Ananias & Sapphira
and
The Kingdom Community

The account of Ananias and Sapphira in the Book of Acts has long been, to some extent, an enigma to many Bible students. This article will attempt to bring this portion of Scripture into sharper focus. First, it will recognize the unique historical setting in which the recorded events take place. Second, it will closely examine the key Greek words, phrases, and grammatical constructions which are significant toward an accurate understanding of the actual thought meant to be conveyed by the writer. This approach to the Scripture is commonly referred to as the historical-grammatical approach.

Record in the BOOK of ACTS

Acts 5:1 – **"And a certain man, Ananias by name, with Sapphira his wife sold a possession."**

Very little is known about Ananias and Sapphira, whose appearance on the scene was brief to say the least. Verse one tells us they sold a possession.

Selling Possessions in ACTS

Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, has left us with quite a detailed account of how the Twelve Apostles and their converts were operating in the early Acts period. A great deal of emphasis is placed upon the selling of possessions during this period.

In Acts 2:44, the ones believing were "***upon the same place***" (επι το αυτο), that is, they were gathered into an exclusive community apart from the rest of the population of Jerusalem. Within the confines of this community "**they were *holding all things common and they were selling the possessions and property and they were dividing these to all according as anyone was having need***."

A more detailed record is provided in Acts 4:32-37, which serves as a preface to the events surrounding Ananias and Sapphira. Luke tells us, "***no one was saying any of his possessions to be his own, but all things were common to them***." The phrases "***no one***" (ουδε εις) and "***all things were common***" (απαντα κοινα) make clear there was one hundred percent participation in this practice within this community of believers. There were no exceptions.

Verses 34 and 35 provide for us further detail on how this communal policy was administered: "***for neither there was anyone needy among them, for as many as were owners of fields or possessing houses; while selling, they were bringing the price of the things being sold and they were placing at the feet of the apostles, and they*** *(the apostles)* ***were distributing to each one according as anyone was having need***."

It should be noted that all the participles in the aforementioned verses are in the *present tense* and all the verbs are in the *imperfect tense*. This indicates the liquidation of personal property and distribution of the proceeds on a need basis was *a daily, ongoing task*. As the community grew, this task became so burdensome and time consuming that the Twelve Apostles later gave this responsibility over to other members of the community (Acts 6:1-6).

Generally speaking, religious practice is the product of religious indoctrination and training. Acts 2:42 tells us, "***they were continuing steadfast in the doctrine of the apostles***." The Greek word translated "***continuing steadfast***" is the *present participle* "προσκαρτερουντες". It literally means they were *strong toward* the teaching, that is, they were *continuously exercising strength or effort* in obedience to the things taught to them by the apostles.

Since the Twelve had been commissioned by Jesus to teach the same things He had taught them (Matt. 28:18-20), we would expect to find certain precepts in Jesus' teachings which correspond with the practices of these early believers.

Selling Possessions in the Synoptic Gospels

In Luke 12:32-33, Jesus says to His disciples, "***Fear not little flock, because your father is well pleased to give to you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give as alms***." The Greek verb "πωλησατε", translated "***sell***" is in the *imperative mood*, the mood of command. This is the *command* given to the Jewish followers of Jesus who were looking forward to taking part in Christ's Kingdom on earth at His coming. They are referred to here as the "***little flock***". What we are seeing in the early chapters of the Book of Acts is the extension and expansion of the little flock.

Jesus taught the rich ruler that, in order to inherit eternal life in the Kingdom, he must keep the Mosaic Law and ***sell all his belongings and distribute them to the poor*** (Luke 18:18-30). This teaching was so well known that Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, upon seeing Jesus for the first time declares: "***Half my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor and if I have falsely charged anyone anything, I will repay four-fold***" (Luke 19:1-10). Apparently Zacchaeus had figured half of his wealth would be

needed to satisfy the requirement of four-fold restitution demanded by the Mosaic Law (Exodus 22:1). Twice Jesus describes the Kingdom in parables as that which a man would sell all his possessions in order to obtain (Matt. 13:44-46).

Acts 5:2 – **"and he embezzled from the price, with his wife's knowledge, and having brought a certain part, he placed at the feet of the apostles."**

The key word in this verse is "***embezzled***". In the original language, it is the middle voice form of the Greek verb "νοσφιζω". It basically means to ***set aside***, ***separate***, or ***divide***. Incorporating the *middle voice*, it conveys the idea of *setting aside something for one's own personal use*. Clearly, from its usage in the Greek New Testament and other contemporary Greek literature, this word is used specifically to describe the act of embezzlement, that is, the theft of property given into one's trust.

The Apostle Paul uses this word instructing slaves not to embezzle from their masters, but to show them all good faith (Titus 2:10). In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, this same word is used to describe Achan's embezzlement of part of the spoils from the fallen city of Jericho (Joshua 7:1). This word is also used in the Greek Apocrypha in Second Maccabees 4:32 to relate how Menelaus, the high priest, had embezzled gold from the temple.

