Everything They Owned Was Held in Common

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Introduction

The Gospel of Luke provides a view on wealth that is unique in the Synoptics through a description of the practices of Jesus and his disciples, and extended teachings on wealth that are introduced in the Sermon on the Plain, and made increasingly explicit in the Travel Narrative. Acts 4:32 to 5:11 illustrates the living out in Jerusalem of Luke's wealth ethics in a passage that begins with a second summary of the community's rules on property, and then illustrates these rules first with the story of the generosity of Barnabas, followed by the story of the death of Ananias and Sapphira following their violation of these rules. The second summary passage provides further details of the community life following on the first summary description from the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:44-45, with the change that instead of property being sold and proceeds distributed by the owners, the proceeds were first "laid at the feet of the apostles" and distributed by them. While the example of Barnabas (who later plays a key role in working with Paul) is a positive example, the story of Ananias and Sapphira appears to be a text of terror, as their sins of holding back proceeds and deceit result in them falling dead.

Under a postcolonial reading, we see that the highly unequal distribution of wealth that creates the need for the early community to redistribute property is caused by the imposition of the colonial system and the perpetuation of the colonial system through local "collaborators" who participate in the oppression of the majority of the local population. In a limited good society, the only way to acquire wealth is to take it away from others. The practices of the early community attempt to reverse this injustice through redistribution without challenging the systems that created the concentration of wealth in the first place. My thesis is that an initial reading as a text of terror through the killing of Ananias and Sapphira must be reconstructed under a postcolonial reading that challenges the underlying economic dynamics maintained through violent military occupation. Their deaths are justified. While concentrations of wealth can arise even without imperial occupation, local elites are able to use imperial military power to maintain the system which would otherwise be subject to local rebellion as those oppressed vastly outnumber the wealthy elites. As part of this reconstruction, we accept Luke's invitation to regard this incident as one of five key events of Acts, each marked by the death of the participant(s).

Luke's Wealth Ethics

Christopher Hays carefully reviews the wealth ethics of the Gospel of Luke, both the practices of Jesus and the disciples, and the teaching which begins in the Sermon on the Plain

and is expanded in the Travel Narrative.[1] He specifically focuses on the critique of wealth in the Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1-13, the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31, the Rich Ruler in Luke 18:18-30, and Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10, which raise questions of consistency on the question of whether and when all wealth must be sold and the proceeds distributed to the poor.[2] He offers a proposal that responds to 50 years of debate by asserting that "Luke possesses a coherent ethical principle with a range of contingent applications."[3] Hays rejects the *interim* solution of David Seccombe, Wilhelm Friedrich Horn and Vincenzo Petracca which suggests that the requirement of the rich to sell property and distribute proceeds only applies during an interim period of Jesus' life and perhaps the lives of the original disciples.[4] Instead, Hays builds on both the *bi-vocational* solution to alleged incoherence developed by Hans-Joachim Degenhardt, Hans-Josef Klauck and Kyoung-Jin Kim which requires complete dispositions of property only for full time ministers and the *personalist* solution developed by Luke Timothy Johnson, Hans-Georg Gradl and James Metzger which suggests that there is no cohesive framework, leaving it to each individual Christian to decide whether and when to dispose of property.[5]

Without asserting that Luke is a systematic ethicist, based on a review of the actions and teachings of Jesus and his disciples, Hays offers a four-fold framework based on vocation and wealth that sorts disciples into poor itinerants, rich itinerants, poor localized disciples and rich localized disciples.[6] Each group practices their own contextualized method of "renouncing all possessions."[7] Poor itinerants leave behind home and livelihood, carrying only basic supplies, and rich itinerants are additionally required to immediately sell all property and give the proceeds to the poor, or to do so over time. Poor localized disciples extend hospitality to itinerants however they can, and rich localized disciples are called to extend hospitality, practice justice and sell their property and give the proceeds to the poor as needed over time.[8]

The application of this framework to the early Church, now localized in Jerusalem and not itinerant, is proclaimed early on in the first summary statement in Acts 2:44-45: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need," reflecting "wholehearted obedience to

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[1] Christopher M. Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics: A Study in Their Coherence and Character* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 70-188.

[2] See also the discussion of these stories in James A. Metzger, *Consumption and Wealth in Luke's Travel Narrative* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007), 63-182 and Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation. Volume One: The Gospel According to Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 127-32, 246-8.

