

# THE PRINCIPLES OF OWNERSHIP IN THE EARLY CHURCH. THE PUNISHMENT OF ANANIAS AND SAFIRA (ACTS 5:1-11)

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Reading the shocking story of Ananias and Safira, the temptation might arise to interpret the text verbatim and reject it immediately. It is opposed to the leniency of the gospel, and on the other hand, it is quite unrealistic, so we might easily classify it as a myth. Both approaches undervalue the significance of the story.

First, I would like to examine the marked pericope in the light of Luke's works, the Gospel and The Acts of the Apostles. Then, I will reflect on Old Testament parallels to the story, well known by the members of the ancient Jerusalem Church, and I will also take parallels from the books of Genesis and Deuteronomy as well as from the book of Joshua. Examining these textual contexts together with the pericope, we will get a deeper understanding of the story explaining the message of Ananias' death and its role in the life of the early Church.

## THE FORMS OF SHARING GOODS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

It is precisely the act of sharing that testifies to the presence of God's grace in the life of the early Christian community. In the Acts we find two practices: on the one hand, believers offered their private properties for common use (2:44; 4:32b: κοίνοϛ); on the other hand, they sold private properties and shared the income (2:45: *πιπρα̅σκειν, διαμερίζειν*; 4:34-35: *πωλειν (διαδίδοναι)*).

The first one: sharing private properties among the members of the community means letting people have their own goods and consider themselves careful stewards of them. Instead of claiming exclusive proprietary rights to enjoy ownership, believers let their Christian brothers and sisters use these possessions out of kindness. Through this, believers testify the presence of God's grace and glory in the Christian community. Let us note that this practice is connected to the witness of the apostles concerning the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Through this they became the stewards of the power of the Lord (Acts 3:12; 4:7: *δυνάμις*) receiving the grace of God previously received by Jesus (cf. Lk 2:40) and having the right to manage this spiritual power from that time on.

The other practice is based on selling goods and sharing the income. Selling certain possessions and deposing the income at the feet of the apostles made it possible to satisfy certain personal needs, especially those of the indigent (Acts 2:45; 4:34) and

widows. In this case, the owner gives up his proprietorship and has a chance to escape the trouble and discomfort of sharing.

Since God's grace might be revealed in several other ways in the life of the Christian community, let us describe some other examples: the apostle Paul mentions in his last speech his own practice: he had worked himself to take care of God's people in need (Acts 20: 34–35 those of the weak.) One of the disciples from Joppa, called Tabitha, had a sewing workshop (Acts 9:36–39). Lydia, the woman selling purple fabric, became known by her devoted hospitality (Acts 16:15). The Holy Spirit reveals God's goodness in and through the lives of His believers.

We can say that, in the early Church, sharing goods freely, selling them, and distributing the proceeds under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, are prophetic signs of mission. How is it possible to declare God's grace to people starving if we do not give them anything to eat? It is evident that sharing goods is not an ascetic deed, but rather an opening of a prophetic path: a sign of the last times, the time of God's grace and forgiveness. Due to the different gifts of the Holy Spirit, everyone witnesses to the Gospel on his own way to serve the Christian community (cf. 1Cor 12:4.11.13). It is urgent to convert but the ways of conversion are different. When, in the Jerusalem Church, sharing freely is lived out not only in private actions but publicly in the whole Christian community, then it is the sign of God's grace revealed and manifested openly, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the people of Israel.

## SHARING GOODS: A SIGN OF GOD'S GRACE

If we are to understand the meaning of sharing represented in the Acts we should see that the early Christian community was deeply penetrated by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The author of the book emphasises this fact several times: *“united, heart and soul”*; (Acts 4,32) added by the Western witness of the text: *“with one heart” “one in heart”* (2,46; 5,12); together (2,44–47).

