



Destroying the City, Burning the fields: Towards a New Testament Concept and Definition of Corruption

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to construct a New Testament concept and definition of the phenomenon of corruption. It contends that current definitions which are based on the World Bank's and Transparency International's political-materialistic definitions either miss or ignore the "unique" position adopted by New Testament writers whose focus is on the protection of the ideal, that is, the "common good", against disruptors' destructive actions. Pursuant to its aim and with some assistance from socio-literary criticism, the article pays special attention to Luke-Acts, the epistles and Greek terminology for corruption. It then concludes that while there is no direct reference to abuse of material resources or public office in the New Testament, any behaviour that is tantamount to subverting the vision of the common good is viewed as corruption; it is no different from the "destruction of the city" or "burning of the fields".

Keywords: corruption, New Testament, common good, Greek terminology.

Introduction

In his paper on the roots of corruption, Marbaniang (2013:1) correctly asserts that our awareness of the commission of corruption comes from our knowledge of the opposite of corruption, the ideal. Stated differently, corruption is a disruptor¹ or subversion of a vision, the ideal towards which others are striving. This in the New Testament context, translates to a wrecking of the vision which may be summed up as the "common good" (cf. Aristotle, Aquinas)². New Testament authors elected to focus on protecting the vision of the "common good" against disruptors despite the Old Testament's materialistic approach or the views held in the Greco-Roman world of their time. The New Testament concept therefore lies between the ideal and individual acts but the political-materialistic concept, even as it is adopted by some theologians, overlooks or distorts this aspect. My aim in this article is to construct a New Testament concept and definition of the phenomenon of corruption, based on "the ideal" which enabled New Testament writers to pronounce against corrupt behaviour. The Greek terms, *phtheira* and *diaphtheira* among those used to denote corruption, Luke-Acts and the epistles will be utilised in the process.

I argue that while the Greek terms are not used in every instance, the narratives in Luke's gospel and Acts and the pronouncements against direct and indirect corruption in the epistles suggest a concept of corruption that is different from contemporary and ancient understandings of the same which are based on the World Bank's (WB) and Transparency International's (TI) shared concept and definitions. There may be a continuity between ancient and contemporary concepts (cf. Hill, 2013 contra Bratsis, 2003) but the New Testament

¹ I am using this term in a pejorative sense as used for example, in "biological disruptions", not in a positive light as for instance, in "innovative disruption".

² Plato (in Republic) alluded to the "good of the city" which might be slightly different from the concept of "common good".



concept which differs slightly from both runs parallel to these.³The Greek word(s) used to denote corruption, the tensions between premodern and modern concepts as well as the debate on the use of public resources for private gain have been debated from various angles, including a theological angle (cf. van der Walt, 2001; Theron & Lotter; 2012, Coetzer & Snell, 2013; Itebiye, 2016; Igbari, 2016; Okyere, 2018; etc.). However, there is a glaring lacuna of a biblical-theological concept, especially when viewed from a biblical studies perspective. Williams (2021) correctly observes that responses to the scourge of corruption are based on how it is conceived and defined. He opines that all definitions can be useful, depending on the positionality of the user. I will make use of the fruits of current debates and/or research in attempting to establish a New Testament concept of corruption and the resultant definition.

This article also utilises, albeit in a limited manner, socio-literary criticism associated with the name of Norman Gottwald (1989). The approach has been used for almost four decades now, therefore needs no introduction. In terms of this approach, the meaning of terms cannot be understood unless they are placed in their social context. The term “socio-literary” represents both socio-historical and literary aspects.

Following this introduction, the article proceeds with a discussion under the following headings: i) a critical appraisal of political-economistic definitions of corruption ii) a brief outline of a possible socio-literary context iii) *diaphtheirein* as a loaded term iv) towards a New Testament concept and definition. A conclusion precedes the bibliography.

A critical appraisal of political-economistic definitions of corruption

Definitions

Classicists will not take kindly to any work that does not appreciate the complexity of the notion of corruption (cf. Ruffy, 2012; Onongha, 2014:2). According to Ruffy (2012: 131), it may refer to many things, depending on the ideology of the author(s) and their social location. Ruffy emphasizes that it is only a close reading of the usage within the context of the author that can illuminate meaning. She recommends Plutarch’s work⁴ as the most important source for the study of corruption. This latter statement is however debatable but to pursue it in this article will lead to a distraction. As can be seen below, the goal can be achieved even without referring to Plutarch’s work. Yet this does not take away Ruffy’s point about the complex nature of the notion of corruption and attempts to quantify its damage.