[3] Hays, 185.

[4] Ibid., 264-5.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., 184-8, 264-8.

[7] Ibid., 185, referencing his own translation of Luke 14:33 *ἀποτάσσεται*.

[8] Ibid., 186.

Jesus' teachings about possessions in Luke."[9] This first summary implies that the meaning of "having all things in common" is explained by the second clause: property owners continued to own their property individually, but they held this property for the benefit of the community, to be sold at any time, based on community need.

Acts 4:32-5:11

Acts 4:32 offers a second summary of the community's rules on property, again referring to ownership in common, and adding an explicit denial of private ownership of property. Acts 4:34-35 modifies the description in the first summary of property sales, noting that proceeds are now brought to the apostles, rather than distributed directly to the poor. Even with these changes, Joseph Fitzmyer notes the implication that property continues to be owned by the individual owners, who sell and provide the proceeds to the community only at the point of need,[10] consistent with Hays' observed ethic for rich localized disciples. Luke Timothy Johnson observes, "The phrase also introduces an element of complexity: ownership was not utterly renounced, but all grasping onto individual possessiveness was."[11] Acts 4:34 indicates that the early church may be disproportionately wealthy as there were a number who had land or houses. The focus on wealth foregrounds the entire economic system in Palestine as a colony of the Roman Empire, where local wealth in Jerusalem was highly concentrated, with income flowing back to Rome.

Acts 4:36-37 offers the positive example of Barnabas who sold a field and then brought all the money and "laid it at the apostles' feet." Consistent with the understanding of the community rules as requiring the rich to sell property over time, there is no suggestion that this field is the only property owned by Barnabas, or that the sale took place upon Barnabas joining the community. Acts 5:1-6 and 5:7-10 then offers paired negative examples of Ananias and his wife Sapphira who sold property but held back proceeds and then lied. Peter questions Ananias, noting that the property while unsold remained his own, again consistent with the framework proposed above. Peter calls out two separate sins in this action, asking "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land?" After each confrontation with Peter, first Ananias and then Sapphira "falls down and dies."

The passage ends in 5:11 with "great fear seiz[ing] the whole church and all who heard of these things." Richard Pervo cites Ben Witherington's observation:

> One must ask . . . why Luke, in an apologetic document keen on evangelism, would expand or report the expanded story in this way. Surely, this story would scare more off than it would attract! It is much more likely that he had hard

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[9] Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation. Volume Two: The Acts of the Apostles*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990), 45-6.

[10] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *Anchor Bible, The Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 313. See also Frederick F. Bruce, *New International Commentary on the New Testament. The Book of Acts*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 101.

[11] Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacra Pagina Series. The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 86.

> evidence that this story had a strong basis in fact, and he felt he must include at least some traditions that showed that the earliest church was not perfect.[12]

Fitzmyer, after discussing precedents from the Old Testament, first and second-century Judaism and the Greco-Roman world, says that the story "reveals how evil and deception finally manifest themselves among God's new people and disrupt the idyllic existence that Luke has so far depicted."[13] Even so, Luke as a masterful redactor and storyteller is not likely to leave this passage as merely an otherwise unexplainable text of terror. After parables such as the Unjust Steward, the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Rich Ruler and Zacchaeus, Luke is clear that the question of how the rich use their wealth is in fact a matter of life and death.

The fuller context of the acquisition, use and disposal of property by the rich becomes clear when we adopt a postcolonial lens. Pervo, Johnson and Fitzmyer are silent about the context of the passage in the Roman Empire. By contrast, Margaret Aymer applies four lenses of gender, postcoloniality, theology and reading "darkly" to all of Acts.[14] She emphasizes the violent occupation by the Roman Empire, with the land impoverished by the export of goods to Rome for consumption by the elite, and control of the vast majority of wealth by 2 percent of the population and more than half the population living at a subsistence level at least part of the time.[15] This concentration of wealth, maintained under threat of violence, is what requires the community to prescribe methods of redistribution, redistribution that would not be required if a different wealth allocation economy was in place. The broader context of the connection between wealth and violence leads us to step back from this passage to see how Luke has set it within the overall narrative of Acts.

