

# Holy community of life and property amongst the poor: A response to Steve Walton

*Brian J. Capper*

*Dr Brian Capper is Reader in Christian Origins at Canterbury Christ Church University*

KEY WORDS: Acts, community, economics, Essenes, ethics, possessions, Steve Walton, Qumran, Dead Sea Scrolls

I am very grateful to the editors for the opportunity to respond to Dr. Walton's thoughtful and thought-provoking piece. I also sincerely thank Dr. Walton for his consideration of my work to resist the sceptical view of earliest Christian community of goods, and for both his compliments and criticisms. In response I first explain something of the interlocking wider context which in my view connects the common purse of Jesus' travelling party, the Judaeon practice of formal property-sharing, and the sharing of the first believers in Jerusalem, further grounding my particular and emphatic acceptance of the historicity of the Acts report. I then present two philological cases to answer Dr. Walton's challenges to my view.

## **Jesus' travelling party: consecration in community of goods to proclamation of God's kingdom and care for the poor.**

Jesus' travelling party of disciples apparently held their money in common; Judas administered their common purse (John 12:6; 13:29). We may assume that the monetary support of Jesus' wealthy and high status women patrons (Luke 8:1-3) was received into this purse. Disbursements for the poor appear to have been made from this common purse during Jesus' ministry. According to Mark, some present at Jesus' anointing at Bethany imagined that the costly perfumed oil poured over Jesus might have been sold and the proceeds donated to the poor, probably through the auspices of Judas as the group's treasurer (14:4-5). Matthew tells us these detractors were disciples (26:8-9), while John identifies Judas as the lone, or perhaps principal, scolding voice. John tells us that at Jesus' last supper some of his disciples, after Judas' departure following Jesus' cryptic words to him, thought Jesus had instructed him to make purchases for the group's needs at the feast, or to give alms to the poor, suggesting a pattern of both common expenditure and disbursements for the poor from the common purse (12:4-6). When Jesus asked Philip where bread might be purchased to feed a large crowd near Passover, Philip exclaimed that two hundred *denarii* would not suffice. Jesus' question was intended to test Philip (John 6:5-7), perhaps because it was not usually beyond the financial resources of the common purse to aid the needy in Jesus' audience.

We may assume that Jesus frequently sanctioned expenditures for the needy outside his immediate group from the common purse. Very substantial benefactions were within the means of Jesus' elite women patrons. Jesus often appears dining and teaching at meals; the existence of the common purse suggests that his travelling party did not always dine at others' expense. Rather, the needy probably received assistance at open meals financed from the travelling group's purse, though certain meals were private to Jesus and his travelling group. We may assume that Jesus was able to offer more assistance to the needy than food alone, through the resources of the common purse, and to precipitate generosity from benefactors when resources proved too little to meet all legitimate needs. The complete consecration to service in God's Kingdom of Jesus' mobile party of disciples was expressed, in part, by their possessionless travel and generous common life.

The Gospels, then, bear witness to receipts from wealthy patrons into the common purse of Jesus' disciple-group, and probably to disbursements for the needs of both Jesus' travelling party and the needy outside this group. We probably find, early in Acts, a continuation of this pattern. All who believed and joined the expanding group of Jesus' disciples 'had all things in common'. Believers sold their possessions; distributions were made to meet the needs of all (2:44-45). We learn that 'as many as owned lands or houses sold them', laying the proceeds at the apostles' feet (4:34-35). These events occurred only weeks after Jesus' death and resurrection. Since these accounts appear in Acts, it is easy to conceive them primarily as part of 'Church History', and to look forward to the later chapters of Acts and the letters of Paul for analogies to help us understand their pattern, rather than to look back to the ministry of Jesus in order to find their direct root in the practice of his travelling party. During the period between Jesus' last Passover and Pentecost, his disciple-group, according to Luke-Acts, settled in Jerusalem and followed a life of intense, continuous prayer and worship. The group of Jesus' followers, gathered from Galilee and planted in Jerusalem, were somehow billeted together in the guest premises of 'the room upstairs where they were staying'. There, they lived a communal life together, 'constantly devoting themselves to prayer', and so continued the communal sharing initiated by Jesus, their now heavenly master (Acts 1:13-14; cf. Luke 24:49-52; Acts 1:1-5). Their economic pattern of life – based around a common purse into which large donations were received from wealthy patrons, a common purse from which the group lived, a common purse from which the needy might receive support – was not a *novum*. This way of life bore the stamp of Jesus' authority and practice, and expressed the continued consecration to him of those who proclaimed him as heavenly Lord.