Definitions of corruption have been evolving from a focus on particular acts such as theft, extortion or bribery (cf. Rotaru, et al., 2016) to abuse of public office and its various permutations. Most of the individual acts by which corruption was defined were committed by state officials, politicians and soldiers (Hill, 2013; Pluskota, 2020; Rotaru, *ibid.*). According to Rotaru et al (*ibid.*p.240f), there were immediate consequences for such acts in both biblical Israel (as seen in the Old Testament) and Graeco-Roman societies (as reflected in their social history). However, none of the ancient references- both secular and religious, have a single definition. The now popular political-materialistic definition of “abuse of public resources for private/personal gain” is used by both theologians and secular researchers regardless of its short-comings when viewed from a biblical perspective.

That said, the above widely used definition of corruption which comes to us via the WB and TI definitions whose roots date back to the mid-1990s⁵ actually goes back to the 1930s⁶. In terms

³ The Old Testament has inter alia, Hosea 9:9, Isaiah 1:4, Genesis 6: 12, Deuteronomy 31:29, Proverbs 29:4, 4:24. However, due to limited space, the discussion in this article will be limited to the New Testament.

⁴ Although the author does not specify the work referred to, the possibility is that it is *Moralia*.

⁵ Allaby (2020) dates it back to 1996 but the concern actually goes back earlier than the event which produced the definition in 1996.

⁶ A similar view was originally expressed in the 1930s. I am unable to locate the references as the article goes to print but it is worth pursuing for research purposes. Hill (2013) asserts that the concept goes back to antiquity



of this, corruption is respectively, “the (ab)use of public office for private gain” (WB) and “(ab)use of entrusted power for private gain” (TI)⁷. This foundational concept has since acquired many permutations at different times and in different contexts. For example, Iyanda (2012) cites Ekiyor’s (2005) definition which runs as follows: corruption is the “unlawful use of official power or influence by an official of the government either to enrich himself or further his course and/or any other person at the expense of the public, in contravention of his oath of office and/or contrary to the conventions or laws that are in force”. An earlier version along similar lines was proffered by Nye (1967) who defined corruption as “Behaviour which deviates from the formal duties of a public role- regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or state gains; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence”. Wang Huning and Huang Bai Lian simply define corruption as: “non-public use of public power” (in Xizi, 2016). Even a “progressive” author like Tanzi (1998) falls back on this definition despite being critical of it. This may only be a reflection of the bankruptcy of ideas, not a total agreement with the conjurations. Marbaniang (2013:5) also uses the same with some misgivings, for instance, he questions the lop-sidedness of the definition.

Lisa Hill (*ibid.*) opines that this definition is in continuum with the premodern views on corruption. This is in response to Peter Bratsis (2003) averment that current views on corruption are influenced by modern conditions. In turn, Hill dedicates an entire article to an analysis of what she refers to as Corruption 2, that is, acts or incidents that reflect corruption as it is talked about today in an attempt to dispute Bratsis view. This focuses on similarities between the Graeco-Roman situation and our contemporary responses to the phenomenon of corruption. Many more permutations of the WB-TI definitions reflect almost the same content as the dominant definition. Therefore, I will not provide further examples. In my view, the above examples portray a picture of the basic concept used by adherents to the political-economistic definition.

Some definitions however, purport to be comprehensive. One alludes to ethics and individual behaviour (Heidenheimer, 1989), this in the face of a tension between “collective” and “primary” responsibility (Nye, 1967). Heidenheimer is of course, critical of any definition that includes a “breaking of the rules” as this reflects a “Weberian era” which, he argues, was not present in the past. In terms of this, rules are determined by certain sections of the community, this making corruption relative. However, this is not a concern of this section. My aim is to establish the merits of the public/private divide. A definition that is solely based on the public officials’ conduct is narrow and misleading. Corruption has no such boundaries, a point which Hodgson (2007 cf. 2020) feels is neglected and lacking in definitions. The point here is that corruption is found in both public and private spaces. It has both moral and economic dimensions.

James Scott (1972) offers a definition that goes against Heidenheimer’s objection. He sees corruption as “acting against the laws pertaining to it, or acting against what the public opinion deems integrity, or again, acting against general interest”. This has no specific focus on the abuse of resources but can incorporate that as well in its explanation. The key words for me are “integrity” and “general interest”, not the social location of the deed or the perpetrator. These take the concept beyond a narrow focus on material gains to the individual’s interests and behaviour in relation to the interests and social order of the community. Another which may be perceived as deviating from the World Bank/ Transparency International definition is offered by Mistree and Dibley (2018). They conclude in their Working Paper (03) that corruption is “an event that occurs when an actor seeks an unauthorised benefit from an organisation in a manner that could compromise the public trust in that organisation”. ‘Unauthorised benefit’, ‘organisation’ and ‘public trust’ are key words here. They may be used

but it is the World Bank which popularised the view, following its empirical observations in developing and non-developed countries.

