

## *Ananias and Sapphira*

*Acts 4:32 - 5:11(RSV) <sup>32</sup>Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. <sup>33</sup>And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup>There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold <sup>35</sup>and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need. <sup>36</sup>Thus Joseph who was surnamed by the apostles Barnabas (which means, Son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, <sup>37</sup>sold a field which belonged to him, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. 5:1 But a man named Ananias with his wife Sapphira sold a piece of property, <sup>2</sup>and with his wife's knowledge he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. <sup>3</sup>But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? <sup>4</sup>While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." <sup>5</sup>When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. <sup>6</sup>The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. <sup>7</sup>After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup>And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." <sup>9</sup>But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? Hark, the feet of those that have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." <sup>10</sup>Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup>And great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard of these things.*

There are pericopes and passages in the Holy Bible, where you don't know which to choose: Whether it is worse to presume that the text is authentic or in some way twisted by tradition or right false. One may have such a feeling with some (aggressive and fierce) scenes from the Old Testament, including Psalms, most often however about the books of Joshua and Judges. A Christian reader may still live with this – why, the Old Testament has been in a way delimited, or “put into brackets” by Christ and Christian theology, and innovated. The present text, however, shows that such

unpleasant encounters may await us even in the New Testament. Truly, with exception of some passages of the Second Epistle of Peter and passing tiny remarks in the Book of Revelation which speak about the Antichrist it may be the worst passage in the New Testament altogether.

A simplified preliminary judgment may be such, that if this passage taken down by Luke is true and trustworthy, it would mean that there was a perverse totalitarian communism in the primeval community of (Christ's) disciples, moreover maintained by means of repression. If we take the opposite alternative, it means that credibility of not only the whole Book of Acts and its author is at stake, but also of the Gospel of Luke and finally of the whole New Testament, since it was also edited and redacted as a certain whole, and if one of its authors falls under suspicion of falsehood, also the others may have done the same.

The only way out can be in a thorough analysis of both alternatives and this will be undertaken here now.

*Alternative A:* The presented text in Acts 4,32-5,11 is TRUE, CORRESPONDING TO REALITY; the things portrayed here did really take place, more or less in the way, how they had been described by the evangelist i.e.: the primeval community of disciples in Jerusalem shared their property to the maximum possible extent, that its members had no property of their own; in particular they were not allowed to have any money; transgression of this rule effected – minimally in the specific case documented by Luke – condemnation of the member by the superior of the community (Peter) and an immediate “God’s ordeal” with fatal consequences for the guilty one.

But such a description is weak in some points. First, the author of the Epistle of James, which had been written without doubt for Jewish Christians, probably in the Palestinian area, who is by the tradition held to be a later head of the Jerusalem community, James (the “Lesser”, or the “Lord’s brother”), reflects on existence of social differences within the community and admonishes its members that in spite of these they should keep equality and brotherhood. The time of origin of this epistle is not clear, but it may well have been at the same time or even before the origin of Lucan corpus, which was completed probably somewhere between 70 and 80 A.D. The objection can be countered by another one, that even if both sources have come down from the same period they still may have reflected different stages and/or periods of development of the community: The Acts the time around 34-40, while the epistle of James its (then) contemporary stage. In such case however, a question must be raised, where Luke got such a comprehensive knowledge of facts and events, which had come to pass so long ago and of which he probably couldn’t have been witness, for he had been a companion and disciple of Paul, having joined him only after his (e.g. Paul’s) conversion, that is somewhere in the late forties. In such a light the existence of “primeval communism” in the Jerusalem community seems to be even less probable.

After the basic prerequisite for trustworthiness of the presented story has been shaken it may seem of less importance to deal with its particular components, but we'll still undertake it. The narrative introduces four characters on the stage one after another. While the existence of Ananias and Sapphira can be neither confirmed nor refuted, the other two characters are known to us also from other early Christian sources. Joseph Barnabas was an ardent missionary of the early Christian period and the primary "tutor" of Paul, so surely he knew Luke, too. He is an alleged author of the pseudoepigraphic Epistle of Barnabas, which is a very old and respectable Christian source, and could even have something in common with the true Barnabas. (The so-called Johannine writings of the New Testament also do not come from one hand, the less from the hand of the Apostle John, but still they have a kind of common air, something that may betray a certain "Johannine tradition"; the Epistle of Barnabas is moreover from the same period – between the first and the second Jewish uprising.) So the story of Ananias and Sapphira could come from Barnabas or some people standing close to him, a certain "Barnabas tradition".

