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SOME LUKAN EXPRESSIONS OF TIME

(LEXICAL NOTES ON LUKE-ACTS VII)

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THE current emphasis in biblical theology upon the theological meaning of time, both in general¹ and in the writings of Luke,² suggests that before continuing in this series of lexical notes to discuss some few of the Lukan expressions of time I should call attention to the relevance of nontheological reasons for Luke's manner of writing. It would be a false antithesis to suppose that his phrases are either purely historical or purely theological. Nor is their interest merely lexical.

Luke 3 1, 2. There is evidence that perhaps more than the other evangelists Luke was or aspired to be something of a historian like the secular historians of his age.³ The ambitious synchronism with which he dates the beginning of the ministry of John the Baptist has parallels in classical literature. It also echoes the dating with which several of the prophetic books of the OT are introduced. There is more literary than historical or theological interest here displayed, though the assimilation of John (and inferentially Jesus) to the prophets has perhaps the element of interpretation which meets us elsewhere in the work. But as Conzelmann says:

We must beware of reading too much into this verse. It is true that a synchronism of world history is given, by means of which Jesus is allotted a definite point in time, but there is no suggestion of a particular conception of this point as an exceptional "hour" in the history of the world. There is no trace of "a theology of history" as a comprehensive view of world history as a whole.⁴

Luke 1 24, 26, 36, 56. An unexpected chronological reference occurs in the first chapter of the gospel. The conception of a child to be called John is announced to the aged Zacharias by the angel Gabriel, and six months later a similar announcement is made by the same angel to Mary. The latter visits Elisabeth, Zacharias' wife, having been told of her pregnancy. The six-month child in the womb responds to Mary's visit. The latter remains three months and then goes home.

¹ Oscar Cullmann, *Christus und die Zeit* (ET, *Christ and Time*); cf. James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time*.

² Hans Conzelmann, *Die Mitte der Zeit, Studien zur Theologie des Lukas* (ET, *The Theology of Saint Luke*); J. C. O'Neill, *The Theology of Acts in its Historical Setting*.

³ See my *Making of Luke-Acts*, pp. 204-09, and for other contacts with secular history, *ibid.*, pp. 240-42.

⁴ *Op. cit.* (ET), p. 168.

But why is Mary's visit dated by the pregnancy of Elisabeth?⁵ And why six months? This puts the births half a year apart. Some have tried to find an astrological connection or a physiological one; to others it has seemed an unintelligible eccentricity of the author. Perhaps it is an editorial manipulation of the editor who has in other ways deliberately interwoven the birth story of Jesus with that of John. This at least appears to be the solution of Eduard Norden in an interesting discussion of the passage.⁶

Acts 1 4. Again near the beginning of Acts we have some reference to time. In retelling the farewell scenes between Jesus and his disciples after the resurrection, in which both gospel and Acts emphasize the duty of remaining at Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit (or power) is received, the later book gives two spans of time, each beginning with the death-resurrection weekend. One shows how after forty days of association Jesus is taken up to heaven (Acts 1 4). Neither in Luke nor later in Acts is the length of this interval or the separation so explicitly described. The latter says he appeared "for some days" (13₃₁ ἐπὶ ἡμέρας πλείους), the former, whether we read only "departed from them" or also "and was taken up to heaven," leaves us without indication of the length of time since the resurrection.

This alternation in Luke's writing between variants of which one is more explicit than the other is not unusual. But for the explicit one here — an assumption to heaven after forty days — we have a parallel or rather two parallels not quite independent of each other. In addition to other similarity of structure both the Apocalypse of Baruch 76 4 and IV Ezra 14 23, 49 end with a period of forty days after which the seer is taken up to heaven. As I wrote before, "Their agreement with Acts in the detail of forty days before an ascension is a striking coincidence if nothing more."⁷ Literary dependence, either way, is not probable with Acts. Shall we regard it as a matter of common folklore?