⁷ Williams (2021) notes that the UN does not have a definition but focuses on specific acts such as bribery, money laundering, embezzlement, etc.



with the state, private business or even a social structure such as the church or sports body. The individual's behaviour in relation to the whole is what causes a concern.

In my view, the above discussion sums up the current portrayal and definitions of corruption in secular circles. Further pursuit of the discussion will result in unnecessary repetition. This puts me in a position to conduct a brief critique from my perspective as a biblical exponent. That follows below.



A critique of definitions

In addition to the critical comments I made in the process of discussing the above definitions, I proceed to make three more points: i) The definitions sketched above revolve around individuals' actions and individuals' responsibilities as public servants (Williams, *ibid*, p.2). This is partly because the history of corruption in organised societies seems to have originated in public office- either those who were in office and had abused their position or those who used bribes to get into office or those who felt that they were not paid enough by the state and resorted to accepting bribes or extortion (see Rotaru et al, 2016:245; Hill, 2013; Pluskota, 2020). On the other hand, the WB, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and TI were at different times concerned about the escalating levels of corruption in public office. They had never denied the culpability of offenders in the private sector but focused more on actions of those in public office precisely because corruption at that level depletes resources that are budgeted for the good of the broader society (see Allaby, 2020:84; Pluskota, 2020:79-80; Wei, 1999). Stealing them or bending the rules so they could benefit a few, destroys the broader vision (cf. Speckman, 2021).

I have argued in the above article that the private sector has elements who are as corrupt as elements found in the public sector (Speckman, *ibid.*). However, focus on the public sector is thought to be linked to the impact corruption has on the well-being of many with more damage to the survival of the poor and marginalised (Pope Bergoglio, 2013). I assert in my article that even what is owned by the private sector and individuals in the context of a democratic South Africa has been pledged to the state by those who set out to invest in order to make the country work (*ibid.*). Any deviation from this impacts the vision of making democracy a reality. Nefarious ways of deviating make matters worse, affecting the well-being of many, particularly the poor, in the same manner.

This strengthens the need to develop a more comprehensive definition, at least, in the South African context. Experiences with transnationals such as Steinhof (2017) for which there is still no prosecution⁸ and Fidentia (2011) support this. There are similar experiences with private companies in other parts of the world. Their corrupt actions cannot be excused simply on the grounds of being private entities. After all, the monies that are being moved around by private companies wreck the broad visions of the countries from which they originated.

ii) Another point of concern is the exclusion of the ethical dimension in the definitions. There are divergent views on the question of whether corruption is purely an ethical issue or not. Okyere (2018:4) for example, argues that "corruption is relative- what is considered a corrupt act in one society may not be so in another". Domenic Marbaniang (*ibid.*) postulates that corruption is a "moral problem that has social and economic dimensions". In my view, morality refers to general behaviour with the ability to distinguish between right and wrong while ethics refers to the ability to make the correct judgement at the right time, regardless of what external rules or code of conduct of an organisation or country state to the contrary. Contextual ethics places the discretion on the individual in a given context rather than the norms of a given community (cf Hoffman, 1971). The definition that is out in the public must make this explicit instead of leaving it to the experts to infer. It takes a consistent and sustained social teaching before individuals make a connection between abuse of office for private gain and morality. Those who coined the definition may have had this in mind but an untrained reader will not readily be in a position to do so. If the definition is to be user-friendly, it has to incorporate these aspects and make them explicit.

Motivating for this, Hodgson (*ibid.*) who also asserts that the true meaning of corruption has been distorted observes:

⁸ The media reports (19/10/22), as this article is about to be submitted for publication, that the Reserve bank in South Africa has frozen the assets of former Steinhoff CEO, Markus Jooste. But the Reserve Bank is not the same as the National Prosecuting Authority. It is not yet clear whether the latter has a case against him or not.



The concept has itself been corrupted by the utilitarian underpinnings of mainstream economics and by ideological prejudices against state activity. The commonplace definition of public office for private gain, itself reflects this conceptual corruption...Policies to consider corruption should embrace ethical issues and emphasize matters of moral motivation. (ditto)

iii) A final and important point is that existing definitions even by theologians, are largely derivatives of the WB-TI definitions. Their hallmark is a political-economistic 'stamp'. The biblical-theological lacuna is conspicuous. It is not clear why biblical scholars have not earnestly reflected on the subject and produced a biblical-theological concept. However, complexities around the subject, even at a theological level, could be the reason. It is hoped that one of the benefits of this exercise will be the assertion of corruption as a theological theme, worthy of biblical scholars' attention.

