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A Deadly Covenant: Mimetic interpretation of Acts 5:1–11*

Summary: This is an attempt of a mimetic interpretation of Acts 5:1–11. The article juxtaposes the narrative of Ananias and Sapphira with the story of the sudden death of Nadab and Abihu from Lev 10:1–7. The Author argues that apart from situational resemblance, both passages are similar on a deeper level: they are set at the beginning of new orders. Ananias and Sapphira are Adam and Eve of the early Christian community and like them violate their marital unity. Since marriage has become a symbol of Christ’s faithful and loving relationship to humanity, the couple’s treacherous connivance constitutes the ‘original sin’ of Christianity. Nevertheless, as a sacrificial text, Acts 5:1–11 has had a negative influence on Christian religiosity.

Keywords: connivance, guilt, Lamb’s wedding, lie, matrimony, new order, original sin, punishment, sacrificial logic, violence.

Introduction

For years I have been fascinated by René Girard’s theory, which states that we are mimetic beings, solving tensions by a scapegoat mechanism. His creative re-reading of the biblical texts proves that victimisation is a deceitful way of using religion. However, there are numerous passages that seem to resist the mimetic approach and provide ample fuel for his opponents. I want to focus on one such shocking passage, Acts 5:1–11. Allegedly, the narrative speaks of people lying about their possessions; the cheating results in their death. The story looks very simple, but is it? I would like to interpret this difficult text in a novel way, with the help of the mimetic theory and by revisiting the perspective on sin and redemption.

Acts 5:1–11 presents a couple, Ananias and Sapphira, who sold their estate. They kept part of the proceeds for themselves and brought the rest to the Apostles, pretending that it was all the money they had received. When Peter informed

* This is a revised version of the paper, which I delivered on 7 November 2011 at Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, at the conference devoted to the work of René Girard.

Ananias that his lie had been discovered, the man fell dead at Peter's feet. An intriguing fact about this story is the immediate burial of Ananias by three men from the community and keeping his death a secret from his wife, who arrives on the scene three hours later. Her life ends in the same way as her husband's. The description of both deadly incidents is concluded with a remark: "great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things" (vs. 11).

The narrative resembles those violent texts from the Old Testament in which God himself kills an evildoer. It is totally discordant with Jesus' message about the Father, whose perfection consists in patient endurance of the sinners and in His willingness to treat them with merciful justice. Readers of Acts wonder how the Gospel's understanding of such a good God can be applied to the story of Ananias and Sapphira and why Luke, who emphasizes care for victims as the essence of true piety, included such a vengeful story in his text. We may assume that he intended to criticize the rich who were cheating the poor in the early Christian community, since there is sufficient evidence in Luke's Gospel that he highly valued sharing. However, I suggest that the main sin of the couple, revealed by Luke, consisted in their distortion of their greatest asset, namely the oneness, which made them an image of marital unity of Christ with his Church, and of God with His people. This idea, which I have discovered with the help of Girard's theory, combines one of the finest Paulinian concepts and the magnificent theme running through the whole Bible. Still, since Acts 5:1-11 seems to present the idea of a wrathful and punishing God, the text has been used as one of the bases for clerical power and thus obfuscated its original purpose.

The nature of guilt

A twin narrative, which looks like a matrix for Acts 5:1-11, is found in Leviticus 10:1-7. Here, the two sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, offered YHWH "unholy fire", which resulted in their immediate death. Exegetes have always stressed the resemblance between the two narratives. The weakest and most irrational part of both narratives is the explanation of the victims' culpability. Both young men in Lev 10:1-7 and the married couple in Acts 5:1-11 intended to do a good thing: to honour God in the first instance and to give alms in the second. However, their piety is rendered "imperfect". Nadab and Abihu are said to have worshipped God in an unauthorized manner, whereas the couple do give alms, but hide part of the proceeds.

The second common elements are the hasty burials, indicating the guilt of the deceased persons and the community's desire to dispose of its defiled members. We do not know how the culprits died. In the case of Nadab and Abihu, the Bible says that "fire came out of the Lord" (Lev 9:24.10:2), which refers to lightening, whereas Acts 5:1-11 is more enigmatic. It does not give any clue as to the cause of the couple's death, but rather states it as a matter of fact.

