'lqen pro;z eJautovn, shows contact between the verses.

But these phenomena are equally well-explained if Luke and John share a common tradition.

Moreover, against the hypothesis of a Johannine-based interpolation stand the Lukan characteristics also evinced by 24,12: the pleonastic use of ajnastavz (nine times in Lk, 19 times in Acts); qaumavzwn (12 times in Lk, five times in Acts); to; gegonovz (four times in Lk, three times in Acts). Mahoney lays great weight on the historical present blevpei to prove borrowing from John. But while the point has weight, Luke does have ten historical presents in verbs of saying, as well as historical presents in 8,49; 16,23; 24,36. This historical present in 24,12 could, like the historical present in 24,36, another Western non-interpolation, be traditional.

(B) Context argues against the inclusion of 24.12. Mahoney adduces as evidence: (1) Lk 24,12 could be removed without disturbing the narrative. (2) It is awkward after hjpivstoun auktai'z. (3) it is superfluous in light of 24,24. (4) The oldest tradition is of the first appearance to Peter, not of his visiting the tomb.

But these reasons seem weak. If Lk 24,12 is an independent piece of tradition inserted here by Luke, then (1) and (2) are satisfactorily explained. As for (3), 24,12 is presupposed, rather than rendered superfluous, by 24,24. (In this sense, [1] is false). What especially weakens Mahoney's case is the fact that in light of 24,24 a later scribe who knew John would definitely have made someone else accompany Peter. Mahoney's response to this counter-argument is faltering. He claims (a) the Beloved Disciple is left out as Johannine, while the unnamed companions are mentioned in 24,24 and (b) in this way the faith of the Beloved Disciple is left out. But the point is surely that a scribe would make disciples go to the tomb precisely *because of* the presence of the Beloved Disciple and those mentioned in 24,24. One could easily leave out the Beloved Disciple's cognomen and even his faith without excising this other person from the narrative altogether. Finally, as for (4), Peter's role in seeing Jesus is not mutually exclusive with his inspection of the tomb, which was, in any case, less important.

(C) Other Western non-interpolations are inauthentic. Mahoney argues that 24,3.6 and 24,36.40 are likewise inauthentic. But in so doing he passes over 24,51-52 and 21,19b-20. But *pari passu* if these non-interpolations are authentic, the aura of authenticity is lent to the others as well.

Although time does not permit us to examine Mahoney's reasons for omitting the verses he disputes, they do not seem to me compelling-the interested reader may judge for himself.

The failure of Mahoney's extensive argument against the authenticity of 24,12 makes it plausible that John is not the source of Luke's story.

II

Borrowing in the other direction has been more recently defended by F. Neiryck [3]. His contention is that the postulate of a common tradition which is almost identical with Lk 24.17 becomes "an unnecessary hypothesis" if Johannine dependence on Luke is envisioned. But this claim is, of course, trivially true; the really interesting question is whether this alternative is more plausible than a shared tradition. Neiryck rebuts two possible objections to Johannine borrowing:

(1) If there is Johannine dependence, why do the Lukanisms in 24,12 not appear in Jn 20,2-10? Neiryck answers that the pleonastic *ajnavstaz* is never used in John and may have been omitted or replaced by *ejxh'lqen*. The *qaumavzwn to; gegonovz* may have been the basis of the Beloved Disciple's *ejpivsteusen*.

I think we must say that this answer is certainly possible, though there is no positive evidence in its favor, and the phrase *qaumavzwn to; gegonovz* would have fit very nicely, indeed, at the end of Jn 20,10. So it seems to me that the objection does count against Neiryck's hypothesis, but not heavily.

(2) if there is Johannine dependence, whence the non-Lukan elements of 24,12 that are characteristic of the Johannine tradition? Neiryck answers that the phrase *parpkuvyaz blevpei ... ta; ojgovnia* in Jn 20,5 is identical with Lk 24,12 and there is probably no other traditional basis for the second use of the verb in 20,11 or for references to the *ojgovnia* in 20,6.7; 19,40. Although *ajpevrcestai provz* is alleged to be Johannine (Jn 4,47; 6,68; 11,46; 20,10), only in 20,10 does *ajpevrcomai* appear with *provz auvtouvz*, an un-Johannine expression which is borrowed from Lk 24,12. As for *blevpei*, the historic present is not distinctively Johannine and could come from pre-Lukan tradition.

