"Pointing the Bone": Sorcery Syndrome & Uncanny Death in Acts 5:1-11

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ABSTRACT

The story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) has long vexed commentators, particularly because their fate appears excessively severe. This episode should be considered against the background of sorcery syndrome and uncanny death which inform the world of Luke –Acts. From this foundation the treatment of Ananias and Sapphira has the hallmarks of an episode in which the wielding of authority by a figure gifted with spiritual power leads to the uncanny deaths of the accused. As such this story raises several questions about the idealisation of the new community in Acts.

INTRODUCTION

THE STORY OF ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA (ACTS 5:1-11) DEFIES EASY explanation. Daniel Marguerat has noted that the story "provokes fear", interrupts the "idyllic picture of the first Christian community", provides a narrative shock, and is a "brutal emergence of a crisis" from the pen of a writer who more often "aim[s] to soften the internal conflicts of the church".[1] Part of the problem is that the punishment seems far in excess of the crime. As

[1] D. Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the "Acts of the Apostles"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 155.

Justo González has noted, such extreme punishment is no longer applied to those whose offence is, in essence, to lie to God:

> The problem is not so much the miraculous nature of the death of Ananias and Sapphira, but rather the apparently disproportionate punishment.....
>
> The sin is in the lie...
>
> To lie to the Church is to lie to God. This is not to be taken lightly. It is, as Peter says, a satanic action.
>
> If everyone who lies in Church today were to drop dead, our membership would be diminished drastically.[2]

Past readings have been dominated by dogmatic or institutional concerns, present ones by reference to five external factors: aetiology, Qumran, typology, ecclesiology (excommunication) and salvation history.[3]

More recently social scientific criticism, especially in regard to community and finance, has been used to give fresh explanations of how the story might have been understood. Much of this work has focused on the actions of Ananias and Sapphira, and attempts to justify the outcome of the story by reference to their actions. These have added detailed cross-reference to communities, guilds and associations in the ancient world, in discussions of the community of goods, and of how benefactions worked.[4] There is a strong economic

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2 J.L. González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001) 78.

3 Marguerat, *First Christian Historian*, 157.

4 For example, R.S. Ascough, "Benefaction Gone Wrong: The 'Sin ' of Ananias and Sapphira in Context" in *Text and Artifact in the Religions of*

bias in much of this work. Care needs to be exercised that our modern, post-Marxist pre-occupation with economics and wealth does not render invisible other factors which might have come into play in the ancient context such as rank and status.[5]

The following reflections follow a different path. They examine the episode through a different social phenomenon: magic. Marguerat's work has even touched on this possibility, with his observation that the analogous treatment meted out on Bar-Jesus by Paul (Acts 13:6-12) is resolved "less tragically".[6]

Magic may thus provide a lens through which the episode may be examined. A number of scholars have explored NT passages particularly in reference to Jesus as an exorcist or shaman.[7] African and Africanist scholars have also explored such themes in the paradigms of Jesus as Witch-doctor/Traditional Healer/*Nganga*.[8] Susan Garrett has even raised this possibility in relation to this very

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Mediterranean Antiquity (ed. M. Desjardins; Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier, 2000) 91-110.

5 J. D'Arms, "The Roman Convivium and the Idea of Equality" in *Sympotica: A Symposium on the Symposion* (ed. O. Murray; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 308-319.

6 Marguerat, *First Christian Historian*, 155.

7 P.F. Craffert, *The Life of a Galilean Shaman: Jesus of Nazareth in Anthropological-Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2008); S. R. Garrett, *The Demise of the Devil: Magic and the Demonic in Luke's Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); J. M. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition* (London: SCM, 1974); M. Smith, *Jesus the Magician: Charlatan or Son of God?* (Berkeley: Ulysses, 1998); G. H. Twelftree, *In the Name of Jesus: Exorcism among Early Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

8 J. Healey and D. Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1996)85-87; C. Kolé, "Jesus as Healer?" in *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (ed. R.J. Schreiter; London: SCM Press, 1991), 128-150; A. Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor: An Approach to Healing and Wholeness* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985).

passage (Acts 5:1-11): "Luke also describes a number of miracles that to the modern observer look 'magical'".[9]