### **Holy community of life and property amongst the poor: the unique Judean solution to the problems of agrarian economy**

I have come to believe that the common life of Jesus' travelling party had its ultimate roots with *Judean* practice. Jesus was linked to a Judean group immedi-

ately before bursting onto the Galilean scene in public ministry (cf. Mark 1:1-20 and parallels; John 1:19-43). He appears to have 'taken north' the Judaeian concept and practice of an intensely integrated social and religious life. He gathered, through the extraordinary force of his own person, a group of chosen Galileians into a travelling party which every day shared meals and received instruction. Such 'common life' appears not to have been a Galileian practice. There are no other attested contemporary examples. By contrast, the practice of common life is very well attested for Judaea, amongst the Essenes.<sup>1</sup>

Closely communitarian forms of living had developed in Judaea because its social, economic and religious world was rather different from that of Galilee. The community of property of the early Jerusalem church reflects this specifically Judaeian social milieu and the ways through which many Judaeians had long responded to the economic problems of the age. The land of Galilee was more fertile than Judaea, and afforded more opportunities for economic expansion. Galilee lay on major trade routes, and was well connected to the coast. By contrast, Judaea was a land-locked, rugged, semi-arid inland region. A relatively small area geographically, off the major trade routes, its religious, social and economic world was dominated by its massive Temple. It had a long history as a Temple state, ruled by its clergy.<sup>2</sup> In consequence, ideals of holiness and consecration dominated the Judaeian religious and social world in an almost totalitarian fashion, far more extensively than they did the Galileian milieu, while the economic harshness of Judaeian life posed the problems of survival in a subsistence economy more sharply than the more 'open' economy of Galilee.

The particular Judaeian response to the problems of subsistence in the ancient agrarian world took, because of these unusual circumstances, a unique form. In Judaea, the Essene movement developed widespread and well understood forms of regulated economic sharing. This local, uniquely Judaeian pattern of social organisation was long established by the first century AD. There existed in Judaea a prestigious 'upper echelon' of more than four thousand celibate male Essenes, who lived with each other in full community of property.<sup>3</sup> On most

- 
- 1 Philo limits the Essene movement to Judaea, *Apology for the Jews* 11.1. On this see Brian J. Capper, 'Essene Community Houses and Jesus' Early Community', in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *Jesus and Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 472-502, esp. 473-479.
  - 2 The consequences of this socio-geographic differentiation were worked out by my student, Timothy J. M. Ling, *The Judaeian Poor and the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), see esp. 78-97; cf. also his 'Virtuoso Religion and the Judaeian Social World', in Louise J. Lawrence and Mario I. Aguilar, *Anthropology and Biblical Studies: Avenues of Approach* (Leiden: Deo Publishing, 2004), 227-258.
  - 3 Philo, *That Every Good Man is Free*, §75; Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.1.5 §§20-21. Although these texts clearly enumerate only *male celibate* Essenes, they are often wrongly taken to number the *whole* Essene movement at 'over four thousand'. This misreading drastically diminishes appreciation of the scale and importance of Essenism in the Judaeian social and religious world.

days they worked as labourers and artisans in the fields of local estate owners.<sup>4</sup> They shared common meals with each other in the evenings,<sup>5</sup> open-handedly entertaining members of the order from elsewhere, who may have travelled to find work or disseminate news.<sup>6</sup> This 'holy core' of Essene monks was distributed through the perhaps two hundred villages and towns of the Judaeian landscape in small communities of ten or more.<sup>7</sup> It seems also to have occupied an important centre on the southwest hill of Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup> It was associated with a 'second order' of marrying Essenes,<sup>9</sup> which was probably much larger. The ancient sources give us no figures for this group, but since celibacy is always a less popular option than marriage, it probably numbered several tens of thousands, perhaps more.

Hartmut Stegemann, one of the principal early researchers of the Dead Sea Scrolls, came to conclude that the Essene movement was the 'main Jewish union of the second Temple period'.<sup>10</sup> I have argued, by a statistical method, that Essenism was probably the dominant social and religious force amongst the labourers, artisans and needy of the villages and towns of rural Judaea. I would also suggest that the Essenes were very well represented amongst the poor urban population of Jerusalem.<sup>11</sup>

Overpopulation and scarcity of resources characterised the ancient agrarian economy. The needy were frequently compelled to migration, perhaps to seek work in the large coastal cities, to soldiering, or to work on large estates as servants or slaves. Women were frequently forced into prostitution. Essenism offered different options for the needy of Judaea. Children who could not be fed in poor

---

4 Cf. Philo, *Apology for the Jews* 11:4-9; cf. Brian J. Capper, 'The New Covenant in Southern Palestine at the Arrest of Jesus' in James R. Davila (ed.) *The Dead Sea Scrolls as Background to Postbiblical Judaism and Early Christianity* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003), 90-116, see 95-98.

5 Philo, *Apology for the Jews*, 11.10-11.

6 Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.4 §§124-125.

7 1QS VI.3-4; Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.9 §146.

8 Cf. Otto Betz and Rainer Riesner, *Verschönerung um Qumran. Jesus, die Schriftröllen, und der Vatikan* (Munich: Knaur, 2007), 226-238; Riesner, 'Essener und Urkirche auf dem Südwesthügel Jerusalems (Zion III)', in Nikodemus C. Schnabel (ed.), *Laetere Jerusalem* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2006), 200-234; Riesner, *Essener und Urgemeinde in Jerusalem* (Giessen: Brunnen, 1998), 2-55; Brian J. Capper, 'The Palestinian Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods', in R. J. Bauckham (ed.), *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995; volume 4 of *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*), 323-356, see 341-350; Capper, ' "With the Oldest Monks..." Light from Essene History on the Career of the Beloved Disciple?', *JTS* ns 49 (1998) 1-55, see 19-36.

9 Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.13 §§160-161.