These answers are less convincing. The point about *ojgovnia* is not whether John has a traditional

basis for the word, but rather that its singular appearance in Lk 24,12 in the Synoptics, which everywhere else speak of the *sindwvn*, and its multiple use in John are more plausibly explained on the basis of a shared tradition than by John's borrowing this anomalous word to the complete exclusion of the *sindwvn* and then spreading it throughout his narrative. Again, we may agree that *ajph'lqon pro;z aujtouvz* would not be typical of John, who would probably prefer *pro;z (or eijz) ta i[diva* as in 1,11; 16,32; 19,27; but if this expression is "foreign to John's style", as Neiryneck agrees, then why did he not omit or replace it along with the pleonastic *ajnastavz* and the *qaumavzwn to; gegonovz*? The argument cuts both ways. Moreover, although *pro;z eJautovn-ouvz* in the sense of "home" is multiply attested in Josephus, the expression *ajph'lqen pro;z eJautovn* is rare, as we have seen, and as uncharacteristic of Luke as of John. The most plausible explanation of its appearance in the story is that it belongs to the shared tradition. Finally, if one is ready to posit pre-Lukan tradition for the *blevpei*, then one might as well say that John knew a generically similar tradition.

In order, then, to show that John is solely dependent upon Luke for this story, Neiryneck goes on to argue that Lk 24,12 is a Lukan editorial composition, so that John's dependence on Luke becomes "an unavoidable conclusion" [4]. He argues for a Lukan origin on the basis of the story's similarity of pattern to that of Luke's empty tomb story, the story's Lukan traits, and the story's function in the chapter's composition.

Concerning the story's pattern, Neiryneck draws three parallels between Peter's visit and the women's visit to the empty tomb:

12a *ajnasta;z e[dramen eJpi; to; mnhmei'on*
 b *kai; parakuvyaz blevpei ta; ojgovnia movna*
 c *kai; ajph'lqen pro;z eJautovn*

24,1 *eJpi; to; mnh'ma h[lqon*
 3 *oujc eu[ron to; zw'ma tou' kurivou jlhsou'*
 9 *kai; uJpostrevyasai. . .*

He takes these parallels to show that Luke has constructed the story of Peter's inspection on the model of the women's visit.

Now I must confess that I find this argument extremely unpersuasive. For the elements of the pattern are either tautological or not really parallel. The first element is tautological, for any story of a visit to an empty tomb must by definition include that the parties involved went to the tomb! The

second element is not parallel, since one story focuses on the positive observation of the graveclothes, while the other mentions only the negative fact that the body was not found (that both stories imply that the tomb was empty is again tautological in any such story). That leaves the third element as a weak parallel between the stories. These similarities afford no grounds for an inference to Lukan composition of 24,12 on the basis of his empty tomb account.

By Lukan traits, Neiryneck seems to mean elements of Luke's storytelling style which are found in 24,12; for example, compare Peter's arising and running with Mary's arising and going with haste (1,39), his stooping and looking corresponds with (not) finding in 24,2.3, the historic present of seeing finds a parallel in 16,23, and the returning home is a typical Lukan motif (1,56; cf. 1,23; etc.).

This is a better argument, but there is a danger of over-estimating the force of one's evidence.

Apart from the admittedly Lukan pleonastic *ajnostavz*, it seems fanciful to see a connection with 1,39. Similarly, though Luke sometimes uses *euJrivskein* as a replacement for *verba videndi* (cf. Lk 8,35; Mk 5,15; Lk 9,36; Mk 9,8; Lk 24,2; Mk 16,2), that does not support the reverse conjecture that Peter's seeing is derivative from the women's not finding. The historic present in 16,23 could well be traditional, as well as the *blevpei* in 24,12. To claim that *blevpei* is derived from *ajnablevyasai qewrou'sin* (Mk 16,4) is pure speculation. The returning home motif is a Lukan favorite, but the language is not Lukan and so may indicate tradition. This argument for Lukan composition is thus inconclusive.

Concerning the story's function in the chapter, Neiryneck seems to mean that it is a verification story similar to Lk 1,39-56; 2,16-20; 8,34-36. But the first two of these have nothing to do with verification at all; the third could be so construed, but is in fact taken from Mark. So I see no convincing evidence of a Lukan compositional function here. Indeed, against Lukan editorial composition stands the awkwardness of the insertion of v. 12, noted by Mahoney, into the narrative [5].

Thus, the case for Lukan composition of 24,12 is inconclusive. Against Lukan invention of the story stands (1) the improbability of Luke's wholesale fabrication of this story [6], (2) the probability that in John's account we encounter eyewitness reminiscences of the incident [7], (3) the intrinsic plausibility of the story in light of the women's discovery of the empty tomb and the disciples' remaining in Jerusalem over the weekend [8], and (4) the fact that John's using Luke as his source is less plausible than shared tradition, as seen above. It follows that 24,12 is probably not a Lukan composition.