These expressions strengthen the feeling that followers of Christ think of themselves as parts of the same spiritual building like stones put upon each other. It is truly the Lord himself, who invites each one of them personally, He unites their community, He builds up His Church (cf. Acts 4:11–12). Among His own people, God's refreshing presence lets the believers inherit the promise expressed to the fathers, receiving the messianistic blessing already promised by God to his people in Deuteronomy: *There must, then, be no poor among you. For Yahweh will grant you his blessing in the country which Yahweh your God is giving you to possess as your*

*heritage, only if you pay careful attention to the voice of Yahweh your God, by keeping and practising all these commandments which I am enjoining on you today.*<sup>1</sup>

The Jewish people of Palestine thought of this promise as an eschatological hope – faithfulness to the Torah, which would be completed by the Messiah and must end adversity and poverty. Sharing their properties and goods in the community of believers, in other words, is the fulfilment of the promise expressed by God in the Exodus. It is strictly connected to the blessing of Messianic times, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

While Luke, knowing well Palestinian traditions, summed up the life of the Jerusalem Church, he was also aware of the Hellenistic ideas of *koinonia* well known to his readers. Contemporary Greek philosophy considered as friends people with one heart, open to sharing all their possessions with each other.<sup>3</sup> Luke clearly sees the difference between idealistic philosophical approaches and the facts offered by the Lord: human desires stumbling in the dark versus God's blessing manifested in the history of Israel by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Lucas points out the substance of *koinonia*: the manifestation of God's blessings in the life of His people. The members of the community, through sharing their goods, made the Torah alive, and this became a concrete sign of the Last Times. (cf. Jer 31,33; Ez 36,27). In the Gospel of Luke, the extraordinary act of Zacchaeus sharing most of his goods among the poor let other people have the same experience: *“Look, sir, I am going to give half my property to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody I will pay him back four times the amount. (...) While the people were listening to this he went on to tell a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and they thought that the kingdom of God was going to show itself then and there.”* (Lk 19:8–11)

But in the following example we can see that, paradoxically, this blessing might as well be considered a judgement. We see Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth announcing the arrival of the time of God's grace, revealing the division of human hearts (cf. Lk 4:16–30).

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that we can chose from two different interpretations of the original text. First, it seems to be a conditional sentence: *there will no be poor amongst you IF you pay attention on the Lord*. On the other hand, we must not overlook the context either since this sentence is a part of the text of the law and right before and after it we find commands. This suggests that the sentence is a prohibition. In this case, we can interpret the conditional sentence in such a way that the condition concern only verse 4b, the blessing: *Let there no be poor among you, because you will get a blessing from Yahweh if you pay attention to Him*.

<sup>2</sup> This theological approach is supported by the Targum: “If you are devoted to keeping the commands of the law, there will be no poor among you, because JHWH will bless you richly.” J. Dupont: „La communauté des biens aux premiers jours de l'église”, *Études sur les Actes*, LD 45, Cerf, Paris 1967, 509–510.)

<sup>3</sup> The life of Pythagoras, Diogenes Laertius VIII, 10: “Friends have all things in common” and “Friendship is equality”; indeed, his disciples did put all their possessions into one common stock. See Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book 8.

## THE CASE OF ANANIAS AND SAFIRA POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE STORY

Interpreting the verses concerning Ananias and Safira, some of the Church fathers come to dogmatic conclusions concerning the Holy Spirit, to whom one must not tell a lie. Sometimes, they point out Peter's authority to express the judgement of God. Others moralize the story to point out the consequences of lying or stinginess, or to demonstrate the importance of sharing as well as proper morality in the life of the first Christians.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary interpreters mainly focus on worries and distresses of ancient Christians in this shocking story and point out its Old Testament parallels.<sup>5</sup>

### ORIGINAL SIN PENETRATING THE COMMUNITY?

We can say that our pericope reflects a midras-like theological thesis about the nature of original sin present in all human communities: The sin of the first human couple (Gen 3), the love of the sons of gods and the daughters of men (Gen 6:1–4), the case of the golden Calf after the birth of the covenant (Ex 32), the sin of Achan after entering the Land of Promise (Josh), the sin of King David (2Sam 11). We can discover a theological range of stories describing sin. Even the community of believers is not an exception; sin is present among them. Unfaithfulness to the covenant, on the other hand, may result in overflowing Grace.