Acts 2 1. The other periodization early in Acts overlaps the interval already mentioned, but is quite independently⁸ presented. It dates a different terminal event, the coming of the Spirit upon the disciples in Jerusalem. And the calendar date is the annual day of Pentecost. Both

⁵ This method of dating one conception by another is all the more arbitrary if there was no close family relationship between them. According to Luke Zacharias was a priest and his wife also descended from Aaron (tribe of Levi). Joseph was of the family of David (tribe of Judah). Mary's tribal background is not indicated, and *συγγενίς* (1 36) may mean, like *συγγενής*, merely fellow Jew(ess). Nothing else in the story suggests closer kinship between the families.

⁶ *Die Geburt des Kindes, Geschichte einer religiösen Idee*, pp. 99–105.

⁷ *Beginnings of Christianity* (Part I, *The Acts of the Apostles*), v, p. 18, n. 2.

⁸ Independently, unless the indefinite phrase in Acts 1 5 (οὐ μετὰ πολλὰς ταύτας ἡμέρας) refers to the (week's?) interval between the ascension and Pentecost.

in the use of "day" before the name of a festival and in the use of the verb *συμπληροῦσθαι* in Acts 2 1 we have marks of Lukan style.⁹

But there is, I believe, something else effective here. The pouring out of tongues, cancelling the story of the tower of Babel, has analogies or contrasts in Jewish lore. These come from the OT and are expanded by Philo and Josephus, and one of them, the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, is traditionally dated, at least in the Talmud, on the day of Pentecost.¹⁰

Acts 22 6; 26 18. Finally in this connection may be mentioned the fact that among other variations between the three accounts in Acts of Paul's conversion, two state the time as noon: 22 6 *περὶ μεσημβρίας*, 26 13 *ἡμέρας μέσης*, while the first account in ch. 9 has no equivalent. What is the reason for mentioning midday? Is it to facilitate emphasis upon the brightness of the light? This is suggested at 26 13 by the phrase *ὑπὲρ τὴν λαμπρότητα τοῦ ἡλίου*. Compare the English title of Robert Jungk's volume, *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns*. But in the other passages there is no such contrast. Is it to contrast with the uncertainty of night revelations, as we say: "in broad daylight"?¹¹ Is it mentioned because Paul's blindness is a sequel and blindness is most superlative at noon?¹²

I have raised these questions before in an unpublished paper read to this Society in 1931. Here I content myself with a few suggestions. The reference to noon is not to be explained merely by saying that it happened then, or by the suggestion that in these passages where Paul himself is speaking it is a mark of personal reminiscence.¹³ References to time have often some underlying reason in the mind or imagination of the writer, as we can see when they are added to the source. Without knowing it, an historian can assume that certain events occurred by night, because probably done by stealth. So, according to Acts, Paul's escape from Damascus over the wall¹⁴ and his transfer under heavy guard from Jerusalem towards Caesarea¹⁵ both occurred at night. Noon was a natural hour for other occurrences, like midday thirst and its satisfaction at a well.¹⁶ Josephus adds to a well-side scene *μεσημβρίας οὔσης*, though there is nothing to that effect in his source,¹⁷ and in a somewhat different

⁹ See *Beginnings*, iv, p. 16 (Lake's note *ad loc.*).

¹⁰ Bab. Pesahim 68b. See more fully in *Beginnings of Christianity*, v, pp. 114-16.

¹¹ B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels*, p. 384, gives an example of a modern preacher adding precisely that phrase quite gratuitously in reporting another appearance of Jesus in the New Testament, "to 500 brethren at one time" (I Cor 15 6).

¹² Deut 28 28 f.; Isa 59 10.

¹³ Cf. E. Hirsch, *ZNTW*, 28 (1929), p. 310: "das hat ganz die Zufälligkeit der persönlichen Erinnerung."

¹⁴ 9 25. II Cor 11 33 has no reference to time for the same event.

¹⁵ 23 23 and 31.

¹⁶ John 4 6 (*ὥρα ἦν ὡς ἕκτη*).

