

## A SEVERE JUDGMENT OF ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA (5:1–11)

Placed between the account about Joseph Barnabas, the Levite who sold his land,<sup>1</sup> brought all the money, and put it at the feet of the apostles (Acts 4:36–37) and the account concerning the miraculous healings and exorcisms (5:12–16), Luke’s narration of the severe judgment on Ananias and Sapphira, who are “the first married couple identified among believers in Acts,”<sup>2</sup> is to depict the matchlessness of the new movement rather than to demonstrate how Barnabas was the only exemplary believer compared to certain blemished believers of the age. Luke also refers to Simon Magus, the arch-heretic (Acts 8:9, 10), as many other deceivers are recorded in the NT (Rom 16:18; 2 Cor 11:13; Eph 4:14; 2 Tim 3:13; Titus 1:10). Using this contrast, Luke creates a vivid picture describing a community in which the atmosphere is profoundly controlled by the Spirit. While Barnabas’s example serves to highlight the unity of the Spirit in the church, the story of Ananias and Sapphira serves ironically in an equally positive sense, to show how the holiness of God amid His people cannot be infringed.<sup>3</sup> Barnabas exemplifies encouragement or consolation; this stands in sharp contrast to what Ananias and Sapphira evoke regarding their sudden deaths that resulted from sin. Within this context, Luke beautifully portrays what the disciples can do for God (4:32–37) which is juxtaposed with what God can do through them (5:12–16). Thus, throughout the overall narrative, Luke dexterously displays Ananias and Sapphira’s case beside the wonders and signs of healing to give a grasp of the impact Christians had in the early Jerusalem days.

Though the above explanation gives a general understanding of Ananias and Sap-

<sup>1</sup> Much has been argued concerning this Cypriot Levite Joseph Barnabas who is described as a land owner, due to the Mosaic law that did not allow the descendants of Levi to do so (Num 18:20; 26:62; Deut 10:9; 12:12; 14:27; 18:2; Josh 13:14; 18:7; Ezek 44:28; 45:4). However, many scholars agree that, by the NT period, not all Levites were Temple workers and could therefore own their properties, including land. Josephus *Life* 68–83. Cf. Jeremias 1969: 105. Also, being a Diaspora Jew emphasizes the fact that Joseph Barnabas was not necessarily expected to devote his time to his duties in the Jerusalem Temple.

<sup>2</sup> Pervo 2009: 132.

<sup>3</sup> Cho 2014: 21–36.

phira's death, certain curiosities remain. Why in an age of grace, should a couple die with no chance of repentance offered to them? How would a congregation of believers celebrating resurrection think of this death? A swarm of questions would have haunted the minds of the people in the community. In fact, this situation has a few analogous incidents found in the OT. The death of this couple evokes the holiness of the unapproachable Mount Zion ([Exod 19:10–25](#)) where the people of Israel had to sanctify themselves before they could meet God. On this occasion, Moses had instructed people not to touch the mountain, and thus set the limits for the people who ought to leave a distance between them and their Holy God. Moreover, the Scripture tells the sad endings of two priests, Nadab and Abihu; the two sons of Aaron who led worship in the sanctuary with a statute and were struck dead right in the holy place ([Lev 10:1–3](#); cf. [Exod 28:1; 29:9](#)).<sup>4</sup> Heavenly fire had once come down bursting from God's presence into the tabernacle to burn the sacrifice that they had dedicated to the Lord; the same fire now fell to struck them down. They had made themselves culpable by profanely and presumptuously dishonoring God. Nadab and Abihu's act of worship was not made holy according to the God's prescribed procedures and was thus unconsecrated.

A similar ruin of an entire family occurred again during Joshua's leadership of Israel. Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, had taken devoted goods during the battle against Jericho and provoked God's anger ([Josh 7:1ff.](#)).<sup>5</sup> God, through Joshua, had instructed the people to abstain from taking those devoted things. The story interestingly encompasses the characteristics of the Ananias tradition.<sup>6</sup> Achan (i.e., troubler): (1) took and kept things he confiscated from the accused ones; (2) hid the truth from the leader, which brought him judgment, as he became a thief; and (3) eventually died along with all of his belongings. Thus, the same happened to Ananias (and Sapphira).<sup>7</sup> Scrutinizing all these scriptural antecedents, one

<sup>4</sup> Keener 2013: 1184; Barrett 1994: 262.