10 H. Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 140-153; idem, 'The Qumran Essenes – Local Members of the Main Jewish Union in Late Second Temple Times', in J. Trebelle Barrera and L. Vegas Montaner (eds.), *The Madrid Qumran Congress* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), Vol. 1, 83-166.

11 See my pieces cited in notes 1 and 4 above.

local families could be adopted into Essene communities, where they received training in work, economic security, and education in holy tradition.<sup>12</sup> By this route many male children of the poor came as adults to renounce the pleasures and social standing of normal family life, enjoying instead highly honoured status as Essene monks and a replacement form of fictive kinship in an extensive and loving brotherhood.<sup>13</sup> Since numerous males did not father children, but cared for those of others, Essenism came to function, in the Judaeen heartland, as an important economic compensating mechanism against overpopulation and undernourishment. There may also have been honoured Essene orders for widows and life-long celibate women.<sup>14</sup>

The population of Jerusalem in the first century AD was c. 60,000-80,000.<sup>15</sup> The population of rural Judaea was of a similar size, the two hundred or so villages and towns averaging a few hundred souls each, including children.<sup>16</sup> The more than four thousand celibate male Essenes were sufficient in number to form communities of between ten and twenty in most, if not all, the towns and villages of the region. This powerful, firmly united 'core' of over four thousand skilled, educated and highly disciplined male celibates was supported by, I would suggest, at least several thousand families whose male heads belonged to the second Essene order. For every male child adopted by the Essenes, a reciprocally grateful local family may have attached itself to the Essene movement. It would not be surprising if most rural clans and families had come to express gratitude to the Essene movement by such secondary association. The two Essene orders, acting in concert, probably dominated the social, political and religious world of Judaea's towns and villages. The longstanding, honoured presence of the celibate male Essene order throughout Judaea, its intimate connections through adoption with the local population, and its willingness to assist rural families facing economic crisis when there were too many mouths to feed,<sup>17</sup> may indeed mean that virtually the entire married rural population, and a substantial sector of the married labouring and artisan population of Jerusalem, had been absorbed into the second Essene order by the time of Jesus.

When we find, therefore, in the *Acts of the Apostles*, the early church of Jerusalem sharing their property and joining together in daily common meals, we

12 Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.2 §120.

13 Josephus tells us that the Essenes were 'lovers of each other' (φιλάλληλοι) more than other Jewish groups, *Jewish War* 2.8.2 §119. Philo emphasizes mutual service in menial tasks, care of the sick, and care of the old by the young, *That Every Good Man is Free*, §§79, 87-88.

14 Cf. the 'mothers' of the community in 2Q270 7.i.13-14.

15 Cf. Wolfgang Reinhardt, 'The Population Size of Jerusalem and the Numerical Growth of the Jerusalem Church', in R. J. Bauckham (ed.) *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 237-265.

16 Cf. Capper in Charlesworth (ed.), *Jesus and Archaeology*, see 473-476 and 492-493.

17 Cf. Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.8.2 §120 (adoption) and 2.8.6 §134 (almsgiving and assistance outside the individual Essene's group).

are observing a well established feature of Judaeen cultural and economic life, practised by the primary Essene order. It was, of course, a way of life practised by only a small minority of Judaea's inhabitants. None the less, it was a mode of life, expressive of complete personal consecration and holiness, which most Judaeans certainly respected and understood, and with which many had personal connections through membership in the secondary Essene order. This form of holy, communal life had been lived out, before the eyes of all, by the influential, venerable order of celibate male Essene monks for approaching two centuries at the time the Christian church began. Shared property and common meals, along with regular prayer and study at the feet of esteemed teachers who held no personal property, were aspects of a widespread local Judaeen social form which expressed an ideal of complete holiness and personal consecration. The earliest post-Easter group of Jesus' followers had, according to Acts, experienced a massive outpouring of God's Spirit, enjoying across its whole community inspirations of prophecy and glossolalia (2:1-41). It is hardly surprising that we find the expanding community of believers, recently impressed with an extraordinary sense of God's holiness and powerful presence, implementing the local Judaeen ideal of communalised, holy living, renouncing personal possessions and devoting themselves, after their working day, to prayer, study and common meals (Acts 2:42-47; cf. 1QS VI.2-3, 6-7). This development was also the appropriate way to continue the common life initiated by Jesus in a local, settled community.

### **Breach of holy community: Ananias and Sapphira**

When Ananias and Sapphira breached the fellowship and trust of their community, which was aspiring to an ideal of perfect holiness and consecration, their actions were probably viewed by all with horror. There are three suggested explanations of the true nature of the couple's crime.

First, it is suggested that they had made some dedication of their property in advance of sale, and were therefore culpable when they failed to bring the whole sum before the apostles.<sup>18</sup> This explanation fails because it does not correspond with Peter's question at the beginning of Acts 5:4. Had the couple dedicated their property in advance of sale, Peter would have emphasised that after its sale they were obliged to surrender its full value. Yet he emphasises that the sum they had obtained was entirely their own, to do with as they pleased.

