



# God Abhors Corruption: Some Thoughts on Acts 5:1-11 with special reference to the South African Counter- corruption Efforts

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.102.036>

## Abstract

Corruption has become a buzz word the world-over today. South Africa is no less affected by it than are other countries. Many counter-corruption measures have been devised from a political perspective with no visible results. This reflection is an attempt to introduce a religious intervention. The article argues that the narrative of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts: 1-11) has all the elements of corruption as we know it today as well as a decisive response to it. Redaction criticism is employed in reading the narrative of Ananias and Sapphira with particular reference to the South African counter-corruption efforts. The reading reveals that God abhors corruption, this being inferred from the 'double-deaths' of the corrupt couple. A conclusion is therefore reached that drastic action against perpetrators is imperative and that trustees of state authority who fail to act against corruption and its perpetrators do not deserve to be rewarded with office.

**Keywords:** corruption, counter-corruption efforts, Acts 5:1-11, consequence management, Ananias and Sapphira, *koinonia* community, South Africa.

## Introduction

God abhors corruption. This is the idea conjured up by my reading of the narrative of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11 which is unique in the entire New Testament. The text is indicative of the serious light in which the founders of the early church viewed threats to their new *koinonia* community<sup>1</sup> vision. Contemporary societies label such threats as corruption<sup>2</sup> while the nascent church portrayed corruption as God's most detested enemy. This raises questions such as why corruption is such an abominable vice and what happens if no action is taken against it. My aim in this article is to briefly reflect on the above questions with the view to discerning possible guidelines for a context that is wrestling with the scourge of corruption as is the South African context currently. I argue that the narrative of Ananias and Sapphira does not only reflect elements of what contemporary societies define as corruption, it also provides an idea of how to combat it. Failure to do so is an indictment on those who are entrusted with state authority.

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<sup>1</sup> I have coined this concept based on the Greek word for fellowship, 'reported' life in the early Christian community which reflects notions of *shalom* and Nicomachean Ethics. It marks a new beginning in comparison to what Jesus sought to transform during his short Galilean ministry. Total commitment of converts was required.

<sup>2</sup> The challenge of corruption is not unique to contemporary societies, it can be traced back to biblical times as well. In the New Testament alone, there are many acts that are labelled as corruption. A sample of these may be found in the following passages: Acts 2:27, 13:34-37, Romans 8:21, 2 Cor.11:13-15, Gal. 6:8, 2 Pet. 1:4, 2 Pet.2:19. There is a specific message for the South African society in Acts 5:1-11 because of the situation of similar new beginnings.



Scholarly views on this text abound. They range from a focus on the power of the Holy Spirit to attempts at explaining away what is perceived by some as a “repulsive text” in the New Testament (Foakes-Jackson, 1931). These seem to miss the author’s theological intention with respect to the emerging inclination towards corruption. That intention is inseparable from the vision of establishing a new community. The elements of my assertion are suggested in the text and its immediate literary context. Thus the passage is the work of a redactor who intends to convey a strong message to would-be perpetrators of threats against the vision of a reimagined *koinonia* community. Corruption, particularly involving money, appears to be the first and most serious of such threats in the author’s account of the nascent church. The harsh and decisive stand against it is in contrast to, and a prevention of a *laissez faire* type of leadership which cost old Israel her vision, stability and future.<sup>3</sup>

Following this introduction is a brief appraisal of scholarly views on the text. The intention is not so much to deconstruct their views as it is to demonstrate why I prefer a different trajectory. This is followed by a word about the text and its origin, the aim being to bolster my view that the text was appropriated and rehabilitated for the purposes of addressing the threat of corruption. In the following section, I look at the literary context, followed by a detailed analysis<sup>4</sup> of the text. The analysis incorporates an understanding of contents of the text and the possible theological intention as suggested by its surrounding narratives. This is followed by a brief reflection on a possible scenario where there is impunity or no action against corruption. The last section before conclusion comprises a contextualization of the reflection on the South African context<sup>5</sup>.

### **Appraisal of scholarly views on the text**

There is no single approach to the text at hand and by extension, no correct or incorrect reading of it. The criteria for a plausible or acceptable reading should be determined by its relevance to the reading community, conformity to the broader Christian principles and sound methodology which is able to link the text to both its first century context and the contemporary contexts. These together produce various readings which differ from context to context and are impacted by the social location of the reader (Segovia, 1995; West, 2007, 2015; Bauer, 2016) although this is not always acknowledged. My reading is informed by a search for answers to the scourge of corruption in my context. Owing to this, the purpose of this section is to conduct a brief but critical appraisal of selected approaches for the above-stated reason.

In his 2011 paper presented at the Society for Biblical Literature conference, Albert Harrill provides an outline of six identified scholarly approaches to the Ananias and Sapphira narrative. These are i) the Old Testament story of punishment meted out on Achan for stealing part of the property that was due to God ii) the Christian oral tradition of untimely deaths before the *parousia* iii) *Dead Sea Scrolls*’ prescription of discipline for dishonest candidates iv) legitimation of the excommunication of non-conforming members v) a salvation history approach which views the sin of the corrupt couple as blocking the free activity of the Holy Spirit in human history and vi) the notion of the original sin in the Old Testament. The list is in fact, not unique to Harrill. His own thesis is that breaking a promise, in this case, ‘lying to the Holy Spirit’, courts divine judgement

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<sup>3</sup> The ‘Apiru slaves left Egypt propelled by the vision of a land of flowing “milk and honey” (Exodus 3:17) and ended up with nothing due to corrupt leadership who abandoned the vision along the way. Consequently, the bulk of the Old Testament is about attempts to return the ‘nation’ to the original vision for its salvation.