Since the death of Christ, his first followers knew that the death of the sinner could turn into a reconciliation with God, if he devoted himself to the Lord (Lc 23:42). According to the author of the Acts, this story is not about the Lord's mercy, but emphasises the seriousness of a certain type of sin poisoning the *koinonia* and leading the sinner towards death.

The Covenant offered to Israel had always been a question of life and death. God said through Moses to the fathers: *"Today, I call heaven and earth to witness against you: I am offering you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live"* (Deut 30:19). In the days of the apostles, life as a blessing was revealed by the healing of the crippled (Acts 4:21), then death as a curse was also shown in the case of Ananias and Safira (Acts 5:7). Sudden death seems to be a form of emotional blackmail nowadays, coming from God or the author of the Acts, who want to frighten believers. But we could instead discover that the point of the text is not to frighten but rather to take God's law seriously so as to live, to choose life offered by God.<sup>6</sup> Adam and Eve were allowed to enjoy the magnificence

<sup>4</sup> See E. Jacquier: *Les Actes des Apôtres* (EBib), Gabalda, Paris 1926, 150–156.

<sup>5</sup> In our study we mainly rely on the following articles and studies: D. Marguerat: "La mort d'Ananias et Saphira (Ac 5,1–11) dans la stratégie narrative de Luc", in *NTS*39 (1993), 209–226. L. Tosco: *Pietro e Paolo ministri del giudizio di Dio. Studio del genere letterario e della funzione di At 5,1–11 e 13,4–12* (RivB Suppl. 19), EDB, Bologna 1989.

<sup>6</sup> A. Mettayer: "Ambiguité et terrorisme du sacré: Analyse d'un texte des Actes des Apôtres (4,31–5,11)", in *SR* 7(1978), 415–424.

of the created world freely, just like this couple in the early Church were allowed to offer their goods freely for the better use of the community.

The real catastrophe of the fall can be seen in the light of the previous idyllic state of Eden, as is true in the case of the Christian community as well (Acts 4:32–37). The free sharing in the community as well as Barnabas' devoted character and lifestyle<sup>7</sup> is sharply contrasted to Ananias' deed.

To interpret the story of Ananias and Safira it may be of great help if we look at the character of Barnabas, the Levite from Cyprus. We could consider him as the ideal of the Christian man, especially if we think of sharing goods. The genius of the author of the Acts is revealed through the introduction of Barnabas right before the story of Ananias and Safira. In him, we could see the perfect figure of the first followers of Christ. He symbolises the attitude of the whole one-hearted community, especially concerning the task of sharing. Ananias' deed is sharply in contrast with this and breaks the harmony of the community, just as the harmony of the Garden was broken by the lie of the snake.

It is Satan in the form of a snake, who misleads the woman, and it is the same one in the Acts, who manipulates Ananias and gets him to tell a lie. In both stories, women join men and in both cases end up dissolving a communion: breakers of the law are cast out of the Garden or of the Christian community.

The story of Ananias and Safira is an important warning about original sin and its effects, which are still present in all human communities and even in the newborn Church. If a man and a woman originally called to serve life, through their sin, choose death instead of life, they must be excluded from the community, as Deuteronomy suggests in several verses: "*You must banish this evil from among you.*" (Deut 13:6; 17:7,12; 19:19; 21:21; 22:24).