Both Garrett and Marguerat have therefore raised the potential of examining this passage through the lens of magic: one which has yet to be developed through a socio-historical examination of such thoughts and practices. Not even overtly social scientific critics such as Bruce Malina, John Pilch and Mikael Parsons have addressed the theme of magic in relation to this passage.[10] Yet care needs to be exercised: modern attitudes to magic may import anachronisms to a discussion of ancient phenomena. What the modern scholar may view as "magical" may not be completely disentangled from what the ancient world identified as "religious".[11] James B. Rives notes that two approaches dominate the recent study of magic: the realist approach which gathers impressive quantities of data, but is weak in analysis, and the nominalist which tends to view magic as "immoral, fraudulent or otherwise unacceptable".[12] In place of these, he proposes a model in which one may "invoke the distinction between emic and etic levels of analysis, that is, between 'magic' as a Roman conceptual category and 'magic' as a modern heuristic category".[13] In such a model one is able to "trace lines of continuity between

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9 Garrett, *Demise*, 3.

10 B.J. Malina & J.J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008); M.C. Parsons, *Acts* (Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

11 D. Ogden, "Binding Spells: Curse Tablets and Voodoo Dolls in the Greek and Roman Worlds" in *Witchcraft and Magic In Europe Volume 2: Ancient Greece and Rome* (ed. V. Flint, R. Gordon, G. Luck & D. Ogden; London: The Athlone Press, 1999) 1-90 (85-86).

12 J.B. Rives, "Magic in Roman Law: The Reconstruction of a Crime", *Classical Antiquity* 22/2 (2003) 313-339 (315).

13 Rives, "Magic in Roman Law", 314-316; C.R. Phillips III, "*Nullum Crimen sine Lege*: Socioreligious Sanctions on Magic" in *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (ed. C.A. Faraone and D. Obbink; Oxford: Oxford University Press , 1991) 260-276 (260-262, 266-268)

shifting emic categories".[14] From this kind of foundation, magic figures as one possible explanation for outcomes achieved through "occult and uncanny means".[15]

This study will examine Acts 5:1-11 through the lens of magic. First a set of beliefs centering on "sorcery syndrome" or "voodoo death" is defined; a recurring phenomenon in which death apparently occurs by uncanny or occult means.

The next stage of investigation is to explore whether there is evidence from the ancient world of any such practices. The best social scientific criticism should combine theory with data from the ancient world to avoid importing anachronisms in whole or in part.[16] From this basis, it will be possible to see whether or not Peter's authority might be interpreted as "magical", and the possible implications of such a reading.

SORCERY SYNDROME AND UNCANNY DEATH

"Pointing the bone" is an example of a phenomenon named as "sorcery syndrome" or "voodoo death"[17] in wider anthropological discussion. The phrase, "pointing the bone", has particular associations with practices of the indigenous peoples of Australia[18]. A.P. Elkin gives a detailed description of one such rite, noting that the performer must use the right object, appropriate words and

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14 Rives, "Magic in Roman Law", 317.

15 Rives, "Magic in Roman Law", 320.

16 R.A. Horsley, " Innovation in Search of Reorientation: New Testament Studies Rediscovering its Subject Matter", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 62.4 (1994) 1127-1166 (1139).

17 R. Littlewood, *Pathologies of the West: An Anthropology of Mental Illness in Europe and America* (London: Continuum, 2004) 21

18 M. Gonzaléz-Wippler, *The Complete Book of Spells, Ceremonies and Magic* (2nd ed.; St Paul: Llewellyn , 1988) 311.

"psychic concentration and direction".[19] It is rooted in social behaviour: the interactions and responses which shape identity and experience.[20]

The power of suggestion, intimated by the reaction of the wider community and the performance of ritual which reinforces their views, contributes to the efficacy of such rites.[21] Thus, sorcery syndrome, broadly speaking, implies death may be attributed to sorcerers or magicians who operate within that environment.[22] More detailed biomedical descriptions are many and inconclusive[23]:

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19 A. P. Elkin, "Extracts from Aboriginal Men of High Degree" in *Shamanism: Critical Concepts in Sociology* (ed. A. Znamenski; London: Routledge Curzon, 2004) 383-424 (407).