A possible Socio-literary context

The above critical appraisal of current definitions has honed the task of this reflection further. However, in line with Marbaniang's (2013) assertion and the principles of the socio-literary approach, we can only have a significant reflection on the text when its socio-literary background is understood clearly. This enables the reader to gaze behind the words, at communities that produced the text. We however cannot go too far behind in the case of texts that speak to corruption for two reasons: i) there are no traditions or narratives about the phenomenon in the New Testament. Instead, there are original and direct warning statements from the author(s) with no parallels in contemporaneous literature or society. Hence it is difficult to find stories to use as *topoi* on the theme of corruption.

Even the narrative of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) which by inference is a corruption story, appears to have no parallel in ancient literature of the time. I have elsewhere questioned the link made between it and the Joshua (Joshua 7:19-26) narrative of Achan (Speckman, 2022a); ii) this is not a full inquiry into a particular text but a brief attempt to establish the principle behind the NT concept of corruption from various biblical and extra-biblical texts. I believe that what appears to be the NT concept stands between the individual's actions and the vision being pursued. Of course, we know from literature that acts such as bribery, extortion, sexual seduction, etc. defined corruption in ancient and classical societies.

In the spirit of Marbaniang's philosophical statement, I now zoom in on the reconstruction of the "ideal" as envisaged by the community which made it possible to identify and speak against corrupt acts within. My view is that Acts 2-8⁹, in response to the question at Acts 1:6 "when will you establish the kingdom...?" provides a clue. We do not deny the possibility of a *utopia* as suggested by some (e.g. Noble, 2020) but a *utopia* is always a projected alternative to experienced reality. The Acts 2-8 block suggests that the community that later came to be known as a "Christian" community was according to the author, beginning to emerge as an alternative to the existing one. Its founding principles emulated the values of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Luke the author, would have been familiar with these and, if his Acts account is not reflective of historical reality, he would have appropriated Aristotle's document as the ideal framework of his narrative. This by itself would not have been enough for an author who was extending a gospel message. The addition of the spiritual dimension not only

⁹ No intention to contradict my earlier focus on 2-6 but am accommodating the story of Simon at Acts 8 which also falls under the period still dominated by Peter.



legitimated (Esler, 1987) his message but it also moved it to the realm of the “common good” (*apanta koine*).¹⁰

It is not a coincidence that Aristotle¹¹ is also said to be the author of the “common good” notion which was later refined and popularised by Thomas Aquinas in c.8 CE. He was one of the great thinkers alongside Plato and others who had a concern about social stability, self-preservation of communities and “civilised culture” in the city states. In fact, Plato and Aristotle are reputed to have sought to develop ideal government forms which would incorporate values of goodness (Rotaru, *ibid.*p.241). More importantly, they viewed governance for “common interests” as the key. The clear influence of these ideas in the Acts of the Apostles’ early chapters confirms that the author also shared a concern about the stability, self-preservation and transformation of the new communities. In making Jerusalem the launching centre for that was not arbitrary- for the marginalised Jews, that was the place to transform first. For Christians, the idea of transforming social structures there, using nothing but their spiritual resources (cf. Korten, 1990) was a guarantee for a “mock takeover”.¹² This was to spread to other places where similar communities were established. But there was no similar takeover outside Jerusalem until in the fourth century. There are no stories to tell about corruption in the epistles save the direct messages of condemnation from the author which suggested that there was a challenge with the behaviour of some members of the “body”.

The episode of Ananias, assisted by Sapphira appears to be a “spoiler” in this context (Speckman, 2021). There is however, no verbalisation of that in as many words. It is implied in the description of the act and the reaction of the apostles. The Graeco-Roman literature as referred above (see SOK NHEP, 2003; Hill, *ibid.*,570), exposes the harsh punishments to those found guilty of corruption. These would have been politicians and judges, people who are vital for the stability, preservation and transformation of societies.

I now want to proceed to look at the word which describes the above acts. For the purposes of this discussion, I leave out *phtheira* and focus on *Diaphtheirein*.

***Diaphtheirein* as a loaded term**

Classical literature denotes corruption in both Greek and Latin words. This reflects a wrestling with the phenomenon in Greek and Roman societies which was captured by their respective “thinkers” and authors (e.g. Homer, Herodotus, Plutarch, Cicero). The Hebrew scriptures also reflect a concern with a similar issue in biblical Israel. I am focusing on the Greek word *diaphtheirein* in its various forms, partly for delimitation purposes and partly because I am working with the New Testament texts which were written in the Greek language. References to Latin words will be determined by a need to illustrate or support a point. I contend that *diaphtheirein* is a loaded term to the extent that it is not only descriptive of the phenomenon of corruption but contains meaning(s) as determined by contexts in which the word and its cognates are used. For example, what I understand as corruption in broad terms referred to bribery in another context but was understood to mean “corruption”.

¹⁰ By “common good” Aquinas referred to a fusion of the extrinsic and intrinsic common goods to make a whole (Bersnak 2014). In this understanding, God is the extrinsic common good while the order of the universe is the intrinsic of the common good. Hence the common good of the universe is not whole without the extrinsic good.