Peter pronounces the word of knowledge concerning Ananias and Sapphira's deed and they are struck dead. Even though this may suggest a natural cause, God's agency was presumed in the events.

A closer look at the background of Lev 10:1-7 and Acts 5:1-11 shows another remarkable similarity: both events take place at the dawn of a new order. Aaron's sons' deaths interrupt the description of his introduction into the bloody priestly service. In Acts 5:1-11, the incident also occurs at the beginning of a new order – the establishment of a new, open communion. The ideal of a liberated and sharing congregation was a true evangelic innovation in the political-economic system of Israel in those days, which was ruled by violence and sacrificial logic. Jesus, especially in the Lukan gospel, urged the selling and distribution of proceeds among the poor (cf. Lk 13:32-34; 18:22). He aimed at building God's kingdom by showing charity and sensitivity to the needs of others and thus imitating the Creator's attitude toward humans. Luke places the narrative of Ananias and Sapphira against the background of an ideal community of "one soul and heart", which shares all goods (Acts 4:32). Its members implement Jesus' teaching concerning the multiplication of loaves (Lk 9:12-17): each person recognizes the needs of others who, since that moment, have ceased being anonymous. Like the Samaritan from the parable (Lk 10, 30-37), the rich feel compassion and responsibility for the well-being of the poorer. Barnabas, meaningfully nicknamed the "Son of Encouragement", sets a positive example by selling his land and giving the proceeds to the Apostles.

It must be underlined that despite the common matrix Lev 10 and Acts 5 differ in one matter of utmost importance: the narrative of Nadab and Abihu concerns an unconscious breach of a sacrificial rite, whereas Acts 5 describes conscious violation of high ethical standards. The community depicted in Leviticus worships the Lord in a ritual way; the one in Acts – in spirit and truth. The difference is crucial. Ritual sacrifices – as Girard claims – were God's concession in the face of human violence, which needed an outlet. Sacrifices were not God's direct will, therefore, an involuntary transgression of a rite seems like a light offence in comparison to the deliberate connivance to mislead. Hence, Luke may be said to have an evangelic message in Acts 5:1-11: the interpretation of the incident was linked to Christians' moving out of sacrificial violence in order to form a new kind of society – open, peaceful, based on truth.

The original sin of the early Church: flawed marital harmony

Most interpreters of this passage consider the picture derived from the first four chapters of Acts as the ideal, golden age of Christianity, analogous to the Edenic harmony before the Fall¹. In both cases, a man and a woman are involved. Satan

¹ See, for example, D. Marguerat *et al*, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the 'Acts of the Apostles'*, Cambridge 2002, p. 155-178 and P. H. Reardon, *Ananias and Sapphira*, OrthodoxyToday.org, <http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/view/reardon-ananias-and-sapphira> (accessed 09 June, 2009).

instigates them to sin and they are expelled after the transgression. Indeed, Acts 5:1-11 appears to be the original sin of primitive Christianity. Whether the nature of this sin is hypocrisy, dishonesty, pretense or a monetary transgression, the authors' opinions vary. Still, they all seem to come to the same conclusion: the narrative concerns a reconfirmation of the vengeful action of God towards sinners who trespass against his Spirit.

The words 'covenant' and 'Holy Spirit' may help us one step further if we refrain from a vertical line of thought. A covenant is constantly identified with an agreement in a vertical sense – between God and men – which is continuously being broken by human infidelity, understood in terms of rivalry with God. But this negative focus on the Scriptures, as a demand to submit to the Lord, risks missing a crucial point which is entailed in the typical story of the marital bond. The Genesis narrative focuses strongly on the union between man and woman. The action of God to break loneliness and make the marital bond the heart of Creation is marked clearly and immediately put to the test.

Wiel Eggen suggests that the core of original sin consisted in Adam's application of the "knowledge of good and evil" (cf. Gen 3:5) in order to judge Eve and subordinate her to himself². Indeed Adam, after God's interrogation, proclaims the woman guilty and blames her (and God) for his own fall. The unity of the first couple is ruined by the man's sin.