The Place of Ananias and Sapphira in the Narrative Arc of Acts

New Testament scholar Hyun-Ho Park has suggested that the death of Ananias and Sapphira should be viewed as part of the broader narrative of Acts which includes five deaths: the death of Judas in Acts 1, the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, the death of Stephen in Acts 6, the death of James in the beginning of Acts 12, and the death of Herod at the end of Acts 12.[16] Judas dies as a direct enemy of Jesus, who collaborated with the Roman and Jewish authorities. King Herod died as a direct colonial agent of the Roman Empire.[17] Stephen and James died as righteous believers and disciples, victims of the authorities.

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[12] Richard Pervo, *Hermeneia, Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 132.

[13] Fitzmyer, 320.

[14] Margaret Aymer, "Acts of the Apostles" in *Women's Bible Commentary*, Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 538.

[15] Ibid., 537.

[16] Private communication.

[17] Rubén Muñoz-Larrondo, "Living in Two Worlds – A Postcolonial Reading of the Acts of the Apostles" (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2008).

On an initial review of these four other deaths, they all relate directly to the struggle over the future of the community in Jerusalem. By contrast, Ananias and Sapphira appear to be only members of the community who held back a portion of the proceeds from property sales, and then lied, while donating the rest of the proceeds to the community. Arguably, their only sins were holding back promised cash and deceit. Why should they die? They were not killed by the authorities. Instead, after being confronted with their holding back of cash and deceit by Peter, they both "fell down and died." Judas fell over dead in a field, and Herod was struck by an angel and eaten by worms. Yet, as property owners, Ananias and Sapphira had cooperated and collaborated with the system of colonialism imposed by the Roman Empire and maintained through violence.[18] In Luke's Gospel, wealthy property owners are offered the opportunity to dispose of their wealth by giving the proceeds to the poor, and in so doing, obtain entrance into the Kingdom, as a sign of true repentance and a change of heart. Otherwise, they would face the fate of the Rich Man who ignored Lazarus. In God's eyes, misuse of wealth merits eternal damnation. The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts make clear that their sins are viewed by God as being on the same level as the sins of Judas and Herod.[19] Pervo cites the work of Schuyler Brown connecting this story with the story of Judas through five similarities: (1) Satan is the cause; (2) money is the basis; (3) the deed is intentional; (4) real estate is involved; and (5) the result is sudden death.[20] The colonial system of wealth acquisition and preservation was part of a violent, brutal system. So too under current systems of neocolonialism.

Globalization and Neocolonialism Today

Unlike today's advanced economies including the United States, a number of former colonies continue to have limited good economies where all wealth is related to agricultural products or natural resources that are derived from the land, resulting in concentration of wealth in foreign multinationals and local elites and continued oppression of the local population under the systems of globalization and neocolonialism.[21] While the change from imperialism and colonialism to globalization and neocolonialism in principle introduces local political independence and freedom from military occupation, the economic forces are so strong that oppression remains, especially since tax payments by foreign multinationals can be used by ruling elites, on their own behalf and on behalf of their collaborators, to buy weapons from advanced economies who compete to make sales. Modern day couples like Ananias and Sapphira who own substantial portions of these economies, may respond to local liberation movements by

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[18] This is a continuation in Acts into the economic sphere of the collaboration described in Yong-Sung Ahn, *The Reign of God and Rome and Luke's Passion Narrative* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 204-5. See also Frantz Fanon, "National Culture," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2006), 121-2.

[19] Hays, 224.

[20] Pervo, 130 n. 33.

[21] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffins and Helen Tiffin. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 110-5, 162-3; Anna Runesson, *Exegesis in the Making: Postcolonialism and New Testament Studies* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 22-7.

supporting modest amounts of redistribution, assuming a posture of generosity and charitable alms-giving, while at the same time covertly supporting the violent maintenance of the system. Underpaid soldiers recruited from the peasant class commit the acts of violence, but the guilt should be borne by those who give the orders, just as the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira are seen as equal to the deaths of Judas and Herod. Viewed through a postcolonial lens, this story is not an unexplainable "text of terror", but is instead a challenge to all systems of economic oppression as inconsistent with the Kingdom of God, not merely by a failure to redistribute unfairly acquired wealth, but through a failure to challenge the system that produces unequal distributions of wealth in the first place.

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