Second, some have proposed that Ananias and Sapphira surrendered their property as a supererogatory gift, and were condemned for their pretence in seeking to emulate others who had made unusually large donations, while deceptively retaining a part of their property.<sup>19</sup> This interpretation of the couple's

---

18 Cf. Kirsopp Lake and Henry J. Cadbury, *The Beginnings of Christianity I, The Acts of the Apostles*, IV (London: Macmillan, 1933), 50.

19 Cf. R. B. Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Methuen, 1901), 65.

crime cannot explain their drastic punishment, which surely implies that they had perpetrated a quite heinous deception, a glaringly obvious breach of the community's fundamental practice. It would surely have been nugatory for the couple to have fallen into deception out of fear for their own security when making an unusually generous, indeed highly sacrificial, gift of alms. The proposal of a supererogatory gift can also furnish no clear explanation as to the timing of the couple's expression of intent to donate all their property. They had clearly made no such declaration before its sale, since Peter emphasises they could have disposed of it after its sale as they chose. They seem also not to have made such a declaration after the sale and before bringing a part of the sum obtained to the apostles. Had they verbally declared their intent following the sale, it would be pointless for Peter to refer back to the sale rather than emphasise by doing this their free disposal over their assets after it. Had they committed them following the sale, he would most likely have referred to this declaration ('You promised to give all the proceeds from the sale of your property') rather than emphasised their free disposal over their assets. Ananias appears not to have made any verbal declaration at the point of laying his money at the feet of the apostles. No declaration on his part is recorded, only his participation in the ritual. Before condemning Sapphira, Peter has to pry from her such a false declaration (Acts 5:8), implying that she also made none up to that point. Ananias' deception appears only to have consisted in going through a community ritual of laying property before the apostles without surrendering all his property, perhaps as only one of a line of non-speaking aspirants.

This action of laying property at the apostles' feet, without words or declaration, appears to have had the quite unambiguous meaning that those who laid property at the apostles' feet were surrendering all their assets. No declaration on Ananias' part was required. A context of mere almsgiving, no matter how generous and inspired, cannot account for such ceremonial meaning. This ritual, which carried the implication of full renunciation of property, seems clearly to have arisen from a cultural context in which individuals embarked upon a life of renunciation and complete devotion to communities of effectively monastic type. Individuals surrendered, according to a recognised rule, all their property into the control of the holy community they aspired to join. Since such full community of life is well attested for the Judaeian cultural and religious milieu by the classical accounts of the Essenes and the *Rule of the Community* discovered at Qumran, I have repeatedly argued that this local, effectively regulated form of property-sharing is the right context for understanding Peter's words in Acts 5:4. It is through a process of elimination of *failing* explanations of Ananias and Sapphira's crime that I have come to propose this third explanation, that Ananias and Sapphira breached the rules of a well understood process of provisional surrender of property on their entry into the final phase of their novitiate.<sup>20</sup> This

---

20 For my most extensive argument concerning the inadequacy of other explanations of Ananias and Sapphira's misdeed, see still 'The Interpretation of Acts 5.4', *JSNT* 19 (1983), 117-131.

system of provisional surrender of property is revealed to us in column VI of the *Rule of the Community* discovered at Qumran. It regulated novices' surrender of property not only in the Qumran community, but also in the c. 200 small communities of Essene male celibates in the towns and villages of rural Judaea, and in the Essene community located on the southwest hill of Jerusalem too.

Commentators usually find the strongest argument against the historicity of the Acts account of the community of property of the earliest disciples in the apparent contradiction between the statements of Acts 2:44-45 and 4:32, 34, indicating a universal sharing of property, and Peter's implication to Ananias and Sapphira at Acts 5:4 that their property donation was voluntary. Despite the extraordinarily frequent rehearsal of this argument, it is fallacious. Community of property is usually entered upon on a fully voluntary basis (as in all forms of monasticism). Peter's point was that Ananias and Sapphira were not compelled to join the common purse, but that since they had sought to do this, they should have abided by the general rule, which applied to all who wished to join; they could withhold nothing. One possible way to understand the earliest community's structure is that it contained an 'inner group', and that only transition into this inner core required full renunciation of property. I have contemplated this 'inner circle' possibility carefully, especially since within Essenism full community of property was practised by only a sector of the movement, and have indeed fully supported it in print.<sup>21</sup> I now incline to a modified view, as Dr. Walton notes (n. 11), in order to give the summary statements regarding community of property their full and due weight.

The author of Acts probably had reason to claim that the whole of the earliest Jerusalem community of believers in Jesus after Pentecost practised full community of property. His reason was, I suspect, the preservation in tradition of the simple truth of an originally comprehensive community of property, which was due in part to the peculiar origins and intentions of the three thousand converts at Pentecost (2:41). It appears that many of these converts, already gathered for the festival, were from the widespread Judaeian 'communitarian stream', i.e. from the Essene movement, which had its centre on the southwest hill, where the early Jerusalem church appears to have begun.<sup>22</sup> Essenism regularly advanced many to the next phase of their novitiate at its annual Pentecost covenant renewal festival.<sup>23</sup> It appears that Jesus had successfully 'implanted' his disciple-group

---

21 Capper, 'Palestinian Cultural Context' in Bauckham (ed.), *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, 355. The 'inner group' view was a feature of some early comparisons of 1QS with the Acts account of earliest Christian community of goods, cf. Sherman E. Johnson, 'The Dead Sea Manual of Discipline and the Jerusalem Church of Acts', in K. Stendahl (ed.), *The Scrolls and the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1958), 129-142, see 131; J. Van der Ploeg, *The Excavations at Qumran* (London: Longmans, 1958), 208.