Nevertheless, marriage – an image of the apocalyptic Lamb's wedding – was to become a sign of the common resolution for the good in Christ's spirit³. The Book of Revelation presents a stunning vision of our place in God's heart by using the image of the Lamb's wedding with humankind as his beloved Bride. He is marrying the same humanity that put him to death, which means that Jesus accepts the murderous Bride, despite all her shortcomings. The new Adam, Jesus, promises faithfulness and love to the Bride in order to cleanse and heal her trespasses. In this bridal relationship, there is room for one's humble admittance of weaknesses (e.g. to the love of money), for nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39). Jesus undoes the first man's sin, which consisted in Adam's scapegoating and distancing himself from the beloved person given to him by the Creator.

The Jerusalem community, moved by the Holy Spirit, joined its Master's expiatory pursuit and worked towards harmony, unity, and the rejection of the sacrificial logic. The evangelical call for a society of truthfulness in early Christianity enabled both women and men to make personal choices and commitments, which met high religious and moral standards. On this basis, marital unions in the sacramental sense could be built.

As Acts 5 shows, Peter upholds the ideal of Ananias and Sapphira standing honestly before God. In fact, they do not come into the open together. Ananias

² W. Eggen, *Adam's (ir)Religious Finger: An African View on Religion Pointing Beyond Barth and Rahner (1)*, „Exchange” 1997, 26, p. 141-156.

³ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, Rome 1981, no. 13.

and Sapphira, the married couple of the new order, turn the anti-scapegoating marital harmony into unanimous fraud against others. While their union should be a matter of truth in the Spirit, what they do jointly is a treacherous, demonic deal⁴. Acts 5:1-11 twice uses the notion of *suneidèsis*, denoting moral consciousness linked with obligation and duty. Here, it is marked by a sinful intention. Etymologically, the prefix *sun* designates “together with” and may be referred to the common knowledge: “I know that you know this very fact”. The *sumphonèsis* (common agreement), of which Peter accuses Sapphira, is labeled as “tempting the Spirit”. Clearly, it meant to stress their unification in sinfulness. Instead of engaging positively in mutual love and support in the strenuous struggle against their bad *mimesis*, the couple preferred to imitate each other’s mendacity. This can be read as a parallel to Gen 3, where the unity of Adam and Eve was broken by mendacious conduct, leading to rivalry and discrimination. Ananias and Sapphira repeat the original “fall” against the evangelical call for communion within the community. A form of positive mimesis turned sour because of their fake generosity.

In the light of the idyllic unity and mutual care of the congregation, the couple’s straying seems to intensify their guilt. From now on, the Church’s members will be weakened, just as the sin of Adam and Eve weakened the entire human race⁵. The subsequent chapters of Acts reveal cracks on the unblemished picture of the early Church. From other parts of the text, we learn about the Apostle’s faulty distribution of goods, which aroused the indignation of the Hellenists (cf. Acts 6:1), revealing that from the beginning there were tensions among Jesus’ disciples. It is worth noting that only the first crisis was solved violently or rather a violent solution was ascribed to it, whereas the next crisis got a reasonable or more peaceful response, as if God’s (people’s?) anger had been vented on the unfortunate couple.

Sacrificial killing or sacrificial interpretation

René Girard argues that killing a victim channels human aggression and brings peace into the community⁶. A scapegoat mechanism is the typically human instrument for ordering life, but it is a lie, which the Bible unmasks. However,

⁴ Karl Barth underlines the role of marriage “in the contemporary world” and gives Acts 5:1-11 as an example of squandering of “a new and special commitment to such active participation, in which it may and must be significant and fruitful, an outward witness and help, as the inner fellowship of these two persons, and in which it may in its own place and manner be a factor in human history.” *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation*, vol. 3. London-New York 2004, p. 225.

⁵ J.-D. Rojo, *Ananias and Sapphira, an Original Sin in the Church: the Eschatological Dimension of Money*. <http://www.cjd.org/paper/ananias.html> (accessed 15 August, 2010).

⁶ See, e.g., his *Scapegoat*, Baltimore 1989, p. 16.

the force of victimization remains powerful even within the community of believers, as Acts 5:1-11 demonstrates⁷. The narrative has been interpreted by the Church as God's verdict on sin and used as a basis for canonical sanctions.