¹⁷ *Antt.* 2, 11, 1 (§ 257); contrast Exod 2 18.

situation he says, again with nothing equivalent in his source, that Boaz came to the city *ἤδη μεσοῦσης τῆς ἡμέρας*.¹⁸

But Paul's experience is a supernatural visitation. Ps 91 6 in the Greek and Latin and in the Hebrew as it was understood refers not merely to impersonal "destruction that wastes" at noon day but to a *δαίμονιον μεσημβρινόν*. In its Latin form (*meridianus daemon*) this has become the technical term for a whole development of folklore. Of course there are other theophanies in the Bible at noon, including the visit to Abraham at Mamre as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day (Gen 18 1), and in Acts the vision of Peter at Joppa about the sixth hour.¹⁹ And there are theophanies at other times, to Adam in the garden in the cool of the day (Gen 3 8) and to Lot at the gate of Sodom in the evening (Gen 19 1). Luke himself mentions theophanies at night.²⁰

But the noon hour appears in similar context outside the Jewish tradition. Not only minor or infernal deities in the Graeco-Roman mythology are associated with that hour, but sometimes major deities. Without citing ancient literature and modern discussion, I simply throw out the suggestion that even in so Jewish a book as Acts, what may be a motif of international folklore has played here some unconscious part, as I am persuaded is the case with some other phenomena in Luke-Acts.

The following expressions of time are so familiar and seem so natural in English and even in Greek that comment on them may appear to be superfluous. Yet they each raise some questions of ancient practice and to that extent may be regarded as lexical phenomena.

Decimal or semidecimal numbers for years of age. Luke 3 23 reads *καὶ αὐτὸς ἦν Ἰησοῦς ἀρχόμενος ὡσεὶ ἐτῶν τριάκοντα*. Those who hope to use this passage in connection with other data for a chronology of Jesus' career must have often asked themselves how exactly the number thirty is to be taken. Does the *ὡσεὶ* warn the reader that his thirtieth was his nearest birthday or that there is two or three years' leeway in each direction, so that any age from 27 to 33 may be included? Furthermore is not 30 by itself a round number in Greek as in English?

Having for many years read the volumes of Greek papyri as they were published, I formed the impression that the ages of adults which were

¹⁸ *Antt.* 5, 9, 4, (§ 332); contrast Ruth 4 1, 2. Gravitation to noon occurs in Schweitzer's reconstruction of Jesus' death: "At midday of the same day — it was the 14th Nisan . . . — Jesus cried aloud and expired" (*Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 397), whereas Matt 27 46 and Mark 15 34 say expressly "about the ninth hour." Cf. note 30.

¹⁹ Acts 10 9. In Acts 11 5 the trance is rehearsed again but with no reference to time.

²⁰ Acts 16 9; 18 9; 23 11; 27 23. See *The Making of Luke-Acts*, p. 250 n., with reference to similar practice in the addenda of Josephus to his sources. It is perhaps noteworthy that Luke does not call these night experiences dreams, as Matthew would have done.

²¹ George Milligan, *Selections from the Greek Papyri*, and *Select Papyri*, ed. by A. S. Hunt and C. C. Edgar, II.

given in them tended to occur for the multiples of five far out of proportion to the other numbers. I kept no record, but in order to test the impression I have lately gone over the years of age in two convenient selections of secular papyri²¹ in the general period of the NT, and I find the impression confirmed.²² The actual proportion of multiples of five to other figures is normally two to eight, but in the year ages of these collections the ratio is just about even between multiples of five and the other numbers.

It might be supposed that the use of $\acute{\omega}\varsigma$ in these papyri indicated that the numbers given were approximate,²³ while those without $\acute{\omega}\varsigma$ were more definite. On the contrary the papyri give us in some lists mixed numbers with $\acute{\omega}\varsigma$ ²⁴ and in other lists mixed numbers without it.²⁵ Since the papyri in question come from official documents where exact dating and other details, like identifying scars or value of personal property, are systematically included, and where also census records were soon kept, this tendency to decimal or semidecimal estimates of age is rather striking. Perhaps this means that Luke's thirty years is also an estimated number. His Jewish background might have yielded seven or forty, and he does have forty days (Luke 4 2) and forty or four hundred years (Acts 7 6, 23, 30, 36) following his sources. But $\acute{\omega}\sigma\epsilon\iota$, a favorite word with Luke, is not limited by him, to round numbers, any more than is $\acute{\omega}\varsigma$ in the papyri. The analogy of the papyri is alone sufficient reason for thinking that thirty by itself would be a round number and that the age of Jesus was not more exactly known to Luke. Jesus was somewhere in between approximately twenty-five and approximately thirty-five years old. Thirty was not necessarily his nearest birthday.