<sup>4</sup> This detailed analysis is intentional because there are no other similar interpretations of Acts 5:1-11. Hence also much reliance on the text as a primary source.

<sup>5</sup> Owing to limited space, the contextual issue at hand will not be outlined in this article but in a sister publication (book chapter) later. After all, I argue in a different publication (Speckman, 2007) that such analyses and outline belong to the background and they assist in defining the concerns to pursue in the text.



for perjury, a “stock scene of perjury and death familiar in Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures”. He therefore adopts the approach of divine judgement, the aim being to keep it within an acceptable Christian dogma framework. The problem with his and other interpreters’ continued interpretation of the text within a dogmatic framework is that it devalues the text for contemporary contextual readers who are seeking answers to their social concerns. While the text is difficult to take literally, its intended significance in the chapter may have an impact in contemporary situations even if that means in an adjusted form. Given the new beginning that was inaugurated by Jesus and continued by his disciples, it is incomprehensible to think of this text as a mere decoration of the early Christian community’s narrative of how its history unfolded. Lack of historical veracity or otherwise aside, the moral lesson of the text should always be held on the horizon.

The list provided by Harrill is however not exhaustive. It reflects the ideas prevalent at the time of publication in 2011. There have since been additions based on topical and contextual issues. For example, only one year after the 2011 publication, King (2012) penned a paper based on this passage, pursuing the theme of magic. This in a sense, affirms one of the six approaches above but King incorporates modern social science theories in his study of the text. The driver of such ideas, according to him, was superstition within communities, particularly contemporary African communities. It is not possible to respond fully to King’s very detailed paper whose approach is in my view, in line with contextual concerns. However, the point must be made that the basis of his assertion is questionable. There seems to be some exaggeration of the prevalence of magic and superstition in Luke-Acts, a mistake which clouds the point he wants to make. Amakhungu (2019) from the Kenyan context on the other hand uses the same text as an example of strong leadership by Peter. He reads it alongside chapters 8 (Simon the Magician) and 14 (Lystra and Derbe) where Peter’s responses remain consistent with those of good leadership. This is another new approach and Amakhungu is permitted by the hermeneutical principles to see in the text what it allows him to see (Croatto, 1987). His narrative reading of the text allows him to identify strong leadership in Peter.

There is no disagreement with him on the basis that until the episode of Ananias and Sapphira, Peter is portrayed as the spokesperson and vehicle of the Holy Spirit. This however only becomes clear from 5:12, following the episode that may also be regarded as a “watershed” between the previous chapters and post 5:1-11 episode in respect of leadership. The approach by Thorday (2021) is however not helpful either. He adopts an either/or position, that is, it is either accepted as a literary account, making God a murderer of dissenters or rejected as a myth because it sounds unrealistic. His own position is the latter but he then falls back into the dogmatic mode in his reading of the text. For example, he resorts to issues of God’s grace which makes individuals to share their belongings, the original sin which he links to the act of Ananias and Sapphira, the Achan typology as a lesson on what happens when one steals from God and the leadership of God in the narrative as opposed to that of Peter. None of this respond to concerns about corruption.

Doubts about the text’s historical veracity should not necessarily lead to an interpretation that is totally devoid of a sociological perspective. Biblical texts derive from living communities and are written for the edification of living communities (cf 1Cor. 14:26, 1 Cor. 14:3). Not surprisingly, Thorday’s conclusions are also astounding- for instance, he asserts that the community is formed into a church because of its ‘fear of God and their choice of life in Christ’ (ibid.). It works against the notion of a loving God who is “slow to anger” (Psalm 103:8; Exodus 34:6). This interpretation can therefore not assist in this article’s pursuit of responses to corruption though relevant parts of it might be utilised in this publication. For O’Toole (1995), the text demonstrates Luke’s conviction that the church can neither be deceived nor compromised by the temptations of the devil just as



Jesus had demonstrated it in his own passion. This sounds pedestrian and is disappointing coming from a scholar of O'Toole's caliber.

The above discussion has provided a few examples of varied approaches to Acts 5:1-11. None of them deals directly with the issue of corruption although some contain information that could be repackaged in response to the concerns expressed about the scourge of corruption. I will stick with redaction criticism as I pursue the search for answers on corruption and consequences thereafter. The text is my primary source. It is therefore important to opine on the question of its possible origin before proceeding with the reading.

### **About the text (Acts 5:1-11)<sup>6</sup>**

As a precursor to my reflection on the text, it is necessary to take it briefly through two stages, namely, a tracing of its origin and its literary context. Both aspects have a bearing on the reading of the text. The former will suggest a motive for the inclusion of the text in the narrative while the latter will hint at the author's theological intention. I will look at the latter under an appropriate sub-heading below.

The former aspect seems to have been of interest to the older generations of New Testament scholars. I will respond to only three of their views which seem to have influenced the interpretation of the passage down the ages. The first is the notion that it originated from the Roman practice of sharing (Spencer in Long, 2019 cf Arndt & Gingrich, 1957). According to this view, the community depicted in the early parts of the Acts of the Apostles is like a Graeco-Roman family. There were rules for benefactors and it was shameful to hold back what was expected to be shared. I disagree. There is no credible evidence of it in my reading on the Roman social history. On the contrary, sharing in the Roman and Hellenistic contexts was voluntary and not as widespread as might be assumed today. In times of famine the opening up of granaries in order to feed others was indeed non-negotiable (cf. Speckman, 2007). Parsimonious persons were loathed even to the point of them being stoned to death on account of food scarcity during famine. Selfishness by those with grain silos could not be tolerated (Hands, 1967). Evidence shows that such a situation did not obtain all the time albeit it was rife in times of calamities. It is therefore an unlikely *topos* for the narrative in Acts 5:1-11. Besides, the narrative on Ananias and Saphira is not about stinginess but about dishonesty and theft. It is not about refusing to share but about frustrating attempts to bring about a new community.