Despite all of Luke's good intentions, it cannot be denied that Peter reacts like the typical warrior of the mythological God, who has to be defended and demands sacrifices. YHWH was perceived in this way in the Jewish religion, even though the prophetic tradition stressed God's disgust with the bloody cult and His desire for justice and mercy. Peter – in Luke's narrative – seems to project his own wrath and indignation onto God that such a marvelous experiment of human unity has been broken⁸. In order to magnify Ananias and Sapphira's iniquity, he uses a rhetorical strategy to make them responsible to God, not only to the people (cf. Acts 5: 4b). Moreover, since Ananias allowed Satan to fill his heart (cf. v. 3), the case reaches the level of a battle between God and Satan. With regards to Sapphira, the couple's lie is presented as their testing of the Holy Spirit (cf. v. 9), deserving nothing less than the death penalty. However, no actual execution occurs; their death is self-inflicted. By describing the guilt of the couple as an unpardonable sin, Luke aims to accentuate the fact that integrity and truthfulness should be the marks of the New Gathering in the Holy Spirit – evil is excluded. Nevertheless, one wonders whether the gain of enforcing honesty is worth the mythological lie.

From the point of view of the mimetic theory, the scapegoat mechanism is at work in both Lev 10:1-7 and Acts 5:1-11. In both instances, the victims' mysterious guilt is interpreted as a grave sin deserving severe punishment, which God promptly executes. His fire / Spirit kills the evildoers. It is worth noting that what we read in the Leviticus and Acts is already an interpretation that betrays a violent way of thinking and that was made by the leaders of the communities, Moses and Peter (or attributed to them). Moses bluntly told his brother, Aaron that he had to accept the "sacrifice" of his sons for the sake of the functioning of the (religious) community. Had Aaron rejected Moses' sacrificial interpretation, the foundation of the religious cult would have collapsed. Lack of his dissent enabled Moses to maintain the sacrificial system and channel human violence. The same goes for Acts 5. Peter declares that cheating brings about its own sentence, sanctioned by the transcendent Avenger. Since no one objects, this is proof that the mythological way of

⁷ Girard emphasises the difficulty of implementing one's awareness of scapegoating: "Even if the gospel tells the truth, man is free and is going to do anything he wants with it. Therefore the gospel is going to be disguised and is going to create an extremely complex world. But certainly not one in which the people – especially the people who pretend to speak in the name of the gospel – would infallibly have the truth, as the example of Peter shows." *Generative Scapegoating*, in: *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, ed. R. G. Hamerton-Kelly, introduction B. Mack, commentary R. Rosaldo, Stanford 1987, p. 141.

⁸ Girard explains that people's self delusion prevents them from realizing that their "justified" physical or psychological violence is a lie. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 78.

thinking has been accepted by the audience. YHWH's fire / Spirit is acknowledged as the ultimate punisher.

Peter's argumentation is ruled by the Old Testamental sacrificial logic, which is visible in the *cherem* law: "you shall purge the evil from your midst" (Deut 13:5)⁹. In the Hebrew Bible, human violence was projected onto YHWH and sanctified by His holy order. According to the apocalyptic way of thinking, prevailing in Palestine around intertestamental times, such was the way that God worked among His people. The Lord himself cleanses His community from deceitful elements, lest they contaminate others with their evil. Therefore, He is depicted as a guard and guarantor of the early Church's unity. However, a question arises why the Spirit – present much stronger in Jesus – did not kill during Jesus' earthly life. From where does the double role of the Holy Spirit come? In Jesus' time, the Spirit frees, saves, and heals, whereas in Peter's time the Spirit does heal, but is also an Avenger.