<sup>5</sup> See Park 2007a: 131–37 for the common concept of *Herem* appearing in both the Ananias and Sapphira story in [Acts 5:1–11](#) and the Achan story in [Josh 7:1–26](#).

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Bruce 1988: 102; Witherington 1998: 213.

<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Bock 2007: 220 argues some different aspects between these two stories as follows: “(1) Joshua has no miracle. (2) Here a lie is told to Peter, not a disclosure as with Achan. (3) The community does not suffer any loss. (4) There is no stoning; God acts directly.”

can see a comprehensible basis for the divine capital punishment. The difference between the other incidents and Ananias's is whether or not God had previously given relative prescriptions and strict procedures that had to be followed. Luke's story of Ananias and Sapphira does not clearly describe the way of offering the proceeds. The difficulty of interpretation arises with Peter's interrogation: **While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control (5:4a)?** With these words, one may think that there was room for Ananias and Sapphira to freely give what they wanted to. Or else, the interaction between the leader of the Twelve and Ananias seems to imply that the situation was a give-it-all or keep-it-all-for-you situation. Thus, it might be that, for a certain period, all who had sold their properties had to put the full amount at the feet of the apostles.<sup>8</sup> This provides an explanation of why Ananias needed to inform his wife of the reduced money.

Was being involved in the community of goods, therefore, compulsory?<sup>9</sup> Luke does not provide clear explanations. Nor does he help the reader see why Ananias and Sapphira had to declare the proceeds publicly before the apostles. Why were Ananias and Sapphira sentenced to death if to be a Christian did not mean in principle to become devoid of possession? What aspect made their decision unforgivable? Given that Luke stresses the couple's reduction of the amount by displaying Peter's inquisitive query to both Ananias and his wife and the couple's blasphemous attitude of lying to the Holy Spirit, their crime seems to have been gauged on its double deception of faulting the

<sup>8</sup> Capper 1983: 117–32 (122) demonstrates that sufficient evidence shows how the situation in Acts 5 was not only about charity in which many give as much as they can toward the wellbeing of a few. Here, it was about a few affluent individuals, or at least those with supererogatory means, to surrender the full amount of what they had sold for the well-being of the community. Convincing factors that indicate this include the “complexity of conditions pertaining to the act of laying money before the apostles.” For Capper, this procedure might have constituted a serious ritual to acknowledge those who have decided to support the community by bringing the products of their sales.

<sup>9</sup> Capper 1983: 128 discusses “together” and “had everything in common” as expressions very dear to Luke throughout the foregoing passages. These expressions are used in the story as a way of expanding an “epexegetis” of what was central in the Qumran community discipline. See also Fitzmyer 1998: 318.

entrance procedure by reducing the amount and deceiving the Holy Spirit. This, moreover, qualifies the couple to fall under the same category of the biblical precedents discussed earlier, such as those of Nadab, Abihu, and Achan. In all of the incidents in which death has been inflicted to the concerned community members, such as the cases in the OT or the present circumstance of Ananias and Sapphira, the fundamental issue is whether or not God has been directly offended either by people rebelling against His instructions or by testing the Holy Spirit (5:9).

Luke does in the first place use this incident with its dramatic character to pinpoint the implications of God's holiness in a believer's everyday life. Luke depicts God as all-knowing and wanting to relate with His people even in the smallest details as a personal entity.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the nature of the God of believers is introduced to both Jews and Gentiles as an absolutely different deity compared to the rest of the gods. In this context, by including Ananias and Sapphira's death in the account of Acts, Luke is showing his theological motivation above all.<sup>11</sup> The Spirit of God is presented as the power that makes the difference for believers. Peter disclaims that he has the knowledge and capacity to discern, but the presence of the Spirit is in control of everything, even in Peter's mind, and so Ananias and Sapphira could not escape his penetrating eye. Through Peter, the Spirit speaks what he sees and Peter is merely a mediator between the Spirit and his people.<sup>12</sup> In other words, for Luke, the new movement of Christianity is all about God's presence and consciousness of his holiness.