A second view links the narrative to the Essene Community's practice of detachment from material possessions. This view is promoted by scholars such as Keener (2018) based on discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls (1947/1956). Recruits into the Essene Community were required to denounce all material connections and sell their belongings before they joined the ascetic life. This was a condition for their membership because the community had adopted a flight position in relation to the world in favour of isolation and spiritual discipline<sup>7</sup>. The proceeds would of course be donated to their new community to support its material needs and previous

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<sup>6</sup> Luke Johnson (1992) regards Acts 4: 23-5:11 as a unit which is about "The power of the Apostles". The two parts 4:23-4:37 and 5:1-11 are joined together by the connective "de" which suggests a transition from "empowerment of the apostles to the demonstration of that power within the community of believers. In order to avoid a distraction from the point made in this article, I will respond to Johnson in a sister paper which approaches the same text from a literary perspective. Suffice to point out that contrary to Johnson, the leadership of the apostles according to Acts 5 seems to only become prominent after 5:11 when the Holy Spirit seems to play a lesser role, following the deaths of the corrupt couple.

<sup>7</sup> Spiritual discipline as a motivation may have been secondary. According to the *Damascus Document*, (n.d.) the Essene community of about 4000 fled from persecution into the desert in the second century BCE and disbanded around the second century, possibly during the Jewish War of 66-70 CE.



owners had no claim on the proceeds. In the context of the new community in Acts, the text indicates that possessions were welcome, not for selfish reasons but were encouraged to come into the community with their belongings and hand them over for redistribution. That was a voluntary act for those who 'heard' (Acts 4:4 cf 4:20) and came to identify themselves with the vision of the new community through the act of baptism (Acts 2:41). The new community sought to navigate its way through life's challenges by making this world a place for all living under the sun. Keener's view must therefore also be debunked.

A third view is that it was taken from the Book of Joshua (Spencer 2011, cf Arndt & Gingrich, *ibid*). It may have been drawn from Luke's unique collection despite some earlier authors who attempted to link it to the narrative about Achan in the Book of Joshua (7:21). The elements of the two stories differ although the intention, namely, to warn would-be deviants that any act that disrupts efforts towards ensuring a new beginning and public well-being would be punishable by God. It appears that the two common elements between the two narratives are the word *nosphizomai* (meaning misappropriate) used in the Greek versions of the respective narratives and capital punishment that followed a confession to the act. There is no such a confession or time allowed for it in the Acts narrative though. Death in the Acts version follows the false declaration of the proceeds. In the Joshua narrative, there is a confession and a recovery of the stolen property. In other words, there was a process. It would therefore appear that the author of Acts has appropriated and modified a story that had been going around in order to emphasize a 'zero tolerance' for corruption. That being a strong possibility, his version ought to be accepted as a new story from Luke's own source.

An interesting element in the detail of the new story is that Ananias held back a portion of proceeds from the sale of the property he previously owned (in contemporary communities, Sapphira was the co-owner) while in the case of Achan, what was held back came from the plunder of Jericho. It would seem that the author of the Acts version understands the new recruits (Ananias and Sapphira) to have joined the new community with all they had, in other words, "in community of property". In the absence of any new ideas on the origins of this narrative, the differences and some semblances between it and the cross references provided (both biblical and extra-biblical), it should be assumed that the author took elements from various sources and constructed his own narrative for the purposes of his Acts account.<sup>8</sup>

### **Literary context of Acts 5:1-11**

The passage at hand has a wide range of literary contexts. There are the immediate context of Acts 5, with an outer layer of chapters before and after it, then the context of the entire book which is related to the context of the proclamation of the entire New Testament, then the Old Testament context. Of relevance to this article are the contexts of the Acts of the Apostles and those of the surrounding chapters. These are of course, understood against the background of the New Testament proclamation of a loving and peaceful God whose default traits are love and compassion while S/He applies the law as the last resort.

It would appear that the surrounding context, when read closely, suggests that Acts 5:1-11 interrupts the flow of a narrative that starts off with triumphalism - Jesus has risen from death (Acts 1:1ff), he is elevated to a divine level (Acts 1:6-11), the Holy Spirit subsequently descends as he had promised (Acts:4:1-4), his followers begin to act in the power of the Spirit following the Pentecost event (Acts 2:4ff). This new community, born of the Pentecost event, is committed to a reordering of the society, subverting oppressive social structures, creating a caring and self-

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<sup>8</sup> There are a few variants of the text as identified by Metzger (1994) but they are not strong enough to have a bearing on the content or interpretation of the text. I have therefore left textual criticism out of this reflection.



sufficient community where goods are equitably shared (Acts 2:42, 4:34-35) and defying any authority that seeks to distract them from pursuing this (4:19-20). It is a dynamic community, described by Boesak (1982) as a “Pentecost Church” in action. Despite external threats which could not stop the movement, a *koinonia* community emerges as early as chapter 2 and by chapter 4, it appears to have been well established (Acts 4:32). There are no overt rules in the narrative save the assumption that all participants are of “one heart and spirit” (Acts 4:32). Up to this point, it only had to deal with external challenges. Such is the portrayal of the flow of a movement (later called the Way in Acts 9:2, 19:9, 23, 22:4, 24:14, 18:26) which is propelled by the vision of a new (*koinonia*) community and fueled by the power of the Spirit. However, a change follows after 4:37 (at 5:1), signified by the use of the word “de” (now) translated as “but” in some versions. This is not an insignificant transition as the reader might be misled by the small word used. It is like the effect of a huge turbulence in the sky which nearly causes an airplane to stall mid-air. The passage that follows in 5:1-11 is contrasted with the report at 4:36-37 whose elements are the same up to the point of declaring the proceeds from the sales of their respective properties. Thereafter, binary positions between the two are introduced.