$\acute{\omega}\rho\alpha$ with $\alpha\upsilon\rho\eta$. The Greek word $\acute{\omega}\rho\alpha$ in the classical period of the language was used for any short span of time. Later it was appropriated to mean also the specific short period that we call the hour. Both uses existed side by side in hellenistic Greek writers as in Luke-Acts. Belonging

²¹ In the texts, the word $\acute{\epsilon}\tau\acute{\omega}\nu$ is represented by an abbreviation. The numeral follows and is expressed by letters of the alphabet, not by words.

²² For example, Milligan, no. 16 (=B. G. U. 975. Deed of divorce, A.D. 45): age of husband about 25 years, age of wife about 20 years, age of her guardian and kinsman about 30 years. I omit names and identifying scars.

²³ Hunt and Edgar, no. 328 (Sworn declaration of four priests as floodgate guards A.D. 28): . . . about 21 years . . . about 45 years . . . about 40 years . . . about 39 years (with identifying scars); no. 343 (=P. Ryl. 90. Nomination for compulsory service, early iii/A.D.): about 46 . . . about 30 . . . about 45 . . . about 25 . . . about 35 . . . about 35 . . . about 25 (with valuation of property).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 311 (Registration of a slave child, A.D. 124): . . . 35 years . . . 45 years. *Ibid.*, no. 313 (=P. Tebt. 322. Return for house-to-house census A.D. 189): . . . 61 years . . . 30 years . . . 40 years . . . 5 years . . . 18 years . . . 22 years . . . 18 years. (By "mixed numbers" is meant those that are and those that are not multiples of five.)

to the first usage is the characteristic Lukan (ἐν) αὐτῇ τῇ ὥρᾳ.²⁶ It occurs at Luke 2 38; 7 21 (D); 10 21; 12 12; 13 31; 20 19; 24 33; Acts 16 18; 22 13. At Luke 7 21 other MSS read ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ὥρᾳ. In the parallel to Luke 12 12 Mark 13 11 reads ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ὥρᾳ. The Lukan peculiarity has not to do with the word ὥρα but with the pronoun. Hence it does not specially concern us here. αὐτὸς ὁ is evidently equivalent to ἐκείνος ὁ or οὗτος ὁ or even to ὁ αὐτός ("the same").

ὥρα for a division of the day. The use of hour for a more regular space of time, approximately one twelfth of an equinoctial day, and less often instead of "watches" for portions of the night, occurs in Luke-Acts and in other NT narratives. The ordinal numerals have to be changed from a day beginning at dawn to suit the modern different twelve-hour cycles before and after noon in a day reckoned from midnight to midnight,²⁷ but otherwise seem to us perfectly natural. We accept as entirely familiar the argument in John's gospel (11 9), "Are there not twelve hours of the day?"

But this division had not always existed. The use of ὥρα with an ordinal numeral is cited by Liddell-Scott-Jones from no Greek literature before the NT, and from other early Greek only from a single inscription of the first century B.C. This apparent limitation has led one scholar²⁸ to infer from the occurrence of the phrase *περὶ ἕκτην ὥραν* in an undated work that the work could not have been written before the time of the Roman empire.

This is almost certainly wrong. The usage is said to have begun about the time of Hipparchus, and an elaborate answer²⁹ to the scholar already mentioned has recently been published, giving evidence that phrases of this sort were abundant in literature at least in the last two centuries before Christ. Already W. Bauer in his *Wörterbuch* had listed as illustrating the same idiom Aristeas and Plutarch and inscriptions and papyri from two or three centuries before Christ.

ὥρα with ordinal numerals of three-hour intervals. If we may accept as fully idiomatic for NT times the phrases, *first hour*, *second hour*, etc., we may also ask whether all these phrases were used with equal frequency and precision, just as we asked about the numerals for years of age.

²⁶ See Hawkins, *Horae Synopticae*², p. 16; J. H. Moulton, *Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*, p. 94, and *Grammar of New Testament Greek, Prolegomena*, p. 91. W. F. Howard, *ibid.*, II, p. 432, denies that this is a Semitism because of hellenistic parallels and because of its occurrence in Acts in two passages not suspected of Semitic background. But Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*², pp. 78-81, thinks it represents not one but two Aramaic originals which readily coalesce.