20 T. J. Scheff, "Mental Illness as Residual Deviance" in *Social Problems and Public Policy: Deviance and Liberty* (ed. L. Rainwater; Chicago: Aldine, 1974) 153-162 (158).

21 Scheff "Mental Illness", 161.

22 J. P. Reser and H. D. Eastwell, "Labelling and Cultural Expectations: The Shaping of a Sorcery Syndrome in Aboriginal Australia", *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 169/5 (1981) 303-310, (304). For criticism of "voodoo death" in aboriginal societies and, by implication, in general, see J. Reid and N. Williams, "'Voodoo Death' in Arnhem Land: Whose Reality?', *American Anthropologist* 86/1 (1984) 121-33. For a defence of Walter B. Cannon's seminal definition of "voodoo death", see E. M. Sternberg, "Walter B. Cannon and " 'Voodoo' Death", *American Journal of Public Health* 92/10 (2002) 1564-1566. Online at http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1447278/. Accessed 15/11/2010. Edward H. Hagen, "Delusions as Exploitative Deception", Cogprints, 2005. Online at http://cogprints.org/4134/. Accessed 15/11/2010

23 W. B. Cannon, " 'Voodoo' Death", *American Anthropologist*, 44/2 (1942) 169-181; F.J. Clune, "A Comment on Voodoo Deaths", *American Anthropologist*, 75/1 (1973) 312; H. D. Eastwell , "Voodoo Death and the Mechanism for Dispatch of the Dying in East Arnhem, Australia", *American Anthropologist*, 84/1 (1982) 5-18; "The Forefather Needs No Fluids: Voodoo Death and Its Simulacra", *American Anthropologist*, 86/1 (1984), 133-136; G.L. Engel,"Sudden Death and the 'Medical Model' in Psychiatry", *Canadian Psychiatric Association Journal* 15 (1970) 527-538; A. P. Glascock, "Death-Hastening Behavior: An Expansion of Eastwell's

Sargent and Johnson suggest that it is probably best to see "voodoo death" as the result of some combination of factors.[24]

Examples of the phenomenon are found in a wide range of cultures, even modern Western ones.[25] Whilst some raise doubts about the validity of such descriptions [26], to dismiss them out of hand comes dangerously close to repeating the errors perpetrated by writers like James Frazer[27], albeit from a new scientific perspective[28]. Roland

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Thesis", *American Anthropologist*, 85/2 (1983) 417-420; R. Johnston, *The Politics of Healing: Histories of Alternative Medicine in Twentieth-Century North America* (NY: Routledge, 2004) 71-81; D. Lester, "Voodoo Death: Some New Thoughts on an Old Phenomenon", *American Anthropologist*, 74/3 (1972) 386-390; G. Lewis, "The Problem of Death by Suggestion" in *The Anthropology of the Body* [ASA Monograph 15], (John Blacking (ed), London: Academic Press, 1977),111-143 (136); B. W. Lex, "Voodoo Death: New Thoughts on an Old Explanation", *American Anthropologist*, 76/4 (1974) 818-823; N. Osgood & J. McIntosh , *Suicide and the Elderly: An Annotated Bibliography and Review* (NY: Greenwood, 1986) 52; C. Richter, "The Phenomenon of Sudden Death in Animals and Men", *Psychosomatic Medicine* 19 (1957) 191-198; C. Sargent & T. Johnson, *Medical Anthropology: Contemporary Theory and Method* (Westport CT: Praeger, 1996) 16; P.M. Yap, *Comparative Psychiatry; A Theoretical Framework* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974) 61, 81, 96.

24 Sargent & Johnson, *Medical Anthropology*, 202.

25 B. Glass-Coffin, *The Gift of Life: Female Spirituality and Healing in Northern Peru* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998) 17, 212; Cannon, " 'Voodoo' ", 169; L. Zusne & W. Jones, *Anomalistic Psychology: A Study of Magical Thinking* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc., 1989) 56; M. Galanter, *Cults: Faith, Healing, and Coercion* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1990) 107-109; Cannon, "Voodoo Death", 179. See also Johnston, *Politics*, 331

26 Eastwell , "The Forefather", 135.

27 L. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's* Golden Bough (ed. Rush Rhees; Retford: Brynmill, 1979) 1e; F. Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) 159; M. Latzer, "Wittgenstein and Byzantine Iconography 1",*Encounter*, Summer 2005, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4044/is_200507/ai_n15328817/pg_1.