The narrative of Ananias and Sapphira appears to mark the first internal threat to the vision of a *koinonia* community. I will reflect on its significance in the next section of this paper. The second internal threat follows in chapter 6 consisting of a complaint of racism emanating from the food distribution practices. It portrays a practice which is part of the ‘history’ the new dispensation seeks to alter or reorder. Those accused of discriminatory practices against the Hellenists (Acts 6:1f.) deserve to be brought to book because their behavior affects the common good too. However, this could be forgiven, a possible explanation being that they were servants of a faulty system which was most probably inherited from the Jewish system and practices<sup>9</sup>. Unlike in the case of the corrupt couple, theirs was not a pursuit of personal interests but service within the framework of a system that prioritized the Jewish brethren. The leadership immediately spotted the fault and corrected it by creating a structure manned by six deacons whose mandate was to ensure the extension of equity in the distribution of food as well. Note the contrast between systemic and personal actions (Acts 6:1f cf 5:3f). In one case, actions may be involuntary while in another, there is willfulness<sup>10</sup>. Whatever the origin, the Apostles deal with this swiftly and decisively (Acts 6:3-5). The establishment of a diaconate office ensures governance and sustainability/preservation. It is significant that after the incident of Ananias and Sapphira, focus turns to the authority of the Apostles and the need for their leadership (Acts 5:12ff) as opposed to the ‘activity’ and power of the spirit (Acts 1-4). The point made appears to be that divine authority is mediated through chosen human beings. These are also trustees of the vision.

Apart from the issue of Jew/non-Jew relations often referred to as “Jewish-Gentile relations”, we also see in Acts occasions where the Apostles brush off attempts to corrupt them. For instance, Simon the magician, wants to ‘buy’ their healing power (Acts 8:18-24). Instead of being tempted by the money, they rebuke him and he immediately falls on his fault. These surrounding accounts raise questions about the portrayed behaviour of Ananias and his wife and the purported reaction of the Apostles. Could it have been an historical account or was it a specially constructed narrative or a narrative from elsewhere which the author found useful to address a situation of corruption in the nascent church?

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<sup>9</sup> The Jewish Temple system had provisions such as *Kuppah* and *Tanhui* to support the hungry among their numbers (cf Speckman, 1999, 2001, 2007)

<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis (2013) thinks of corruption as flowing “out of the heart” which is saturated with sin. In other words, it is a stage beyond sinfulness. This is an interesting distinction, more so when read against the backdrop of his description of a corrupt person’s behavior.



If it is accepted that Acts 5:1-11 is part of the work of a redactor whose aim is to convey a message about corruption or related tendencies, then the literary context provides a framework for our interpretation of the passage. We now need to make the intended connections between the passage and those flanking it on either side. As it would be appreciated, the preceding passage which is contrasted with 5:1-11 has its origins in the narrative of the early beginnings which is broken down into four chapters, culminating in the episode of Joseph the Levite selling his property (4:36-37) and placing the proceeds at the feet of the apostles. It is not clear whether the author intended to climax the hype that followed Pentecost with this highest form of commitment, only to be spoilt by the anti-climax that comes with the misconduct of the corrupt couple. The curious observation is that the Spirit plays a less direct role while the Apostles lead and take decisions after the episode. Is it then incorrect to see a 'perfect community' while the Spirit had its firm grip on it and another characterized by worldly challenges after its contamination by the "fall" of Ananias and Sapphira? Whatever the case may be, the passage which closes a chapter in the narrative of the early beginnings (4:36-37) portrays an ideal member and an ideal behavior. Hence Joseph is given a special name, Barnabas. If this were to be taken further, in line with Luke's preoccupation with the new Way, a parallel could be drawn between the "Garden of Eden" before and after the fall of Adam and Eve (cf Bruce, 1988).

### God and Corruption

Given the above summary of the literary context, this text is not arbitrarily included in the Acts of the Apostles but on account of what it denotes – God's decisive response to a threat to the *koinonia* community which ushered in a new beginning. For Luke in particular, the notion of a new *hodos* (way)<sup>11</sup> plays a pivotal role-whether this manifests in the hope for a flipping of the tables (Luke 1:46-55) or a new era characterized by good news to the poor, blind, captive, etc. (Luke 4:18-19) or an unprecedented sharing of resources (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35). In this section, I take a closer look at the transgression with the view to establishing the elements of planning, selfish motive, corruptor-corruptee factor and the act and concealment which are usually present in corrupt acts; I then look at the harsh consequence of the transgression, referred to as "divine judgement" by some (Harrill) or "Curses" by others (Kent) and the role of the apostles as leaders of the new dispensation.