But the best known of these four characters is to us Simon Peter, the first leader of the Christian community, a disciple of Jesus, who may himself have chosen him that name (a rather funny nickname – *Simon the Boulder...*) This person is so clearly described in the New Testament canon that we are able even to perceive some of his characteristic psychological features. These surely comprise some steadfastness, hesitation or even timidity, but on the other hand a boundless loyalty and love to his Master and to his legacy. Practically nowhere in the Book of Acts Peter appears to be the initiator of events; he is sometimes prompted to say his view as an unshakable authority, but never does so by his own motion. We even never see him alone (except here and in a long narrative about his seclusion Joppe and his following journey to Kaisareia) but always in a circle of the disciples; representing something like their collective authority. Can to such a character be attributed an authoritative action, in which he would condemn a guilty person without a slightest mark of pity or even without hearing the accused? Could anyone imagine that Peter, who had been admonished by the Lord himself not to use the sword, would have sent two people to death for such a minor offence? None could, and that is – I mean – another serious blow to the trustworthiness of the present narration. – A thorough analysis of the described event leads us to conclusion that it cannot be trusted at all.

Let's try then the *alternative B*: Was Luke a liar? Or simply a shameless fabulator? The beforehand analysis has convinced us that surely not everything contained in his writings – and these are considered to be from the most trustworthy ones within the New Testament – can be taken for granted. But I mean we can still soften our sentence a little.

First, there are many who understand this place not literally but somehow "spiritually", as an example or a parable. Thousands of various allegoreses have been forged throughout the history of Christian scriptural exegesis and nobody is capable

to chart them. They may even find a certain foothold in the text itself, as we read there that Ananias “lied to the Holy Spirit”. So there are tendencies to construe his deed in the way that it was not Peter and his authority, which were encroached by it, but that a “holy thing” was at stake and this particularly effected the severe punishment. But this way leads nowhere. First, because if the God, the Christian God of love and mercy, the Father of Jesus Christ avenged any mistrust in thus demonstrated way, he would equal the worst revengeful deities of any pantheon. And second: What is a “holy thing”? I can imagine very well restaging of this scene, placing it somewhere to the communist bloc in the 1950’s and behold a local communist dignitary yelling at a farmer who had allegedly “concealed his land/his property” or hadn’t sufficiently performed his obligatory supplies or what, and sending him as a modern slave to the mines. Even that dignitary might have believed in the “holy thing” of communism.

There can be also plenty of other allegoreses: They may not be centred on the Spirit, but they may try to explain allegorically the names of the involved characters, or even that the two “fell down at his feet”, i.e. that the crucial thing for the meaning are Peter’s *feet* – I’ve seen such exegeses myself.

Generally spoken, I think that it will weigh less on behalf of Luke, if we assume that he had really made it up than if we try to excuse him by an alleged aim of creating an allegorical text. But Luke surely didn’t want to lie to his readers. He wanted to write a “true history” of Jesus of Nazareth, of his work and ministry, which went on. But by accomplishing this venture he couldn’t rely only on his own experience – he didn’t know Jesus personally, after all – but he had to refer to accounts of his dealings coming from – for him – trustworthy sources. One conclusion could be thus, that he wasn’t downright successful in this and that among his sources were some less trustworthy as well. But it is not the only possible one. The problem lies in the fact that our modern concept of truth and criteria for discerning it is quite far from that how truth was understood in late antiquity. To write a “true story” didn’t mean then by far to compile it from or to base it upon verified and certifiable facts avoiding any unsubstantiated news, as do we now in our scientific times, but just the contrary – to write a story that can appeal to the reader or listener by its vivacity, by its clear message and consequent stance, and it may be supported even by accounts of strange, unheard of things, in a similar way how folk tales proceed or had proceeded until recently; folk and fairy tales, which hadn’t been originally intended *virginis puerisque*, but were aimed at adults; how it is in early or even late mediaeval legendary writings. A story, which would comprise nothing more than “prosaic facts”, in which nothing miraculous or strange could be found, would have achieved exactly the opposite – it would have risen suspicion that it lacked divine sanction, that the plot had been just somehow cooked and hatched in conformity with the ordinary way how people live. So Luke needn’t have been taken aback by the fact that the stuff reworked by him contained also fantastic elements. Why, it is him who passed to us,

what effect should a sermon/an exhortation have on the listeners: Lk 24:32: "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us?" Such was the reaction of the disciples in Emmaus to a really "true" relation of the meaning of events they had just been witnesses to.

Summarizing the whole, we must say that neither A nor B holds true: The story about Ananias and Sapphira is probably not authentic, i.e. "true"; but nor can be hold that it was simply fabricated, or that its writer, Luke was a liar, or that credibility of him – or even of the whole New Testament - is substantially diminished. The only thing which may rise our concern is, how low was in the past – and we needn't go even as far as the times of the New Testament – the price of human life, or how brutal *narrative* would people of the past accept without hesitation. But even this is not that far from our own experience, minimally in the sphere of language: Do not we frequently say: "I'll *kill* him/her!" And do we really mean that?