¹¹ Plato referred to the “good of the city” which might not be the same as the “common good”.

¹² The alternate theory of development (people centred development) espoused inter alia, by David Korten (cf. 1990) states that social transformation starts with mobilising people to utilise their “bargaining power” (ie., inner resources) to undermine and transform social structures in pursuit of a beckoning social vision. This is what the author of Acts portrays of the early Christian community. They created their own socio-economic and administrative structures and pledged allegiance to their own leaders. The Temple state was still intact at the time.



In line with the above and the principles of the socio-literary approach, I wish to register three brief comments from Willem Vorster's appraisal of then newly launched *Greek-English Lexicon*, edited by Louw and Nida (1988), which in my view, are germane to the discussion. Vorster (1991:33) reminds us that i) the definition of individual words 'reflects the diagnostic components of the particular meaning; they are not just translations'. Hence different meanings, according to the location of the user of the word ii) he further warns that because of the above, words can never be analysed in a mechanical or machine-like manner as some, at times, tend to do iii) despite much information that follows, coming from lexica and dictionaries, these are not determinants of meaning but aid the person who uses the word(s) to do so, assisted by his/her context. I have made a similar point in different publications before, assisted by the works of Bakhtin (1981) and Suggit (1994). If words are a means of communicating meaning, they should be expected to always carry the baggage of the user and that cannot be ignored in attempts to understand them.

Louw and Nida (1996) provide several cognates of the word *phtheira* (corruption). We may call these variations. Some of them do not translate *phtheira* but are associated with corruption through interpretation. They include: *ekstrephomai* (be corrupt), *diaphtheiro* (deprave), *phthora* (moral corruption), *skolios* (unscrupulous), *panourgos* (scoundrel) and *apostrepho* (lead astray). Very few of these appear in the New Testament. Matt Slick (2018) observes that a different form, *phtheiro*, appears nine times in the New Testament and is translated as "corrupt" or "destroy".¹³ The reader of the Greek New Testament is therefore spoilt for choice with respect to descriptive terms for the various manifestations of the phenomenon in the background cultures. They may contextualise these according to their interpretive environments, in line with Vorster's reminder that the meaning of a word is determined by the user. For example, the term *mgodoyi* which I use to characterise Ananias of Acts 5:1-11, elsewhere (Speckman, 2022), may be covered by the term *panourgos*. My interest here is not on the morphology but the semantic field of the words. The lexicon creates some latitude in that regard.

In the introductory chapter to a collection of essays on *Corruption and Integrity in Ancient Greece and Rome*, Flip Bosman (2011:6-7) conducts a survey of English, Latin and Greek terms used to describe corruption. His departure-point is the dictionary (Woodhouse, 1964) but more important is his support of his arguments with extracts from the ancient Greek and Roman texts. While he appreciates the list of words for "bribery" and "depravity" which appear in the dictionary, he still prefers *diaphtheirein* which in his view is translated by the Latin term *corrumpere*. Bribery and *sykophancy* (blackmail) are only manifestations of corruption or a form of corruption (Onongha, *ibid.*). In my view, *sykophancy* should be regarded as a crime that is different from corruption. Bosman himself acknowledges that there is no appropriate Latin or English equivalent of *diaphtheirein* but that *corrumpere* is the closest of all. Viewed from the perspective of Bosman's argument, the latter word does go beyond the narrow confinement to "bribery" which is described by many words such as for instance, *anapeithein* (bribe), *dorodokos* (one taking bribes), etc. In both the Septuagint and classical literature, corruption is mostly manifested in bribery and it was rife. Hence several words for bribery. There were incidents of extortion as well but these seem to have been confined to a few tax collectors and some army officers.¹⁴

Bosman (*ditto*) proceeds to point out that there are morphological similarities between corruption and the word *corrumpere*, a Roman legal term which is rendered as "destructive", "ruin", "destroy", "destruct". In some New Testament texts, these words translate *diaphtheirein* or its cognates and they are often used with reference to the 'body'. Bosman then traces the use of these words in different contexts. In Homer (*Iliad* 13.625) for example, it refers to *utter*

¹³ Occurrences pertaining to morality (1Cor. 15:33, 2Cor.7:2, Rev.19:2 and Eph.4:22), one on leading astray (2Cor.11:3) and three on physical death (1Cor. 3:17, 2Pet.2:12 and Jude 10).

¹⁴ Bosman (2012) interestingly observes that the *philarguros*, that is, "lover of money", is often the one who is tempted to engage in corrupt acts.



destruction of the city while in Herodotus (1.36), it is used with reference to a *burning of the field* and again, in Herodotus (9.88), it refers to *putting to death*. I am putting emphasis on these as they appear to be helpful examples for our purposes. They also confirm the point made by Vorster that a word is not only translated but is given a new meaning.