Furthermore, the Jerusalem Temple symbolizes the presence of God for the Jews and from Acts 3 to 5, this Temple precinct plays an important role in highlighting the consciousness of God's presence and holiness in the life of this new community of faith in Christ, as if to state that there has been some kind of shift of God's presence from the old Temple to the new. This dramatic story of God's judgment is placed in the middle of

<sup>10</sup> Bock 2007: 219.

<sup>11</sup> Norwood 1975: 5 argues that "the dramatic account of Ananias and Sapphira is introduced at this point so that Luke can engage in a theological discussion with his community about the nature of God, the nature of Sin, and the nature of the church."

<sup>12</sup> At this point, it can be asserted that the role of the Spirit in this incident is more closely related to the prophetic, in which Peter could see the couple's deception with special insight. See Cho 2005: 131.

the miraculous happenings in Acts 3–5 in which God’s presence is felt in Him performing extraordinary miracles, healing, and exorcism through the agency of the new Temple, the church (Acts 3–4; 5:12–16); people even continued to preach and teach in the Temple (5:42) in spite of the warnings and threats from the religious authority. By placing this story here, Luke’s message becomes critical for the new Temple; just as the sanctity of the old Temple could not be violated with sin and unrighteousness even by the high priest, the new Temple is not inferior nor man-made. The new Temple demonstrates its superiority over the old not only by performing amazing miracles of all kinds, but also by punishing the sin and unrighteousness that cannot exist where God is present. Wright ponders that if we expect God to perform miracles among the believers the way we see Luke recording here, we must also expect the incompatibility of sin in such a community where the holiness of God’s presence emanates.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, Luke intends to convey motifs concerning the nature of sin. In this act, the couple had availed their hearts to the devil (Acts 5:3, **Ananias, why has Satan filled [eplērōsen]**<sup>14</sup> **your heart**). They had chosen to lie, opposed God, and tested the Holy Spirit. The sin of lying appears to have annoyed Peter the most. The gift of speech is given to humans so that they can truly express who they are, what they think, and how they feel; however, lying distorts everything. Just as the gift of tongues is given in Acts to declare God’s mighty works as the Spirit gives utterances, lying goes against all what men have promised to God.<sup>15</sup> This evokes the scene of the original fall of man. Like how Satan took the leading role in seducing Adam and Eve to turn away from God and do what they desired by lying to God, the same Satan, once again, is in the picture as Ananias and Sapphira lied and made the decision to keep the money. Also, in the same way Satan had capitalized on human nature to lead Adam and Eve astray by seducing them with the good-looking fruit, it also lures Ananias and Sapphira (which means beautiful) with money.<sup>16</sup> Considering the aspects of falsehood and attraction to money, the story

<sup>13</sup> Wright 2008: 79–80. Wright sees the practical implication of becoming God’s Temple in which such divine judgment ought to be taken in the context of God’s divine miraculous involvement.

<sup>14</sup> Although some MSS (P74 Vulgate) have *epeirasen* (“tempted,” so Satan tempted your heart), the mixture of larger external attestation prefers the reading “filled.” Metzger 2000 [1971]: 287–86.

<sup>15</sup> Wright 2008: 81.

<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, Thomas 2011: 125 argues that Acts 5:3 is the cliché of Luke 22:3, in which

of Ananias and Sapphira clearly connects to the initial fall of humanity.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the Hebrew word *laqah* used in [Gen 3:6](#), which, among other definitions, means “lay hold of” or “seize” the fruit, demonstrates exactly what Ananias and Sapphira did to get hold of the money. Peter’s question to Ananias has an emotional force in which it could also be expressed as “how can you do this?”