#### TYPOLGY INSPIRED BY AKAN?

Examining the literary genre of the story of Ananias and Safira, researchers have suggested several typologies, pointing out the parallel example found in the Book of Joshua (7:16–26) describing the sin of Akan. This warrior violated the law when the people of Israel arrived in the land of the Promise. He coveted and took possession

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<sup>7</sup> Barnabas, a Levite from Cyprus, is the first person in the Acts who is not counted amongst the apostles chosen by Jesus. He is close to them, he is even given a name by them, he is called the "son of encouragement" (4:36) and finally we even get to know that he takes charge of Saul, and introduces him to the apostles (cf. 9:27). He is sent to Antioch several times to strengthen the believers (cf. 11:22), and he is even ready to cooperate with Saul (cf. 11:25). In Antioch, he was chosen by the Holy Spirit to fulfill his mission (cf. 13:2). Completely relying on God's mercy, (cf. 14:26; 15:40) he obtained the gift of distinguishing spirits, and he was able to recognise the gift of the Lord given to the believers of Antioch (11:23). In the Acts we do not find any words spoken by Barnabas, but it is a well-known fact that he sold his land and gave the money to the apostles to fulfill Jesus' call – as opposed to the rich young man, who was not able to do this (cf. Lk 18:22). Barnabas became the perfect example of the believer of the last times, and a beneficiary of the consolation of Israel like the aged Simeon (cf. Lk 2:25). The richness of God's mercy is revealed even more strongly in Barnabas in the light of the tragic fate of Ananias and Safira. Luke gives a dramatic account of the story, perhaps in opposition to the exemplary way of Barnabas' life.

of an ornate robe, gold and silver, and was executed for this together with his whole family. The archetype of Akan is deeply engraved in biblical memory (cf. Zac 14:14), even Paul talked about it openly when he left Miletus, emphasising free sharing, a compulsory feature of witnesses to God's Grace: „*I have never asked anyone for money or clothes*” (Acts 20:33).<sup>8</sup>

On the threshold of the Land of promise, at Jericho, God gave the land to the people of Israel without any fighting, as a free gift. Akan broke the covenant given by God himself because he expropriated the booty set aside for God. Joshua declared that all the goods of the enemy had to be destroyed according to God's command so that the people might have received a greater gift in the future. Something similar happened when the people received the manna: they were allowed to collect the portion of that day and they were forbidden to store up manna for the next one (Ex 16:4) Stealing from the booty, Akan stole from the Lord himself, broke the law, and invited the whole of Israel to follow his example. No wonder that in the first battle, the people of Israel sustained a fatal defeat, and buried a lot of their warriors (Josh 7:5).

When Akan and his family were led to the valley of Akor to be stoned to death, Joshua cried out: “*Why have you brought misfortune on us? Today may Yahweh bring misfortune on you!*” (Josh 7:25) In the account of Luke, it is Peter who takes a similar role as the judge.

Like Akan, Ananias and Sapphira play the role of the thieves and liars of the Messianic times, when the Lord's free and generous gift should be recognised. Having sold some of their properties and goods, they pretend to offer the whole of their income to the Christian community but in reality they save part of it, keeping it for themselves. They were not forced to offer all of the money; they were allowed to tell honestly how much they would have offered from the income. They lied before the community (κοινωνία), the apostles, the Holy Spirit and finally to God himself (Acts 5:3–4). They were trapped by Satan, who gets people to tempt God.<sup>9</sup> By their lies they left the community, distanced themselves from the apostles, and disinherited themselves from God's promise.

We can see this as a dramatic scene taking place in two acts. In the first act, Ananias appears in front of Peter, who unveils his sinful lie. Right after this, Ananias suddenly dies. Three hours later, Sapphira unknowingly enters the same house to see Peter and to give an account of her role in the trickery. She dies suddenly, too, right after facing her own sin and the death of her husband.

<sup>8</sup> Some exegetes find other Old Testament parallels like the punishment of Nádáb and Abihu (Lev 10:1–5) or the death of Abia the son of Jeroboam (1King 14,1–18). Still, the similarity is strongest with Josh 7, where we even find the verbs “keep back” (νοσφίζεσθαι), which can only be found here and at 2Macc 4:32 in the OT, while in the NT at Acts 5:2–3 and Tit 2:10. On the other hand, it might as well be interesting to think about the parallel between entering the Land of promise and the beginning of the Church.

<sup>9</sup> We should remember that the believers were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:31) and now the Satan occupied Ananias' heart to tell a lie to the Holy Spirit. See S. Brown, *Apostasy and Perseverance in the Theology of Luke* (AnBib 36), Bibl. Inst. Press, Rome 1969, 98–114.