Hill (ibid.) supports the association of *diaphtheirein* with *corrumpere* because according to her, it distinguishes “gift” from “bribe” while other words used tend to “conflate or confuse the two (eg. *Doron, lemna, chresmasi peithein*)”.¹⁵ However, she understands it to be referring to the corruption of the mind which diminishes the ability to make sound judgements (ibid.). Such a person thus loses the independence of mind (Bratsis, ibid.). Examples of this are judges and jurors who accepted bribes so they could influence the outcome of the legal hearings. Hill however, falls short of pronouncing on the relativity of the notion of corruption in ancient Greece as she points out the accusation of Socrates as corruptor of the youth of Athens. This, she found, referred to his imparting to them of his “subversive” political ideas which led to “irreverence” towards political leadership and “undermining” of the state (Hill, ibid.; Taylor, 2001, Bratsis, ibid.).

It would not be accurate to state that the terms and meanings discussed above have no direct economic facet. Accepting or giving bribes implies the involvement of money or any material gift in lieu of a bribe. The foregrounded words make no mention of extortion but if there were such acts, they too involved one form or another of material compensation. I also note that the focus of the words and meanings discussed, save in the case of Socrates (399 BCE) and the youth of Athens, is on individuals and their actions. This however, is not in a spiritual or pastoral sense but in a legalistic and condemnatory vein. In other words, the concern is not about the damage individuals’ actions inflict on their moral or spiritual well-being but on antinomian behaviour for personal gain. By contrast, the case of Socrates stands out as a concern about a possible collapse of order and the organised state if Socrates continues with his “subversive” teaching to the youth of Athens. His trial was held to ascertain his reputed guilt on two charges, including *asebeia* (impiety) against the pantheon of Athens, and corruption of the youth of the city-state (Kenny, 2016). The descriptions that seem to match, based on Graeco-Roman literature (Homer, Herodotus, Plutarch) are that of “utter destruction of the city” and “burning the fields”. Both metaphors fit in that they speak to what is summarised in one word as “subversion”.

It is a subversion of the city’s vision and a subversion of its well-being. The letter to James (3:5) uses the metaphor of fire and forest to refer to the damage a tongue could cause. In this case too, there could be counter-teachings which destroy the entire plan or doctrine. Warnings against bad company and people that destroy the mind hint at such acts. I test these below in the context of statements from some New Testament writings.

***Diaphtheirein* and the phenomenon in New Testament**

Based on the above discussion, my aim in this section is to concretise the views of ancient authors on the phenomenon of corruption in the context of New Testament writings. I am consciously referring to authors’ views because, while the notion of private/public is non-existent in the New Testament, we still do not have a single concept against which the New Testament writings may be compared. Nor do we have anecdotes in ancient literature that may be used as *topoi* for interpreting and/or understanding the contents of the warnings in the epistles, for instance. By testing, I do not mean a reading of each but matching the references with categories which the ‘frame of meanings’ below provides.

The difference between secular and New Testament documents is clear: secular literature portrays corruption in terms of the weakness of an individual, manifest in greed, bad exercise of judgement, sexual seduction and state subversion (see, e.g. Nel, 2020). Destruction is a

¹⁵ Hill here seems to be misunderstanding the difference between the act of bribery (manifestation) and “corruption” (phenomenon) (see Taylor 2001:53-54).



common operative word in all these situations. On the other hand, the New Testament community has at its centre the creation of a united body in every way, guided by the principles of a common good (Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-35). This should be manifest in the embracement of diverse backgrounds, adherence to the doctrine of the apostles and maintaining high moral standards. Any deviation from this, or any teaching that contradicts the doctrine or general behaviour that wrecks the common good, is corruption. It subverts the broad vision of the Christian community.

Are the readers of New Testament texts free to interpret the word as they see it through the eyes of their own contexts? We had asserted above that there are no *topoi* based on secular literature. New Testament writers would have been aware of the prevalent views and narratives on corruption in secular literature. They chose a parallel route instead of picking on acts such as bribery and extortion by which corruption was largely defined. This does not stop a reader from exploring different possible meanings if *diaphtheirein* and associated words fit the context and lend themselves to one or more meanings which translate as *corruptere*. The text is not a closed entity. It is always open to new interpretations. Since there is no singular text focused on in this reflection, I list below possible frameworks of *diaphtheirein* within which references with a hint of corruption could be interpreted. This is based on the above discussion of the use of the word. It is my opinion that such information could be used (cf. Vorster *ibid.*) to construct new meanings:

1. *Surrendering one's will*: This meaning of the word is conveyed in the dictionaries and Graeco-Roman literature. It is found in the New Testament in the warning about those who change one's mind from correct to corrupt thoughts (Romans 16:17-18; 2Corinthians 11:3-4). It is partly caused by keeping bad company and partly caused by ignorance despite the teaching of the apostles. In secular literature (cf. Bratsis, 2003:10-13) a person who took a bribe was thought to have surrendered their independent will to the donor of the gift or bribe.
2. *Impaired judgement*: In ancient writings, taking of bribes seems to have been one of the foremost manifestations of corruption. The Old Testament condemns it (see footnote 2 above), Graeco-Roman literature alludes to it with condemnation (Rotaru, et al, *ibid.*) but the New Testament strangely has no references to it. The response of John the Baptist to the soldiers in Luke (3:12-14) might be hinting at the scourge of bribes and Felix's leaving of Paul in prison (Acts 24:6) is thought to be a strategy to get a bribe (cf. Igbari, 2016). Of course, Luke would not drop this thought if such a practice was non-existent.

The Greeks and Romans believed that bribes impaired one's judgement because they were given so that judges and jurors could find in favour of the one who gave a bribe (Bratsis, *ibid.*). The same could be said of extortion. When money is exchanged something else, that is, the integrity of the system, is compromised. Hence John the Baptist preached against taking bribes (Luke 3:12-14) and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:8) turns his back on extortion as part of his conversion to new life. In the absence of the materialistic dimension, allowing oneself to be swayed from the correct thing by people of bad influence also reflects impaired judgement.

3. *Burning the field*: this is one of the usages of the word in ancient literature (Homer, Herodotus). It is however in a rhetorical as opposed to literal realm. The "burning of the field" may be referring to the spreading of bad ideas that negate the good there may be or oppose the shared vision or plan that is in place. I have alluded to Aristotle's notion of the "common good" (appropriated and made famous by Thomas Aquinas c.8 CE) in three of my recent publications on Acts 5:1-11 (Speckman 2021, 2022a; 2022b). The author's narrative about the establishment of a sharing community and the value systems that undergirded that community, including the embracement of diversity,



point to a common good. As in Aquinas the external (divine) good activated and propelled the internal (human) good. Anything opposed to that was wrecking the ideal. The specific concern in this regard appears to be a concern about unity of all members of the community. There seemed to be a group within the body that was constantly spreading a different message from the one that was preached. They insisted on the circumcision of the gentiles as required by Jewish law. This was not only causing instability in the young communities, it was also destroying the plan to transform societies. Hence warnings and reprimand (Galatians 6:8 cf. 2:4, Ephesians 4:22-23).

4. *Destroying the City*: The *polis* is an important place for many. Although it depends on the countryside for nutrition (Encyclopaedia Britannica), it provides other developmental opportunities. It was a centre of administration, a religious centre and a marketplace. As the records show, the city was a dynamic and constantly improving place. Those whose fields were either confiscated, sold or simply unproductive, ended up in the city as an alternative to rural life. The narrative in Acts 2-6 provides a hint at what happens in the city- there were a plan, opposition, good life, bad, etc. Of course, interfering with these was tantamount to destroying a city or sabotage in a metaphorical sense. Hence a harsh response as observed in the fate of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). References to corruption should also be viewed in this light.

The above discussion has summarised the possible levels of a New Testament concept of corruption. It incorporates the meaning of the words in the Graeco-Roman context as revealed in the literature of the time and how that could assist in the understanding of the same in New Testament writings. It is however, this author's preference to appropriate the same meanings of the words for the purposes of this article.

Towards a New Testament Concept and Definition of Corruption

The above discussion has highlighted the following: a problem with the political-economistic approaches, the use of *diaphtheiro* and its cognates and a concretisation of these in the New Testament writings. This provides enough information for me to work with as I attempt to construct a New Testament concept of corruption. As already mentioned above, we need to reconstruct the "ideal" in the New Testament context before we get to the disruption.

I have already sketched, albeit briefly, what appears to me to be a common thread in the proclamation or teachings of New Testament writers, viz. the creation of a new community that is held together by the risen Christ and sustained by a commitment to the "common good". The proclamation of the values system of sharing, honesty and embracing of diversity all contributed to the common good. The attempt by Ananias to spoil (5:1-11) the vision in Acts 2-8 is a good example of a threat to the common good (see above definition). Of course, we are not here only referring to external (divine) power and internal (human) response. There was also a conscious creation of conducive conditions along the lines of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in which he discusses a range of moral virtues and their corresponding vices. In other words, the spiritual collaborated with the historical in effecting the common good. The apostles provided the necessary guidance. Compared with the two incidents in Luke's Gospel- that is, John's response to the crowds and Zacchaeus' response to Jesus' presence, the Acts 5:1-11 episode is closer to an attempted subversion of a common good vision than the gospel's two incidents. The ideal of a common good is not as pronounced in the gospels as it is in Acts and the epistles. Emphasis is instead on sowing the seeds of the kingdom (Matthew, Mark, Luke). Whatever had existed in the teachings of Moses had either been distorted or abandoned. Hence the "Sermon on the Mount" which is in two versions (Matthew 5 and Luke 6).