22 For the traditions locating the upper room to the southwest hill see Capper, 'Palestinian Cultural Context' in Bauckham (ed.), *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, 345-349 and "'With the Oldest Monks..." *JTS* ns 49 (1998), 36-42.

23 Cf. Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1997), 79-81 and 150-153.



into the Jerusalem Essene Quarter as its leading echelon; hence the close-knit community of Galileans loyal to him was able to grow very rapidly indeed in Jerusalem, as Acts records, and immediately to express local Judaeon institutions and processes in its structure. Many of the first three thousand converts were, I suspect, already living in a common life on the southwest hill or elsewhere in Jerusalem and Judaea. Others were preparing to surrender their property and to advance to the final stage of the Essene novitiate at Pentecost, AD 30. I suspect this group also included some older Jews from abroad, 'devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem' (Acts 2:5). These, I would propose, had been seeking to retire to a pattern of common life and worship based on the Essene Quarter of the southwest hill and attendance at the Temple.<sup>24</sup> Some may have already been using guest facilities adjacent to the premises used by Jesus' disciple group. They did not anticipate the extraordinary events and preaching of the first Christian Pentecost, but they received them gladly. The novices amongst these converts continued in their resolve to enter fully into a holy common life.

Others from the Essene orders (or perhaps similarly intense, ascetic Judaeon groups not known to us by name) may have responded to Peter and John's preaching in the Temple at 4:4, probably at some point in the first year of the Galilean disciples' leadership in Jerusalem. Acts continues to describe a thoroughgoing community of property at 4:32 and 34, in advance of Ananias and Sapphira's deception at perhaps the group's second celebration of Pentecost (AD 31). I suspect that thereafter the numbers of those who joined the common life started to diminish, and permanently 'outer' and 'inner' groups emerged for the first time. In the second year of the community's life large numbers of Jews from Jerusalem's Greek-speaking synagogues of Jerusalem may have been converted to the apostles' message but not joined the common life, leading to problems with the care of their widows (cf. Acts 6:1-6).<sup>25</sup> This hypothetical reconstruction allows us to take seriously the Acts report of earliest Christian community of goods, which lasted as a universal practice for perhaps the first year of the community's life. While this early community stands in Christian historical perspective as the first Church, it resembled in its social form a large religious order, embracing both men and women. It appears to have utilized, in addition to its large site on the southwest hill, a number of other houses in Jerusalem (Acts 2:46); these may have been community houses and guest facilities of the Essene movement and/or similar groups nearby and elsewhere in Jerusalem. In these locations, a common life was expressed through the sharing of daily wages to finance a common meal each evening. Property owners who held 'houses and lands' (Acts 4:34, cf. 2.45) seem either to have sold all these, or to have sold sur-

---

24 I suspect, too, that Ananias and Sapphira were an older couple, who, like many others, sought to consecrate their latter years to prayer, communal life and service in this community and worship at the Temple.

25 For argument that Stephen's martyrdom, which follows at Acts 6:7-8:1, was in AD 31 or 32, see Rainer Riesner, *Paul's Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 59-74.

plus assets, surrendering their value to the community. Premises may have been transferred whole for community use as accommodation.<sup>26</sup> Ananias and Sapphira departed from whatever was general practice.

### Ananias and Sapphira ‘embezzled’ their own property

As Dr. Walton notes (n. 28), I have emphasised the meaning of the verb νοσφίζομαι (5:2, 3) in my exegesis. In my view this verb always means ‘purloin, pilfer, embezzle’, and is a ‘smoking gun’ pointing to the true nature of Ananias and Sapphira’s crime as having to do with their retention of their property, not merely their deception. Since they desired to enter the common life, they had no right to subtract any sum from the money they gained from the sale of their property, although it would not have become community property until a year later, had they been finally accepted into the community. Numerous translations inadequately translate this verb as ‘keep back’. In my view, this is because without understanding of the process of provisional property surrender, translation as ‘embezzle’ may seem to contradict Peter’s assertion that their property remained fully their own.

The other New Testament usage of this verb, in Titus 2:10, clearly describes stealing. Slaves are exhorted ‘not to pilfer (μὴ νοσφισσάμενους), but to show perfect and complete fidelity’ (NRSV). If we look back to the Greek Old Testament, we find only uses indicating theft. In the Apocrypha, at 2 Maccabees 4:32, we learn that the corrupt and hellenising High Priest Menelaus ‘*stole* some of the gold vessels of the Temple (χρυσώματα τινα τῶν τοῦ ἱεροῦ νοσφισάμενος)’ (NRSV). At Joshua 7:1, ‘the children of Israel committed a great trespass, and purloined [part] of the accursed thing (καὶ ἐνοσφίσαντο ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀναθέματος); and Achar... took of the accursed thing (καὶ ἔλαβεν Ἀχαρ...).’<sup>27</sup> Biblical usage therefore sets pilfering slaves, an embezzling High Priest and the purloining Achan alongside Ananias and Sapphira, suggesting that in their case too we are dealing with a matter of ‘theft’, i.e. that they had no right to retain any part of the proceeds from the sale of their property as they embarked upon the final phase of their novitiate.