In Greek, the word *enosphisato* is used to indicate that **they kept back** some of the money ([Acts 5:2](#)) in order to cover up their attraction to possession and fame.<sup>18</sup> Just as a couple had been involved in Satan’s attempt to destroy God’s plan for humanity from the beginning, the same Satan is trying again to destabilize the new beginning of God’s plan to reach out to humanity through the ministry of the church by corrupting the service of the couple. The involvement of Satan and the degree of corruption that had taken place contained great potential for contaminating the body of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

The protection of the church is the next issue that Luke wants to highlight in the two-burials incident ([Acts 5:6, 10](#)).<sup>20</sup> When Jesus declared to build his church on the sure foundation, the Rock, he warned his listeners that his church was to be neighbored by the gates of Hades ([Matt 16:18](#)). While Jesus’ words denoted the vulnerability of his project, he nevertheless ensured victory by being the builder. This implies that devilish malevolence could not overrule the Holy Spirit’s discernment. In other words, the dramatic account of Ananias and Sapphira is introduced at this point to show the cen-

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Peterson 2009: 209.

<sup>18</sup> This word *nosphizomai* is used in extrabiblical writings to mean that someone inappropriately or intentionally takes things of others. E.g., [Josh 7:1 \(LXX\)](#); [Josephus, Ant. 4.274; 14.164](#); [Plutarch, Pom. 4.1](#); [Strabo, Geog. 2.3.4–5](#). Cf. [Titus 2:10](#). BDAG 679.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas 2011: 125 argues in favor of a “vicious and carefully planned” attack by the Satan. He sees that lying while acting as a lovable couple arouses “suspicion and cynicism.” The church had been rocked to its core by the same half-truth / half-lie Satan had used in the garden of Eden to rock God’s perfect creation.

<sup>20</sup> It is noteworthy that Luke in the two-burial incident ([5:6, 10](#)) refers to the young men (*hoi neōteroi*) in the community who take the initiative in wrapping, carrying, and burying the dead body. Rius-Camps and Read-Heimerdinger 2004: 305 argue that referring to the young men is significant since it is they “who are the life of the recently formed community, they who ‘bury,’ quite literally, the past with its attachment to the old values and systems.”

trality of the [Holy Spirit](#) through Peter in preventing the infectious sins of dishonesty, vain glory, and hypocrisy. In this context, in a meaningful sense, Peter is portrayed as playing the role of the church community protector against the gates of Hades.

Finally, it is notable that the breakthrough elaborated in the subsequent verses of the story of Ananias and Sapphira evokes the scene of the consecutive conquests won by the army of the Lord in Joshua's time. Luke's intention might have been therefore to relate the holiness of the believing community and its victory over Satan with the fear of God. On the surface, the sense of fear that came upon the community may have been engendered by Peter's supernatural insight through which he could assess all situations and human attitudes that could lead to God's immediate and severe judgment. It is likely that henceforth no one dared to speak against the leadership of the church. However, on a deeper level, one needs to also see Luke's theological intention in using the phrase **fear of God**; he wanted to convey the "fear of God's holiness." By witnessing God's judgment on Ananias and Sapphira, people recognized God's holiness and therefore were filled with the fear of God (5:5, 11).<sup>21</sup>

More importantly, Luke does not hesitate to relate this atmosphere of fear toward God with the many conversions conducted by the early church ([Acts 5:14](#)). The original creation was threatened by sin and here again when God is restoring His presence among His people, Satan allures the couple to infringe upon the holiness and sanctity of God's new Temple. However, just as He had banished the first couple out of the garden of Eden, He puts away the culprits<sup>22</sup> so that the rest of the church is set on the right course in genuine obedience to God and thus, not fall victim to hypocrisy or vainglory. This might be the main reason why Luke refers to the word *ekklesia* for the first time throughout Luke-Acts in this tainted situation (5:11) rather than using it in a more compatible circumstance ahead, such as 2:42–47 and 4:32–37.<sup>23</sup> As Marguerat says, the

<sup>21</sup> Marguerat 2002: 155–56, 170.

<sup>22</sup> Marguerat 2002: 166 argues that the motive of removing the bodies in 5:6, 10b is related to the purification of the community. He further asserts that "the repeated removal of the bodies show that we have a concretization of the slogan of the Deuteronomist: 'You shall purge the evil from your mind' (Deut 13:6, 12; 17:7, 12; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21, 24; 24:7; cf. Acts 3:23)."