In the epistles, guidance, aimed at keeping affiliates on track, thereby preserving the unity and common good of the communities continues. Paul's concern however, is about the influences that seem to be coming from within, against the unity of former Jews and former Gentiles



turned Christians.¹⁶ He argues this out from a theological and pastoral perspective. In Galatians, he descends heavily on those who have succumbed to such bad influences: “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” (Galatians 3:1). As he closes the epistle (Galatians 6), he warns about the consequences of their actions. The reason is that their actions are tantamount to “burning the mission-field”. We see a concern about corruption moving further away from the political and economic realm to morality. The notion of subversion does in fact, fit in here as well.

Viewed together, the writings in the epistles introduce a new way of conceiving of corruption. It is devoid of the political -economic notions but focuses on the destruction of the principle of building a common good. This destruction may be viewed as subversion or destruction of the city or a burning of the field. The above may be summed up in the following manner:

Corruption is when one i) steals from his/her own community, Ananias with the help of Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) being a good example of this. Had they not been confronted, their actions would have possibly influenced others and deprived many who depended on the generosity of those who fully handed their resources over to the community leadership ii) causes disunity (Acts 6:1) thus threatening the vision of a community that was of one mind and spirit (Acts 4:32-35) iii) distracts attention from the vision by using money (Acts 8:18-23) and iv) subverts the vision by teaching a contrary doctrine to the one taught by the new community (2 Cor 11:4). Clearly, the early Christian community also had to deal with detractors who may not have intentionally done so but were still enslaved to the past. That, however, is no excuse- they came into the body voluntarily; they therefore had to abide by its rules and value systems. Secondly, they could not claim ignorance because they had preachers and teachers among them.

I have summed up the above as destruction- a destruction of the city and a burning of the fields. This translates into the following definition: Corruption is: “any act by an individual or group of individuals, whether legal or illegal, that is unethical, impacts the common good negatively and leads to the collapse or destruction of a shared vision.” This cancels any previous definitions I may have promoted (e.g. Speckman, 2022b).

Conclusion

I set out to uncover the New Testament concept of corruption with the view to coining a corresponding definition. The discussion has confirmed that the New Testament does not define corruption in terms of individual acts as it was the case in the Old Testament and literature of the same era. This approach, given the above discussion, appears to a modern critic to be trivialising the issue. In fact, it offers piecemeal solution and there is no record of success while literature only alludes to the offences and reactions to them. By contrast, the New Testament sets a standard line which, if crossed for any reason, constitutes corruption. This is a line between a shared vision of the common good and the conduct of those who claim to adhere to the vision. The deviants (some of whom may not be doing so illegally, e.g. Ananias) who betray the vision are called out and where necessary, sanctioned (e.g. Galatians, Ananias and Sapphira). It is immoral and unethical to act in a manner that threatens the welfare of many regardless of whether the law has a loophole in that area or not. Seeking the “common good” (*apanta koine*) of society does not only refer to material assets of a country; it also refers to the important intangible assets such as a democratic vision, the Constitution of a country (Republic in Graeco-Roman context) and the shared values it contains.

This should not be seen as a scratching of the bottom of the barrel but a conscious focus of the authors of Luke, Acts, Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians and 2 Peter on the things that make for the common good and a warning about individuals and groups of individuals whose actions

¹⁶ They have now become Christians and should have shed the former identities for a common one. Hence Paul’s message on Jewish-Gentile relations differed from that of Peter.



threaten the vision. Not all references refer to this usage though. There are references to the decay of the human body in Acts, Romans and Corinthians as well. These speak of a different vision and perhaps, in a positive sense in that the body decays so that new nature could be assumed in line with God's plan for eternal life. Corruption that is subversive is different from this. It affects the whole and destroys the envisaged good.

Future researchers hopefully now have something to work with as they develop resources for the church and country.

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¹⁷ We distinguish between political corruption which has wide social ramifications and private acts of corruption. Both are important (cf Speckman 2022) but our focus in this article is on the former. Acts of corruption which affect what elsewhere (ditto) I refer to as the "common good" constitute political corruption and they invariably appear to result in *kairoi* (cf De Gruchy, 2016). I define corruption as abuse of officially managed state resources for personal gain where state resources refer to assets that are owned by everyone belonging to a state (Speckman, 2022 in forthcoming FS).



Conflict of Interest Statement: *The author(s) declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*



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