The existing interpretations of Acts 5:1-11 stress the efficacy of God's word and suggest that Luke's objective of recalling the story of Ananias and Sapphira was to evoke fear¹⁰. The Church's hierarchy has used this incident to strengthen its hold on people's consciences. The threat of punishment – immediate or in the afterlife – was to deter people from sin. The pedagogy of fear, based on the logic of revenge, reflects human dualistic desires. On the one hand, we would like to receive God's mercy for ourselves when we have sinned; however, for others – especially when they have trespassed against us – we expect His severe justice or vengeance. In this context, it is worth remembering that Jesus thrice forgave Peter for his denial of their friendship. Taking into account the intensity and duration of the contacts with Christ, Peter's fault seems to surpass the guilt of Ananias and Sapphira. In spite of that, the Prince of Apostles dares to judge the couple.

The impact of the sacrificial interpretations attributed to Moses and Peter on subsequent religiosity has been enormous¹¹. Anti-mimetic, early Christian society starts off on a disputable footing, by creating a centralised authority that speaks on behalf of a transcendent entity that is depicted as revengeful and which, thereby, justifies a hierarchical set-up. The sacrificial logic will also be used by Paul in 1 Cor 5:5, where he advocates physical removal of a wrongdoer.

⁹ Robert Jewett refers to Phineas in Num 25 as a pattern for other heroes of "zealous violence". "He had a short circuit of zeal in which human rage was flatly identified with divine rage, thus relieving him of responsibility, and his action relieved the plague and redeemed the community." *Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹⁰ See F. Dixon, *Studies in Acts (Chapters 4-7)*, <http://www.wordsoflife.co.uk/BibleStudy/Series45/Study5.htm> (accessed 10 January, 2011).

¹¹ See the discussion on the death penalty, in which Acts 5:1-11 together with 1 Cor 5:5 are constantly used to support capital punishment: <http://www.karasmierci.info.pl/art.html>. Avery Dulles develops a similar line of argumentation in: *Catholicism & Capital Punishment*, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/08/catholicism-amp-capital-punishment-21> (accessed 18 August 2011).

The Venerable Bede considered Acts 5:1-11 and 1 Cor 5:5 proof of the development how to utilize punishment. According to him, the death penalty is an expression of neighbourly love and care for the sinners' salvation, because if they were allowed to live longer, they would multiply their sins¹². The sacrificial mentality has been our heritage since the beginning of humanity and people are simply unable to reject it once and for all¹³. Paradoxically, we can criticize scapegoating, because the Cross made us sensitive to the mechanism of victimization¹⁴.

Conclusion

Acts 5:1-11, interpreted as the original sin of the Christian community, emphasizes the marital responsibility for becoming a positive model of commitment to the good of the world. However, it was bound to have a bad effect, given its parallels to the punishment of Lev 10. Even the innovations, distinguishing the two texts and marking a new order, could not save it from declining into sacred violence. The interpretation of the narrative proves that sacrificial logic is so engrained in human nature that it cannot be immediately removed, even by the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism through Jesus' Passover. His followers are not exempt from relapsing into the demonization of others.

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¹² A. Bober, *Studia i teksty patrystyczne*, Kraków 1967, p. 121-122.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹⁴ See S. M. Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*, Grand Rapids-Cambridge 2006, p. 252.

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Zabójcze przymierze: Mimetyczna interpretacja Dz 5, 1-11

Streszczenie

Autorka podejmuje próbę mimetycznej interpretacji Dz 5,1-11. W artykule opowiadanie o Ananiaszu i Safirze zostaje zestawione z historią nagłej śmierci Nadaba i Abihu z Kpł 10,1-7. Autorka stwierdza, że poza sytuacyjnym podobieństwem oba teksty są podobne na głębszym poziomie: umiejscowione są u zarania nowego porządku. Ananiasz i Safira tworzą Adama i Ewę wczesnochrześcijańskiej wspólnoty i podobnie jak oni niszczą małżeńską jedność. Ze względu na to, że małżeństwo stało się symbolem wiernej, miłosnej relacji Chrystusa do ludzkości, oszukańcze współdziałanie pary małżeńskiej z Dz 5,1-11 stanowi „grzech pierworodny” chrześcijaństwa. Tym niemniej, jako ofiarnczy tekst, Dz 5,1-11 wywarł negatywny wpływ na chrześcijańską religijność.

Słowa kluczowe: gody Baranka, grzech pierworodny, kłamstwo, małżeństwo, nowy porządek, ofiarncza logika, przemoc, wina, współdziałanie.