Dr. Walton seeks to emphasise that neither the Liddell-Scott-Jones nor Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich lexica suggest the translation ‘pilfer/embezzle’ for this verb in Acts 5:2-3. In the case of LSJ, Dr. Walton has found a little more in the entry than is present. Section II.3 notes that the middle voice is used with active sense in the Hellenistic period to indicate ‘put aside for oneself, appropriate, purloin’. It cites towards its end LXX Joshua 7:1, a little later Acts 5:2, and finally Titus 2:10, defining the meaning of none of these texts more closely. It does not

26 Qumran ostracoon 1 (KhQ1) seems to be a draft of a novice’s transfer of a whole estate to the Qumran community. The form of the courtyard house lent itself to multiple occupancy.

27 The Greek is here cited within the translation of Lancelot C. L. Brenton, *The Septuagint LXX*, (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1844).

emphasise that the actions they describe are illegitimate; yet neither does it suggest any restriction of their meaning to 'put aside for oneself' in a morally neutral sense.<sup>28</sup>

Usage shows that all actions described with the verb in the middle voice in the Hellenistic period are illegitimate. Lake and Cadbury<sup>29</sup> concluded:

Achan took from the spoil of Jericho dedicated to Jehovah, Ananias retained private property dedicated to the Christian community. The word [νοσφίσασθαι] would therefore seem to imply that Ananias stole money which did not belong to him, or, in other words, that he had no right to keep any part of his property. No other explanation is possible in view of the evidence as to its use. It occurs not infrequently in Hellenistic prose... and always implies (a) that the theft is secret; (b) that part of a larger quantity is purloined, hence it is followed by ἐκ... or ἀπο... as well as by other constructions; (c) it is to be noted further that the verb is less commonly used of theft from one individual by another than of taking to oneself (the lexica use for it ἰδιοποιεῖσθαι) what is handled as a trust.

My examination of many examples of this verb has convinced me that Lake and Cadbury were correct. It always implies an illegitimate action – stealing, embezzlement, purloining, or pilfering.<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to compare the story of Ananias and Sapphira with Diodorus of Sicily's account (first century BC) of a shared, tribal system of cultivation found in Spain, cited by Lake and Cadbury:

Of the tribes neighbouring upon the Celtiberians the most advanced is the

28 Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. Henry Stuart Jones et al. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 1182.

29 Kirsopp Lake and Henry J. Cadbury, *The Beginnings of Christianity I, The Acts of the Apostles*, IV (London: Macmillan, 1933), 50.

30 Xenophon tells of commanders admitting their power to *embezzle* (νοσφίσασθαι) from their camp's war booty, 'though common property (κοινῶν ὄντων) with those who helped get it' (*Cyropaedia* 4.2.42). Polybius explains the Roman rule of warfare that no soldiers *embezzle* (νοσφίσασθαι) from booty, but keep their pre-campaign oath (10.16.6). Philo writes that Joseph, averting famine, appointed inspectors of high character so that no farmer should *embezzle* (νοσφίσασσαι) and eat the seed corn provided from the public granaries (*Joseph* 43 §260). Joseph's own high character was shown by not *pilfering* a single drachma (οὐδεμίαν δραχμὴν νοσφισάμενος) of Pharaoh's wealth (43 §258). The Israelites purloined none of the dedicated spoil (οὐδεν ἐκ τῆς λείας νοσφισάμενοι, *Moses* 1.45 §253). Plutarch tells us that Pompey, tried for theft of public property, established that most of the embezzling (νενοσφισμένον) had been done by another (*Pompey* 4.620D, cf. 664C). Part of Themistocles' poor reputation was embezzlement of much state wealth (πολλὰ τῆς πολέως νενοσφισάμενος, *Praeceptor. reip.* 13.809A). Themistocles proved that his fellow officials had embezzled much (πολλὰ νενοσφισάμενους, *Aristides* 4.3). Demosthenes was wronged by his guardians' *purloining* of his property (νοσφισάμενων, *Demosthenes* IV.847D). Markus attacked Lucullus for *embezzling* much (πολλὰ νενοσφισάμενῶ) from state funds (*Lucullus* 37.2) Athenaeus writes of one Gyllipus starving himself to death because convicted of *embezzling* (νοσφισάμενων) public funds (*Deipnosophists* 6.234a). The examples in the papyri are to the same effect.

people of the Vaccaei, as they are called; for this people each year divides among its members the land which it tills and making the fruits the property of all (τοὺς καρποὺς κοινοποιούμενοι) they measure out his portion to each man, and for any cultivators who have misappropriated some part for themselves (καὶ τοῖς νοσφισαμένοις τι γεωργοῖς) they have set the penalty as death. (5.34.3)

Here we find a number of resonances with Acts: a system of shared property described with the κοιν- root, distributions, the case of misappropriation, and the consequence of death for such misappropriation. The comparison supports the view that the author of Acts used the verb νοσφίζομαι because he understood Ananias and Sapphira's retention of part of their property to be illegitimate in view of their goal of joining a fully communal economy.