Remembering that these Kingdom believers were holding all things in common and no one was calling any of his possessions his own according to the command and teaching of Jesus and the Twelve Apostles, Ananias' actions certainly seem to fit into the category of embezzlement of community property.

Acts 5:3 – **"And Peter said, Ananias, for what reason did Satan fill your heart for you to lie to the Holy Spirit and to embezzle from the price of the field?"**

The Greek phrase, "ψευσασθαι σε το πνευμα το αγιον", rendered as "***for you to lie to the Holy Spirit***" is of special grammatical interest. The Greek phrase "το πνευμα το αγιον" (***the Holy Spirit***) has traditionally been translated and understood as the indirect object of the Greek infinitive "ψευσασθαι" which is translated "***to lie***", hence the translation, "***to lie to the Holy Spirit***." However, "το πνευμα το αγιον" does not appear here in its dative case form which normally designates an indirect object, but in its *accusative case form* which normally designates a *direct object.* For example, in verse 4, where Peter says, "***you did not lie to men but to God***", the indirect objects, "***men***" (ανθρωποις) and "***God***" (τω θεω), are both in the dative case form clearly designating them as indirect objects of the Greek verb "ψευδομαι" (to lie).

For the astute student of the Greek New Testament, this poses an interesting question. Is it the norm for an accusative form noun following the Greek verb

"ψευδομαι" (to lie) to be translated as an indirect object, identical to the dative case form? Or, is there substantial evidence which would compel the consideration of an alternative translation?

Evidence Outside the Greek New Testament

To answer this question will require locating other passages in the Greek language which contain the verb "ψευδομαι" used in conjunction with an *accusative form noun*. Unfortunately there are no such passages to be found in the Greek New Testament. However, there are eleven occurrences of this particular grammatical construction found in the Greek Septuagint and Apocrypha. Of these eleven occurrences, eight clearly intend the accusative noun to be the direct object and not the indirect object of the verb "ψευδομαι". The other three occurrences are too ambiguous to make a clear judgment either way. Since the accusative noun in Acts 5:3 is the person of the Holy Spirit, this discussion will be limited to passages which also have a person as the accusative noun.

God, speaking through the Prophet Isaiah, asks the apostate Nation of Israel; "***Through dread of whom did you fear; and belie me, and have not remembered me nor considered me nor regarded. Though when I see you, I pass by, yet you have not feared me***" (Isaiah 57:11). The phrase "***belie me***" is the Greek verb "ψευδομαι" with the accusative personal pronoun "με", translated "***me***". The intended meaning here is not that they were ***lying to*** God, but by their acts of apostasy they were ***belying*** Him. They were ***misrepresenting***, ***proving false***, and ***denying*** God in the eyes of the other nations. The Nation of Israel was supposed to be the light of the world in order that the nations might see their works and glorify their God (Matt. 5:14-16; Rom. 2:23-24).

In Fourth Maccabees 5:35, the writer personifies the Law saying, "***I will not belie you, oh Law, my teacher***." Again, "ψευδομαι", appearing here with the accusative personal pronoun "σε" translated "***you***", is not intended to carry the idea of ***lying to*** the Law, but of ***denying*** its validity as a standard of religion and life. In the face of heavy persecution by a Gentile tyrant, the writer refuses to abandon and, hence, ***deny*** and ***prove false*** the veracity of the Law.

Fourth Maccabees 13:17 reads: "***And as their brothers were being taken away, the ones being left were saying to each one, 'Do not disgrace us brothers, nor belie the ones having already died'***." The context here is a situation where Jews are being executed one by one for their fidelity to the Law of God. As they are led away they are exhorted by their brothers not to ***belie*** those who had already died (ψευσῃ

τους προαποθανοντας). Clearly, the intended meaning is to ***prove*** or ***make out to be false*** those who had already died for their faith by recanting to save their own life.

Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon confirms the usage cited in these examples of "ψευδομαι" when it appears with an accusative form noun with numerous citations from extra-biblical sources of Greek literature. They offer possible meanings of "ψευδομαι" in cases like these to mean ***belie***, ***falsify***, or ***represent something as being false***.

Conclusion

In the light of this evidence there lies not only justification for offering an alternative translation, but also an obligation if objective scholarship is to be maintained. An alternate translation would be: **"Why did Satan fill your heart for you to falsely represent the Holy Spirit."**

According to the preaching of Peter, those who repented and were baptized on the basis of the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins received the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). This supernatural outpouring from the Holy Spirit upon the believers enabled them to amalgamate into a close-knit community to the extent that they were one heart and soul (Acts 4:32). In contrast to this, Satan had filled the heart of Ananias. The believers were holding all things common, while Ananias only pretended to do so in order to gain access to the benefits of the Kingdom community without totally sacrificing all his earthly possessions as the others had done. In doing so he ***belied*** and ***proved false***, in himself, what he had seen wrought by the Holy Spirit among the believers. Ananias was an imposter who, by his act of embezzlement, had ***belied*** and ***proved false*** the work of the Holy Spirit in his own life.

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