The narrative outlines a case of corruption by Ananias and Sapphira, this going against the apostles' attempts to inaugurate a new *koinonia* community. There are consequences for the offenders. However, I have found no systematic academic analysis of the text under the theme of corruption and why that constituted a threat to the well-being of the new community. I look at these from various angles before reflecting on the harsh consequence which is death. Certain words used in the text point to its drift. In 5:1 already, the word "*knowledge*" is used in some translations (eg. RSV) to explain that even before Ananias sold the land, Sapphira knew about the impending sale. Some translations (eg. RSV) only state "*Ananias with his wife*" while others still, allude to "*with the wife's consent*" (eg. NIV). Does this make Sapphira an accomplice in what is about to unfold? The use of "*with*", "*knowledge*" and "*consent*" interchangeably in the respective translations of this verse only indicate that the decision to sell was taken jointly. However, the use of "*with... knowledge...*" in 5:2 implicates Sapphira in Ananias' dishonest act. Just as she was aware of the intended sale in the first place, so was she again aware of Anania's decision to hold back part of the proceeds. Her silence instead of condemning or discouraging or reporting the act makes her a willing participant. None of the versions consulted contains any suggestion of persuasion or force used to coerce Sapphira into participating in the act. However, constant

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<sup>11</sup> My idea of a new beginning or "new age" according to some scholars is different from the way it is understood by scholars such as Spencer (2011).



reference to Ananias as the protagonist and Sapphira as his “sounding board” and supporter makes him a “corruptor” and her, the “corruptee”.

Does the text provide any internal evidence of the corruptor-corruptee relationship? Peter, the leading “accuser” in this case, pins much responsibility on Ananias albeit without exonerating Sapphira. This is not only because he was the first to come into the venue but because he allowed himself to be “filled with Satan’s spirit” (5:3). The ‘you’ is singular because in the Jewish background as Peter would have known it, the man owned the land and he would have prevailed over his wife. As a consequence of allowing Satan’s spirit to be at work in him as opposed to the Holy Spirit, he is driven to think and act contrary to the workings of the Holy Spirit in the new community (5:3). The Holy Spirit is at work, gathering believers in one place and moulding them into one mind and spirit (4:32). Every activity of the believers is in pursuit and/or support of this. Anything contrary to it, disrupts and scatters with the effect of a mid-air turbulence as suggested above. In Peter’s view, Ananias’ actions do not result from a mistake committed but are a manifestation of a premeditated plan. Peter uses the term “*contrive*” to indicate this (5:4, RSV). It emphasizes the point that it was not a thought that crossed his mind in a spur of the moment, it was part of a thought-out plan. What about his wife?

We have established above that the author consciously portrayed Sapphira as a corruptee by mere association and lack of a counteraction. A closer look at the account actually suggests that the author wants the reader to see more than that in the episode. The first indication is what appears to be a planned delay of her appearance on the scene. No explanation is given for her *three hour delay* (5:7). Anyone with an experience of the workings of crooked people knows that Ananias might have gone to ‘test the waters’ because both him and Sapphira were conscious of their betrayal of the rest of the community. In biblical numerology, the number three would ordinarily denote “eternal life” or completion of God’s purpose (Jones, 2008, Haverstine, 2015) as 4 or 7 would denote completeness (Jones, 2008). However, it primarily is associated with testing the validity of something as in the three-fold questioning of Peter by Jesus (Baruch, n.d.<sup>12</sup>). There are several examples, including the Trinity, of the use of the number in this manner. However, three is also half of six, a number with a bad connotation. There was nothing to validate in the narrative in question unless the author intended to show that Ananias was indeed confirmed dead and buried. Given the fact that the narrative itself represents an inversion of everything that is good, it is more probable that the significance of three in this case is that it signals something bad-of course, the death of Ananias is already bad news. More bad news was about to come, namely, the death of Sapphira (5:10). If any religious significance is to be read into this narrative, it is the bad news of a double-death. Otherwise, the three hour delay should be regarded as a calculated delay while Ananias is testing the waters-only that he was immediately found wanting. Sapphira was therefore brought to the temple venue by the anxiety about her husband’s whereabouts after a long wait.

A second indication of her complicity is their conspiracy to *withhold part of the proceeds*. The text states that they “*agreed together*” (5:9). This could also be a substitute for “conspired”. In legal terms, they had a common purpose to commit a crime regardless of whether the owner and active seller was Ananias and she, the receiver of the proceeds<sup>13</sup>. Hence she did not stop him or report the intention to the Apostles before the act. The assertion by Bruce (ditto) that the decision to withhold part of the proceeds came after the pair had received the money does not alter the fact

<sup>12</sup> Baruch, R (PhD) outlines up to the number 50 in the undated blog titled: *Hebrew numerology and the Bible*. The submission is at odds with some views on certain numbers but in agreement with many others.

<sup>13</sup> See discussion of the doctrine of common purpose in law articles and court cases, eg. Peter Parker (1996), South Africa and the Common Purpose Rule in Crowd Murders. *Journal of African law*. (1996), 40 (1), 78-102 in the case of Hendrik Sithole vs The State judgement delivered in January 2016.





that she was as guilty as he was. In fact, her response to Peter's question about the price of the field (5:8) confirms this. It is unlikely that she was merely repeating what she was told by Ananias. Otherwise she would not have 'fainted' but blamed him when asked why she 'conspired' with him. The forthright question from Peter struck a chord in her conscience which reminded her that she was caught out. Whether Sapphira was a morally clean and trustworthy woman prior to the sale of the property is not clear in the narrative. The author does not provide background details as is the case with Joseph the Levite at the end of the previous chapter. She is now an accomplice, a corrupt person. All innocence is gone. What could have happened if she had told the truth about the amount? That question must remain rhetorical.