I am content to oppose the opinion of the Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich lexicon, which in this case appears merely derivative of conventional exegesis and translation rather than a useful guide; it mistranslates Acts 5:2, 3 because it has neither heeded Lake and Cadbury's observation and freshly surveyed usage, nor understood the relevance of the *Rule of the Community* for unravelling the true nature of Ananias and Sapphira's crime. Kurt and Barbara Aland's revision of Walter Bauer's *Wörterbuch*, by contrast, accepts Lake and Cadbury's observations and translates ἐνοσφίσαστο in Acts 5.2 'er unterschlug', i.e. 'he embezzled'.<sup>31</sup>

### 'Sold' or 'handed over'?

I close with suggestions concerning Peter's first question in Acts 5:4, οὐχὶ μένον σοὶ ἔμενεν καὶ παρῶν ἐν τῇ σῆ ἐξουσίᾳ ὑπῆρχεν; For Dr. Walton a 'key weakness' of my view is that Peter asserts *prima facie* through this rhetorical question that *prior* to handing his money over to the apostles it remained Ananias's own; according to my view Peter should say that Ananias retained title to his property *after* he handed it over to the apostles, since it would be preserved for him in a 'blocked account.' It may be possible to read the participle παρῶν with the sylleptic sense 'sold and handed over', allowing it to include the idea of delivering over as well as that of sale. Peter's question is clearly concise in its expression, as are numerous Rabbinic rulings on matters of sale and acquisition. Since his statement was first made, in my view, in a context in which all Peter's hearers understood the conditions of the novitiate, it is possible that he expressed the ideas of sale and surrender with a single word.

However, the Greek of Acts, in having Peter say 'After it was *sold*, it was still in your power', may give an incorrect rendering of a Semitic verb. It is clear that

31 Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland (eds.), *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch* (Berlin/ New York: Walter de Gruyter, 6th edition, 1988), column 1100. I thank Herr Ulrich Wippermann of Bonn, my colleague Dr. Burkhard Scherer, and my student Annette Borchert for confirming that *unterschlagen* always denotes an illegitimate action, when used in reference to money, 'embezzle, misappropriate'; cf. Peter Terrell et al. (eds.), *Collins German Dictionary* (Glasgow: Collins, 1980), 691.

Peter's question was originally posed in a Semitic language. The Essene officer may, indeed, have emphasised, to a deceptive novice, the protection afforded him during the last phase of his novitiate by saying: 'After you *handed over* your property, it was still in your power.' Yet transmission between languages sometimes yields an inaccurate rendering. The Greek of Acts conveys Peter's essential point (Ananias' free disposal over his property), but may mistakenly render a verb which meant not 'sell' but 'hand over'.

The usual Hebrew root for 'sell' is מכר (*makar*). E. Lipinski has shown that the ancient Semitic root *mkr* 'signifies a transfer of possession which can, but must not necessarily, amount to a sale.'<sup>32</sup> Sale was 'originally understood in the Semitic world' as 'just a particular case of delivery of possession, a rather comprehensive notion denoted by the root *mkr*'; 'a scrutiny of the verbal and nominal use of the root *mkr* in the older texts shows that it does not apply specifically to sale, but designates delivery of possession... with or without the intent of passing ownership.' He demonstrates the meaning 'hand over' in many legal passages.<sup>33</sup> Jacob Levy explained that *makar* in the *Talmudim* and *Midrashim* 'properly' denotes 'exchange, hand over' (*tauschen, übergeben*). He acknowledged that *makar* 'usually' indicates 'sell' (*verkaufen*), but insisted that even in this usage the root 'properly' indicates 'hand over the sold, exchanged object' (*den gekauften, eingetauschten Gegenstand übergeben*).<sup>34</sup>

In my view, Peter had to emphasise precisely that Ananias was yielding his possession (i.e. control) of his property, but not his ownership of it, to the community. Peter may have expressed 'handed over' with *mkr* in niph'al (נִמְכַר). Or, his word may have been so remembered early in the tradition. According to Michael Wise's sociolinguistic model of Judaea, both high and dialect forms of Hebrew were in use there in the first century AD. Wise also argues that Jesus probably knew both high and at least one dialect form of Hebrew.<sup>35</sup> Jesus' disciple Peter could probably express himself in dialect Hebrew. It is possible that נִמְכַר was rendered into Greek with πρᾶθέν on the mistaken assumption that Peter was re-

32 E. Lipinski, art. *mkr*, in G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 291-296. The quotation is from 292.

33 E. Lipinski, 'Sale, Transfer, and Delivery in Ancient Semitic Terminology', in H. Klengel (ed.), *Gesellschaft und Kultur im alten Vorderasien*, (*Schriften zur Geschichte und Kultur des Alten Orients*, 15, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1982), 173-185, quotations from 176. See 174-178 for his studies of Deuteronomy 15:12; Leviticus 25:13-16, 29-31, 34, 39-42; Ruth 4:3-5; Exodus 21:7-8, 37 and 22:2 (cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.8.27 §272); Isaiah 50:1; 52:3-5; Amos 2:6 and Esther 7:4. In all of these texts 'hand over' is the proper translation.