III

In summary, it therefore seems more plausible to posit common tradition rather than interdependence for Luke and John's story of the disciples' inspection of the empty tomb. This alternative is supported by (i) its ability to explain all the relevant data without bruising them, (ii) the improbability of Luke's dependence on John, and (iii) the improbability of John's dependence on Luke.

Footnotes:

[\[1\]](#)

F. Neiryck, *John and the Synoptics: 1975-1990*, paper presented at the Colloquium, in this volume, pp. 3-61.

[\[2\]](#)

R. Mahoney, *Two Disciples at the Tomb* (Theologie and Wirklichkeit, 6), Bern, 1974, pp. 41-69.

[\[3\]](#)

F. Neiryck., *John and the Synoptics: The Empty Tomb Stories*, in *NTS* 30 (1984) 161-87. See also *idem*, APHLQEN PROS EAYTON (*Lc 24,12 et Jn 20,10*), in *ETL* 54 (1978) 104-18; *The Uncorrected Historic Present in Lk XXIV.12*, in *ID.*, *Evangelica: Gospel Studies* (BETL, 60) Leuven, 1982, pp. 329-334

[\[4\]](#)

ID., *Empty Tomb Stories* (n. 3), p. 175. See also *ID.*, *John and the Synoptics*, in *Evangelica* (n. 3), pp 391-395. For if Luke made the story up, then obviously there were no prior traditions behind it. It could find its way into John's gospel only if John borrowed it from Luke. Hence, Luke is John's only source for the story.

[\[5\]](#)

Neiryck contends that the association of *ajpiste'w* and *qaumavzw* (cf. v 41) connects vv. 11 and 12, that v. 12 prepares for the appearance to Peter, and that it picks up the omitted reference to Peter in Mk 16,7. But the two verbs do not seem linked here as they are in v. 41, and Mk 16,7 is picked up in v. 34, not v. 12. The passage in Luke seems much less an integral part of the whole story than it does in John.

[\[6\]](#)

A neglected issue in this debate is whether Luke's invention of this story would not be what Neiryck calls "an unlikely editorial liberty taken by the evangelist", especially by one who is so self-consciously writing a historical account. Neiryck says no, for Luke develops Mk 15,47 into an independent story in Lk 23,54-56a. But there is no comparison between such extrapolations or embellishments and the wholesale invention of Peter's inspection of the tomb. Note by contrast Luke's refusal to build an appearance to Peter story out of the meager tradition of v. 34, a reserve which Dodd believed showed Luke's integrity as a historian (C.H. Dodd, *The Appearances of the Risen Christ: A Study in form criticism of the Gospels*, in ID., *More New Testament studies*, Manchester, 1968, p. 126).

[7]

See my discussion in *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity, 16), Lewiston, 1989, pp 232-37. I contend that the Fourth Gospel fills out the common tradition of Peter and another disciple's inspection with the reminiscences of the Beloved Disciple and, hence, the additional Johannine details. I agree with Neiryck that Lk 24,24 is not the primary focus of tradition and 24,12 Luke's redactional adaptation. But Luke could include in 24,24 an element he left out in 24,12. The plural in 24,24 is not a vague generalization, but as Neiryck himself, quoting Dodd, notes, is entirely appropriate in the context of conversation with a total stranger. For another example of Luke's obliquely referring to persons he has left out, see Lk 5,4.6.7. Neiryck's complaint that there the phenomena occur in the same story whereas 24,12.24 occur in different stories seems utterly ineffectual, since Luke is freely writing in the Emmaus story and so could easily include his oblique reference there.

[8]

Most scholars acknowledge the historical credibility of the women's discovery of Jesus' empty tomb. According to Kremer, "By far, most exegetes hold firmly... to the reliability of the biblical statements about the empty tomb ..." and he furnishes in support a list of 28 scholars, to which his own name may be added (J. Kremer, *Die Oster- evangelien-Geschichten um Geschichte*, Stuttgart, 1977, pp. 49-50). I can think of at least 16 more whom he neglected to mention. Moreover, von Campenhausen has rightly dismissed the flight to Galilee hypothesis as a fiction of the critics (H. F. von Campenhausen, *Der Ablauf der Osterereignisse und das leere Grab* [Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften], Heidelberg, 1966, pp.44-49. Cf. J. Weiss, *Der erste Korintherbrief* [KEKNT, 5], Göttingen, 9 1910, p. 350: "I cannot

convince myself of the scholarly legend that the apostles fled to Galilee"; M. Albrecht, *Zur Formgeschichte der Aufstehungsberichte*, in *ZNW* 21 [1922] 269: "a critic's legend"). Given the disciples' continuing presence in Jerusalem during this time, it seems entirely plausible that, in response to a report by the women of Jesus' tomb's having been evacuated, one or more of them should verify this report by an inspection of the tomb.