Many interpreters of Acts 5:1-11 tend to focus more on the consequence which consists of double-deaths and less on the conduct of the couple. To some extent, this is justified, owing to the many questions it raises about God. The consequence of a 'permanent removal' (5:4) from the fellowship of believers is unprecedented if my dispute of the link with the Achan narrative (Joshua 7:20-26) is sustained. There is also no subsequent repetition of the same even as Peter attempted against Simon the Magician (Acts 8:18-24). The question is whether the deaths are caused by God (Harrill, 2011; Morris, 1980), Peter (Morris, 1980) or shock (Dunn, 1975) to which I refer as 'self-removal'. While over the years there has been no consensus on this issue, it is important to note that the statement made by the author is pivotal to our understanding of the gravity of corruption. If the reaction to corruption was an automatic death sentence (from a historical-critical approach perspective) or a symbolic drastic action (from a narrative perspective) then the author was making a statement about corruption as a destructive force which should not be allowed to take root in the new community. Whether the narrative were to be viewed from a historical-critical or narrative perspective, the point made was that corruption was abominable and would not be tolerated. Besides, corruption as we know it, is invariably an antithesis of progress or development. It steals from the little there is and undermines the efforts to improve the lives of many. This is as true of the life of early Christian fellowships that is described in the Acts of the Apostles as it is of many others in contemporary times.

Interestingly, the story of Ananias and Sapphira concludes with the remark: "And *great fear* came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard of these things" (5:11). This appears to be the intended outcome of the episode. The point has been driven home—"disturb the flow of the Spirit in the community, there will be grave consequences". As one commentator opines, "the leaders had to make an example of them" (Morris, 1980). Their authority was at stake. Death—whether self-inflicted or by divine decree, is a capital punishment congruent with the gravity of the offense. It amounts to an irreversible removal of a person from the society. And it is intended to serve as a deterrent. This is only effective if the trustees of authority act as expected.

Aside from what is suggested to be a need to make an example of the couple, there appears to be much more in the narrative leading up to the two contrasting scenarios at the end of chapter 4 and beginning of chapter 5. Starting with the Pentecost event, there is a narrative about how the Apostles under the power of the Holy Spirit, brought together those who believed in Jesus, creating a new *koinonia* community. The hallmark of the new *koinonia* community was a total commitment of individuals to the principle of the common good and concomitant behavior (2:42, 4:34). This ensured equity and harmony and it contributed to the numerical growth of the community (5:12f). Without this, the reported flow of the narrative would not have been possible. The interruption of the flow by the conduct of Ananias and Sapphira is very conspicuous, more so when looked at from the perspective of what follows on in verse 12- the flow of the narrative taking on from where it had left.

Notwithstanding the above, questions about God's role in the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira cannot be brushed aside. Peter implicates the Holy Spirit in his questioning of Ananias and his



wife. Was he thereby invoking the power of the Spirit against the couple or pointing to the Power behind the life of the new community? Curiously, in each case, his mentioning of the Holy Spirit was followed by a death. This is open to various interpretations and I will not pursue it but a different question namely, how could the God of the New Testament be associated with murders? The New Testament presents a long-suffering God who judges with love before resorting to the Law which carries punishment (1 John 4:7). This God is portrayed in the life of Jesus who makes the claim: “what you see me do is what the Father does...” (John 5:19) and is the antithesis of the Old Testament view of God which is couched in the *lex talionis* (that is, eye for an eye) principle. Snippets of the latter come through various statements and narratives in the Old Testament. Among the most glaring examples of cause and effect are the choice between life and death which is given to ‘Israel’ (Deut. 30:15), offense and exile (Jer. 25:11-12, 29:10) as well as the notion of vengeance on the enemies of Israel (cf oracles in Amos 1 & 2). This begins to tone down towards the end of the Babylonian exile (eg. Isaiah 40:1-11) and in the New Testament, a complete flip becomes apparent (eg. Luke 23:24). It is therefore inconceivable that the death of Ananias and Sapphira could be ascribed to the same God. On the other hand, death from severe shock is scientifically possible, resulting from a ‘heart burst’ (Morris, *Ibid.*). However, it is not a common occurrence, especially when two people at different times are affected in the same manner. The least that could be expected is ‘fainting’ and depending on how long the brains have been deprived of oxygen, death may result. There is therefore nothing conclusive about the cause of these deaths save to confirm their hyperbolic role in the statement against corruption. They point to the dim light in which corruption or related tendencies are viewed. There is no monetary value or price of the field provided, an omission interpreters of this text tend to overlook. In my opinion, the omission is intentional, the author’s point being that corruption has no size, it is deplorable whether at a small or large scale. The principle is to refrain from misappropriating, regardless of the amount.

The last leg of this section is a reflection on the role of the apostles as leaders of the new *koinonia* community. Apart from Amakhungu’s (2019) recent article, interpreters of this text tend to gloss over the role assigned to the apostles in the narrative. Viewed closely from the Pentecost event (Acts 2) to the end of the Ananias and Sapphira narrative (5:11), the Holy Spirit is portrayed as the *de facto* leader while the apostles are its ‘foot soldiers’. In the narrative, it is the apostles, led by Peter, who now speak ‘on behalf of the Spirit’ (5:3-10). This subtle change is often overlooked by interpreters. Yet it prepares for a transition that follows after 5:12 when the apostles take full charge of the community, now for the first time referred to as the “Church” in the chapter. This transition is not inexplicable: the Holy Spirit was at the helm while the apostles who had come out of hiding were still establishing the new community. Its readiness is supported by the oneness of heart and soul, the equitable satisfaction of needs and the example of Joseph the Levite. The apostles were given the responsibility of protecting such gains and the episode of Ananias and Sapphira is proof that they had taken that seriously. As indicated above, it was only like a passing turbulence in the sky or a footnote in the narrative of the early church. The rest of its history is in the apostles’ hands. If at all the Spirit ‘handed over’ to them, that should be regarded as a recognition of their success as stewards of the new order and a reward for their success. The ‘loose movement’ or community has now become a coherent body, the Church with an emerging and visible leadership.