34 Jacob Levy, *Wörterbuch über die Talmudim und Midraschim* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963 [originally Leipzig, 1876-89]), Vol. 3, 115. Here 'properly' is my translation of Levy's 'eig.' (= *eigentlich*), 'usually' my rendering of his 'gew.' (= *gewöhnlich*).

35 M. O. Wise, art. 'Languages of Palestine', in Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (eds.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL/Leicester, InterVarsity Press), 434-444, see esp. 441 and 443.

ferring back to Ananias' earlier act of selling his property rather than speaking of his current action of handing over the proceeds from the sale. If the party responsible for rendering the account into Greek did not understand the practice of preserving the novice's funds in a blocked account, this mistranslation would actually be highly likely.

Bible readers familiar with the language of any of the English translations in the line of descent from the 'Authorised Version' (or 'KJV') to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) will be familiar with apparent usage in the book of Judges, according to which Israel's God repeatedly 'sold' his people into the hands of their enemies (Judges 2:14; 3:8; 4:2; 10:7). At 1 Samuel 12:9 Israel is 'sold' into the hand of Sisera; at Judges 4:9 the prophetess Deborah informs Barak that 'the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman'. Similarly, at Deuteronomy 32:30, Moses' song tells that Israel could not have been routed by their enemies 'unless their Rock had *sold* them, [unless] the Lord had given them up' (NRSV). Here *makar* is set in synonymous parallel with  $\text{נָתַן}$  in hiphil ('shut up' or 'deliver up'). Elijah declares to Ahab, in an idiomatic reflexive usage characteristic of the books of Kings, 'you have given yourself up [NRSV 'sold yourself'] to do what is evil' (1 Kings 21:20, cf. 25 and 2 Kings 17:17). Of course, none of these texts envisage the payment of a price. Lipinski's studies show that *makar* does not mean 'sell' in any of them, but carries only its essential root meaning, 'hand over', 'deliver up'. All translations of these texts with 'sell' are mistaken. Since a whole tradition of modern Bible translation has misunderstood *makar* to mean 'sell' in many passages, despite the awkwardness of this rendering,<sup>36</sup> it seems possible that such a misunderstanding may also have occurred in the transmission from Hebrew into Greek of Peter's question about the status of Ananias' property in the next phase of his novitiate.

### Abstract

This article explores the origins of the earliest Jerusalem believers' communal lifestyle (Acts 1:13-14; 2:42-47; 4:32-5:11; cf. 6.1-6). Jesus' example and authority sanctioned community of life and property. Wealthy supporters made benefactions (Luke 8:1-3) to his travelling party's shared purse. Jesus' group financed from their common purse support for the poor, common meals and other needs (John 6.5-7; 12:4-6; 13:29). Ideals of holiness and complete consecration domi-

---

36 My colleague Dr. Stephen Bax has pointed out to me that in early English 'sell' could mean 'to give' in various senses, including 'to hand over (something, esp. food, a gift)', 'to deliver up (a person, esp. a hostage)'; and 'to give up (a person) treacherously to his enemies; to betray'. 'Sell' in English therefore originally had a similar semantic range to the Hebrew root *makar*. This may imply that the first English translations of the Bible sometimes used 'sell' to denote 'hand over', 'deliver up'. Cf. art. 'sell' in J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. XIV (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 934-936. The definitions cited here are from sections B1 and B2, cf. also B3e. I thank Dr. Bax for applying his keen sense for English usage to my reflections.

nated ancient Judaea more than Galilee. Highly dedicated service to God in common life amongst the poor had originated as a Judaeian response, amongst the Essenes, to the harshness of agrarian subsistence economy. The verb *nosphizomai*, used of Ananias' crime in Acts 5:2-3, means 'embezzle, misappropriate'; Peter's reference to Ananias' sale of property (5:4) may reflect the Hebrew verb *makar* in its root sense 'hand over'. Ananias' property-surrender, which was only provisional, reflected both the Essene novitiate (1QS 6.13-23, cf. Josephus, Jewish War 2.8.7 §§137-142) and the nascent Church's associations with Jerusalem Essenism.

## Trinity in Human Community

### Exploring Congregational Life in the Image of the Social Trinity

Peter R. Holmes

The one God, in Christian thought, is not a single divine 'Person' but a Trinity of three inter-twined 'Persons'. God, on this social Trinitarian view, is a community of love and so relationship lies at the very heart of God's identity. In this book, Peter Holmes builds on growing interest in idea of the Trinity as a divine society by offering a practical application to congregational life. The central issue is how faith community could better reflect the harmony and diversity of the Trinity. *Trinity in Human Community* outlines aspects of both the author's personal journey and his theological explorations in the context of a particular congregation that has sought to break new ground in radical, relational, community living. Holmes suggests a number of practical principles intended to help local congregations implement at a personal and communal level what it means to love and worship the Trinity within authentic human faith community. This is the first book of a trilogy entitled 'Discipleship as Wholeness' devoted to re-imagining Christian community along the lines of a therapeutic community model.

Peter R. Holmes is a management trainer and co-founder of Christ Church Deal in Kent.

1-84227-470-8 / 216x140 mm / 224pp / £11.99



9 Holdom Avenue, Bletchley, Milton Keynes MK1 1QR, UK