<sup>23</sup> Later in Acts, this word is constantly used, twenty-three more times. On the other hand, Luke uses *plethos* when indicating the assembly of the believers (e.g., 4:32).

status of the church (the assembly of the people of God) “is acquired through the action of God’s judgement, which excluded from the assembly those who are not ‘of one heart and soul’ (4:32).”<sup>24</sup>

## Fusing the Horizons: Treasures in Jars of Clay

In the ancient world, jars of clay were the most common household utensils. Some were used for menial and mundane purposes while others for noble and lasting; in the case of the latter they contained precious items like jewelry, treasures, and parchments to be stored for posterity. Though cheap and fragile, the usefulness of such clay pots in antiquity was unmatched. In the middle of the last century, one of the priceless treasures of the biblical world, the [Dead Sea Scrolls](#), were found preserved in such clay pots; though breakable by a shepherd’s sling stone, they preserved these priceless documents for thousands of years.

After witnessing the Spirit’s role in giving birth to the church and the demonstration of God’s power in healing the lame, Luke now draws his reader’s attention to what could be called the “jars of clay” characteristics of the early church. [Acts 5](#) opens with the tragic loss of a couple attempting to lie for reasons only known to them, and [Acts 6](#) closes with Stephen standing trial for proclaiming the truth. In between, we see the early church’s internal struggle that threatened the church’s stability due to matters pertaining to material assistance. Yet, [Acts 4](#) had ended with an ideal community composed of people ready to share and sacrifice. In [Acts 5](#), Luke delineates the point that this community is made up of weak and fragile clay pots. Ananias and his wife dishonored the [Holy Spirit](#) by trying to lie about the sale of their property. Due to their sin, they met their ruin. The moment they decided to put aside the guidance of the Spirit in their private life due to material greed, they became mere clay pots devoid of lasting value. If the church were to be comprised of such membership, then the church would also be an empty jar of clay.

Luke also makes the point that the church as a whole is made up of jars of clay—some empty and others full, while some are filled with precious treasures and others with dirt. The character of the individual members essentially affects the character of the community. Although Luke allows the readers to glimpse the brittleness of the early church, his primary purpose appears to be to shed light into the jars of clay in order for the readers to see the treasures contained in them. Ananias and his wife were dead, but God used the event to bring a deep sense of awe and respect to the message of the apostles. There came a greater hunger to seek the empowering presence of God in the church. As a result of this new awe and hunger, the church entered into an era of amazing demonstrations of God’s power. The city streets were covered with patients so that Peter’s shadow would fall on them and heal them. Peter, like any other human being, was just a jar of clay but within him resided a treasure, the empowering presence of the Spirit, who used him to bring multitudes to faith in Christ ([5:12–16](#)).

Material greed has always been an issue for the church throughout its long history. Judas was the first, and henceforth, material greed has caused great damage to the cause of God’s Kingdom. Most conflicts in the church take place primarily for some material reason like the desire to control the budget, property, and authority of the church. Even the rise of modern-day televangelism and use of social media has also made it

<sup>24</sup> Marguerat 2002: 164.



very easy for charlatans to fool innocent Christians. When these charlatans are exposed for their greed and deception, the church becomes a laughingstock in the eyes of the world and deceived Christians lose hope in God.

The term “prosperity gospel” has become a normality in today’s Christian vocabulary, in which emphasis is placed on gaining material blessings from putting one’s faith in Christ. The human-centered gospel has shifted the focus from the treasure to the jars that are supposed to contain the treasures. This is just what we see in [Acts 5](#), where a family perishes for trying to be materially well off. However, no matter how weak and broken the jars of clay are, God in His divine grace continues to work with the church. Ultimately, the practical value of the jars of clay is that, as Paul says, “If any one purifies himself from what is ignoble, then he will be a vessel for noble use, consecrated and useful to the master of the house, ready for any good work” ([2 Tim 2:21](#)).