It is clear from the above reading of the text that the problem of dishonesty for material gains - whether known by the term corruption or any other euphemism, is not new. It could have been a familiar vice. Given the number of occurrences spread over the entire New Testament, it is possible that the author made use of the narrative to demonstrate what would happen to Christians should they participate in such acts instead of committing fully to the new Way.



## Corruption and consequence

The use of the death metaphor is the author's manner of driving home the seriousness of the offense and the concomitant action that should follow it. This is a proactive stance, intended to serve as a deterrent to any would-be offender if the author was addressing an existing problem in the community for which he was writing. In my view, the two reported deaths might be hyperbolic with the view to demonstrating how seriously the matter of corruption was viewed. There are several instances of corruption in New Testament writings as listed above. If the apostles had only reacted by demanding a paying back of the undeclared balance of the proceeds that would not have conveyed the condemnation of corrupt tendencies as strongly as the author had intended.

If the logic of the narrative in the first six chapters of the Acts of the Apostles is to be of any assistance in this reflection, it is the indication that corruption is a threat to God's plan. It disrupts God's plan for the common good and halts the flow of benefits to those who need them the most. The author seems to be communicating that Individuals who initiate and engage in corrupt acts are incorrigible and are therefore fit for elimination, a response which is stronger than the excommunication proposed by some commentators above. The reason is that corruption in the context of the new community portrayed in the narrative is not a legal transgression but a betrayal of trust, failure to exercise self-discipline and a symptom of a perverted mind. It is therefore a spiritual deficiency. Flowing from this are a public display of what appears to be good deeds, refusal to admit wrongdoing and a projection of guilt on others (cf Pope Francis, 2013). Sapphira failed to self-correct even though she could have done so after sensing that something was not right with her husband's whereabouts. She did not do so because she did not see anything wrong about misappropriating the proceeds from the sale of the property. Failure to correct such acts by the apostles would have been tantamount to condoning a free flow of vices. Willimon (1988) goes further and asserts that it would have meant the 'death of the church'. Contrast the couple's behavior with that of Simon the Magician, a different picture emerges. Is this another lesson on how a Christian should behave after they have been called out?

There appear to be three types of corruption highlighted in the text and its literary context. The narrative on Ananias and Sapphira clearly speaks to *dishonesty and theft*, the hallmark of which is the theft of communal property for personal benefits. Ananias and his wife had sold property they had handed over to the community and withheld part of the proceeds. It is not clear how many would have benefitted from that but the text alludes to needy people within the new community. The second type is *nepotism*. Ordinarily, nepotism is associated with a bias towards relatives or close friends. However, it can be extended to those of the same cultural background as well this leaving a very thin line between nepotism and discrimination. Hence the Hellenists complained about the discrimination of their wives (Acts 6:1). This was in fact, "Jewish brotherhood" at work-no one mattered above those of the same origin and ilk. Thirdly, *bribery* is also a form of corruption. There is no innocent or self-standing bribery. It is always for a reason and linked to something. Simon the Magician's attempt to buy the Apostles' healing power constitutes corruption to the extent that he is enticing the Apostles with money to turn their heads away while the magician usurped the power of the Spirit.

Imagine if there was no consequence for the above behaviour. The apostles seem to have set a standard in a situation where corruption may have been allowed to be rampant. It was the first crisis to hit the young church (Willimon, *ibid.*), a matter of life and death. The good news is that while Ananias and Sapphira stuck to their story even as Peter was inquiring, this leading to their demise, Simon the Magician, a new convert, immediately refrained from his attempt and repented before a curse could descend on him. Whether the reaction of the church with fear after the



Ananias and Sapphira incident was temporary or permanent is not clear. If it was permanent, it would have contributed to a reordering of society.

### **Corruption and South Africa<sup>14</sup>**

There are direct and indirect parallels to be drawn between the first century and the 21<sup>st</sup> century experiences. Like the nascent church, the South African context is struggling to nurture a young democracy which is threatened inter alia, by corruption. The scourge has permeated both private and public sectors. While at both levels it poses a threat to the young democracy, it is less difficult to confront it head-on in the public sector than it is in the private sector. Part of the difficulty arises from a misguided view that private owners may do with their property as they wish. Some public participants of radio talk shows during the Steinhof saga (2017)<sup>15</sup> advanced such arguments. The text clearly states that even if the property was his (Ananias') own, dishonesty or corruption could not be tolerated. My own reading which removes ownership from converts who have surrendered themselves and all they possessed to the community renders all property state property<sup>16</sup>. The state in this case being the new community. Those who misappropriate therefore defraud the community or the state.

Given the above, it would have been a travesty of justice for the trustees of state authority to continue to tolerate corruption indefinitely as the South African government had done for almost nine years (2008-2017). The testimonies at the State Capture Commission (2018-2021)<sup>17</sup> reveal that politicians at the head of the state were aware of a network of corruption within as well as outside state organs but never acted against it. This is contrary to the swift and obligatory action taken by the leaders of the early church in 5:1-11. What makes contemporary state leaders think that they have no duty to protect the state and its members against corrupt individuals? There is a subtle hint in the text about the dominance of the Holy Spirit until the removal of Ananias and Sapphira from the community after which the leadership of the apostles become more dominant. Does this mean that leaders who act against corruption are trustworthy, therefore, rewarded? Conversely, should contemporary societies not dethrone leaders who fail to address corruption decisively? If they tolerate and/or defend corruption once, they will always feel comfortable to co-exist with it while the majority are deprived of what they could have benefited in a corruption-free environment.