This is the first time the author of the Acts used the word *ecclesia* instead of *koinonia* to refer to the Jerusalem community. People of the Church, petrified with fear of God's judgement, united themselves and formed a new *ecclesia* of Christ (Acts 5:11: ἐκκλησία)

#### AN ETIOLOGICAL NARRATIVE?

The commentators looked for the historical basis of the events. Some of them – referring to the verses 1Thess 4:13–17 and 1Cor 11:29–30 – suggested that the cause of people's sudden death in the Jerusalem Church should be found in financial scandals.<sup>10</sup> Most of the believers, even Paul, thought of these scandals as a sign of the forthcoming *parousia*. So, the story of Ananias and Safira gave a good explanation for the fact that the cause of death is sin itself.

Other interpreters connect the same story to the Qumran texts. They point out that the core of the sin of Ananias was pretending that he was a mature follower of Christ, while he was only a newcomer in the community.<sup>11</sup>

The most recent researches examine the inner dynamism through which the community acquires the authority to exclude some of its members as told in 1Cor 5:13 and Matt 18:15–17. The community of believers is faced with sins that divide the *koinonia*. They may have realised that, on their own, they are not allowed to exclude anyone from the community that nourishes salvation: punishment must come only from God himself.

It is interesting to see that in our story it is not Peter but God himself, who excludes the sinners, by their death, from the community that bears salvation. So it is not the community who condemns the sinners to death but its leader. Peter discovers the concrete nature of sin dividing the *koinonia*; he reveals the distance created by sinners between themselves and the community and finally he announces God's judgement (Acts 5:9).<sup>12</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Sin committed against the Christian community, as we may have seen in the story of Ananias and Safira, appeared very early in the history of the Jerusalem Church, primarily around matters of money and sharing of goods.<sup>13</sup> Peter immediately pointed out its severity and even God justified its seriousness by the sudden death of the sinners.

<sup>10</sup> Paul similarly warned a Christian community in the case of incest at Corinth (cf. 1Cor 5:5).

<sup>11</sup> C. Spicq: "La place ou le rôle des jeunes dans certaines communautés néotestamentaire", in *RB* 76(1969), 508–527.

<sup>12</sup> Ch. Perrot: "Ananie et Saphire. Le jugement ecclésial et la justice divine", in *L'Année canonique* 25(1981), 121.

<sup>13</sup> D. Marguerat: "Ananias et Saphira (Actes 5,1–11). Le viol sacré", in *Lumière V* 215(1993)42, 51–63.

Facing reality, the community of believers was “astounded” and admitted Peter’s legal way of acting when confronting the sinners publicly with their sins.

In the light of the previous pericope, we saw the archetype of the Christian man in Barnabas and a sinless, single-hearted state of the Christian community. This ideal state is broken by the lie of Ananias and Safira, so they become real antitypes of Christians. Their life is parallel to the life of the first human couple, who broke the law given by God and received severe punishment: expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Ananias and his wife were “expelled” similarly from an honest and devoted Christian community by God himself.

Taking another Old Testament typology, Akan’s story, we understand that God’s commands and laws had always been taken seriously by the people of Israel. Breaking God’s law given to the community deserved a most serious punishment: death. In the shadow of the forthcoming *parousia*, the first Christians were astonished not only because of the power given to Peter by the Lord himself but also because of the seriousness of the law itself. Telling a lie deserves death and exclusion.

Finally, we must also see that, after the death of Ananias and Safira, believers in Christ can understand that sin is overcome by grace. Death has not been outside of God’s plan to bring salvation; rather it has been a part of it. As a proof of this, it is the first time when Luke called the Christian *koinonia* of Jerusalem ἐκκλήσια. The small Christian community becomes a Church due to their honest fear of God, and the Church becomes a community of Christ’s followers from the moment when spiritual life and death have been distinguished. The members of the *ecclesia* definitely “choose life” in Christ.