²⁷ There was, of course, another kind of day, by the Jewish reckoning from sunset to sunset, but I am not aware of its influence on Luke-Acts unless it be in the use of ἐπιφώσκω at Luke 23 54. Cf. Matt 28 1.

²⁸ Chion of Heracles, ed. by Düring, *Acta Univ. Gotob.*, 57, 5 (1951), pp. 15, 97.

²⁹ Jonas Palm, "Eine Bemerkung über ὥρα = Stunde," *Eranos*, 57 (1959), pp. 72-73.

Again, I think the answer is in the negative. In Luke-Acts we have only the third hour (Acts 2 15; 23 23 "of the night"), the sixth hour (Luke 23 44; Acts 10 9), and the ninth hour (Luke 23 44; Acts 3 1; 10 3; cf. 10 30). Mark gives the same three hours for the passion story, and Luke, Matthew, John, and the Gospel of Peter follow him for one or both of the last two. John 4 6 dates another event at the sixth hour. The same threefold arrangement is found in Matthew's parable (20 1-16) of late hiring of servants in the vineyard, but Matthew adds the final "eleventh hour" episode. The only other exceptions in the NT to this limitation are John 1 39 (tenth), 4 52 (seventh), and the Western reading at Acts 19 9, "from the fifth hour to the tenth."

Perhaps other literature is not so nearly limited to the third, sixth, and ninth hours. It has been suggested that at the crucifixion these numbers reflect an early Christian liturgical division for Good Friday, and in Acts (10 9; and 3 1, 10 3, 10 30) the Jewish hours of prayer or sacrifice at noon and 3 p.m.

It seems to me more likely that in spite of the opportunity offered by an hourly nomenclature the ancients found that for many purposes the simpler three-hour interval was sufficiently definite. For the culture represented by the evangelists and in a society without clocks or watches one could often be satisfied with phrases no more specific than our *mid-morning*, *midday* (or *noon*), *mid-afternoon*³⁰ together with *dawn* or *sunset*.³¹ For the last two terms even in the Greek the first hour and the twelfth are conspicuously scarce or missing.

ὡς and *περί* with numbered hours. As with the years of age, so with these hours of the day, *ὡς* is not infrequent,³² or in Luke *ὡσεί*.³³ As with the cardinal numerals, these adverbs belong with the ordinal numerals. But *περί* is also found.³⁴ It belongs with the noun *ῥαυ*. In one passage both are combined: *ὡσεί περί ῥαυ ἐνάτην τῆς ἡμέρας* (Acts 10 3), and the first two words look awkwardly arranged or repetitious. But *περί* as a preposition must immediately precede the nominal phrase³⁵ and *ὡσεί* modifies, though at a distance, the numeral adjective. Thus also one of the vernacular Greek papyri has exactly the same arrangement, as I pointed out long ago.³⁶ It occurs in P Tebt i, 15 (114 B.C.) lines 2 f., *τῇ α' τοῦ ὑποκειμένου μηνὸς περί ῥαυ ια'* and apparently again in line 25.

³⁰ Contrast the modern book title, *God Died at Three O'clock in the Afternoon*.

³¹ Cf. Matt 20 1 (*ἕμα πρωῖ*); 20 8 (*ὀψίας γενομένης*).

³² E. g., John 4 6 (*ῥαυ ἦν ὡς ἕκτη*).

³³ E. g., Luke 23 44 (*καὶ ἦν ἡδὴ ὡσεὶ ῥαυ ἕκτη*).

³⁴ E. g., Chion of Heraclea 13 1 (*περὶ ἕκτην ῥαυ*); Polybius 1, 46, 6 (*περὶ τετάρτην ῥαυ*); Acts 10 9; Matt 27 46; 20 3, 5, 6.

³⁵ Cf. the order of words in the well-supported reading at Luke 9 14, *ὡσεὶ ἀνὰ πενήκοντα*, and *ὡς ἐπὶ ῥαυ δύο* (Acts 19 34).

³⁶ *Beginnings of Christianity*, IV, p. 113.