Corruption is not good for the young South African democracy for the same reason as it was not for the nascent *koinonia* community. The loot, regardless of its magnitude, would affect the development of the new Way both spiritually and materially. As Pope Francis (2013) argues in his booklet, corrupt acts reveal what is inside the person but that in turn, affects the spiritual health of the entire society. The text suggests that if the society is to be saved from this, corruption should not be allowed to take root. Otherwise many others will perceive it as a way to 'better life' while it is only a life of crime. Materially, the beneficiaries of the redistributed possessions who received equitably according to each person's needs would be deprived of more opportunities as

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<sup>14</sup> The discussion of this section will be heavily based on anecdotes from the media since the final report of the Commission on State Capture will only be ready at the end of 2021 and possibly released to the public in 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Steinhof is an international company with huge investments in several retail undertakings in South Africa. It collapsed in December 2017 after it was exposed that Marcus Jooste, its CEO, had lied about its finances. Many investors lost their shares and monies and businesses closed down. No immediate legal steps were taken primarily because it was not regarded as a priority while corruption in state owned entities was prioritized. The matter is ongoing.

<sup>16</sup> The existence of a contract is even depicted by the laying of the proceeds "at the apostles' feet".

<sup>17</sup> All we know from the State Capture currently are snippets from the media-electronic and print. A final report is being prepared by the Commission for the State President. It will be submitted at the end of 2021.



a result of the looted resources. The Mbeki report of 2015 avers that Africa loses between \$30 and \$52 billion annually<sup>18</sup> while it has an annual shortfall of R200 billion.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, corruption is the antithesis of efforts to establish a full democratic order with all the benefits of a democracy. The conduct of the characters portrayed in the text under discussion was contrary to such efforts in the nascent church, thereby running the risk of depriving members of possible opportunities

Much of what is revealed during the inquiry of the State Capture Commission (2018-2021) indicates that all three forms of corruption as identified above are present in South Africa today. There is theft of state possessions and resources, whether through a diversion of these or through direct misappropriation by individuals and syndicates. The Commission evidence also hints at the presence of nepotism as well. Close family members and distant relatives have been prioritized in job and resource allocation with the view to laundering money through them. In addition, there also appears to be rampant bribery of both state officials and private sector. Names have been mentioned at the Commission which will remain anonymous in this article. The point is that people had received kick-backs for approving tenders or forwarding confidential information about tenders and related processes.

In all the above cases, there is a clear pattern of planning on the part of the culprits, refusal to admit wrong-doing, selfish motives for their actions and conniving with one or two other persons. These are present in the biblical text as we had analysed it above. We may not have addressed them blow by blow but they certainly came to the fore during the analysis of the text. If corruption comprises of acts that undermine the main activity aimed at benefitting all, the pattern identified above gives it the characteristics of subversion. Ignorance is no credible explanation as the perpetrators are invariably people in positions of note. Pope Francis (ditto) correctly distinguishes between “corruption” and “sin”. In my view, sin may be regarded as a “slip up” while corruption may be characterized as a planned and deliberate activity. It is therefore no surprise that perpetrators exploit gaps where possible and attempt to corrode the system where there are none. This is regardless of whether the resources being exploited are a private property as in the case of Steinhof or state assets as in the case of State Owned Enterprises- if they have the potential to benefit the public but are diverted for individual benefits, that is corruption. In fact, the private sector is in the country as co-creators of the new democracy, not its destroyers. Those who do the opposite define themselves outside the young South African democracy.

South Africans were able to mobilise all non-capital resources against apartheid and oppression, particularly in the 1970s and 1990s. Churches took the lead and in the latter days of apartheid rule, religious and civic activists united under the banner of “Mass Democratic Movement” which incorporated the “Standing for the Truth Campaign”.<sup>20</sup> What stops them from doing the same to counter corruption? As it is clear in the above reading of the text, the church is given authority alongside the failing civil authority to provide leadership by doing the correct thing. If leaders of government are trustees of the authority of the state, they must act with integrity on behalf of the state. Otherwise South Africa will be fully consumed by corruption which has already taken root in society globally, arising from greed and self-preservation. A zero-tolerance stance against corruption has to be adopted, starting in the house of God, extending to civil authorities. The buzz word should not only be “corruption” but “God abhors corruption”.

## Conclusion

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<sup>18</sup> Mbeki led the United Nation’s High Level Panel on the Illicit Financial Flows from Africa. The report was released in 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Greg Mills (2021) sees more losses than have so far been touted. He refers to trillions as opposed to billions.

<sup>20</sup> The two became one stream as religious leaders joined hands with civil/political leaders around 1989, following the publication of the *Kairos Document* (1985) under the banner of the Institute for Contextual Theology.



This reflection was not meant to provide solutions but to highlight what is available in the text that could be of assistance in the South African context. Contemporary and contextual concerns informed the reflection and three outstanding issues were pursued, these being-the nature of corruption and response in the early church, a reflection on why a harsh sanction was deemed an appropriate consequence and what is expected of those entrusted with state authority. In applying the results of the reflection to the South African context, the failure of the state to act or contain the state of corruption became clear. Looking back at the text, there can be no reward for leaders who fail to act decisively on corruption. They cannot be trusted with the protection and advancement of the state. This as the text suggests, is because God abhors corruption as it is a threat to God's plan for God's world.

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