Littlewood is wary of traditional approaches which search for essentials at the expense of cultural specifics, noting that "culture bound syndromes" should neither be essentialised nor ignored. [29]

Modern Biblical studies, now seriously engaging with the implications of global and post-colonial scholarship and the fresh perspectives they bring, cannot afford to slip back into an unreflective prioritizing of Western/Northern experience[30]. Thus, Pieter Craffert proposes the evaluation of the gospels through a biopsychochosocial model rather than a Western biomedical approach.[31]

My proposal is that behaviour like sorcery syndrome may lie behind the narrative of Acts 5: 1-11. However, this cannot simply be assumed. Whilst a large body of research suggests sorcery syndrome is a widely found phenomenon, albeit with regional and cultural variations, it is appropriate to see whether any evidence may be found for such phenomena in the world of Luke-Acts.

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[28] R. J. McNally, *Panic Disorder: A Critical Analysis* (NY: Guildford, 1994) 208.

[29] Littlewood, *Pathologies*, 21. W.H. Wessels, "The Traditional Healer and Psychiatry", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 19 (1985) 283-286 notes the efficacy of incorporating culturally appropriate practices (e.g., divination) within therapy. S. K. Chaturvedi, "Neurosis across Cultures", *International Review of Psychiatry* 5 (1993) 179-191 notes that many cultures ascribe neurosis to sorcery (180). R.W.S Cheetham and R.J. Cheetham, "Concepts of Mental Illness amongst the Rural Xhosa People in South Africa", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 10 (1976) 39-45 note the significance of culturally specific phenomena such as ancestor worship, sorcery, witchcraft in explaining events (41), even in urban and Christian sub-contexts (44).

[30] C. Tart, "A Systems Approach to Altered States of Consciousness" in *The Psychobiology of Consciousness* (ed. J. M. Davidson and R. J. Davidson; NY: Plenum, 1980) 243-269 (245).

[31] Craffert, *Galilean Shaman*, 260-308.

SORCERY SYNDROME AND UNCANNY DEATH IN THE WORLD OF LUKE-ACTS

The writer and readers of Luke-Acts lived in a world familiar with magic: a two-stage process involving ritual activity and performative gesture with the aim of controlling supernatural forces, with a stratified order of respectability from θεουργία, through μαγεία down to γοητεία.[32]

Is there any evidence for traditions analogous to sorcery syndrome in the ancient world? There are a number of sources which might be explored. Historical, fictional and philosophical literature records such evidence as do inscriptions and papyri. Further archaeological evidence is found in physical remains such as amulets,[33] dolls[34] and votive tablets.[35] These include binding spells which may restrict speech, serve an erotic purpose, cripple or maim: they may be directed against groups or individuals.

Binding curses (κατάδεσμοι or *defixiones*) are found throughout the Graeco-Roman world from 500 BCE onward. Confusion is a key factor, indicated by jumbled writing[36] or the physical rolling or folding of tablets,[37] frequently composed of lead compounds.[38] The language is often formulaic,[39] and becomes increasingly elaborate in the Roman world. A key term in κατάδεσμοι is the use of the verb

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32 C. A. Walz, "The Cursing Paul: Magical Contests in Acts 13 and the New Testament Apocrypha" in *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context* (ed. R. L. Gallagher and P. Hertig; Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004) 167-82 (169).

33 Ogden, "Binding Spells", 51-54.

34 Ogden, "Binding Spells", 71-79.

35 Ogden, "Binding Spells",3-10.

36 J.G. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 5.

37 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 18; Ogden, "Binding Spells", 29-30.

38 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 3-4.

39 E. Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses, and Risk among the Ancient Greeks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 142-152.

καταδέω.[40] Christopher Faraone has identified three types of binding spells: simple direct binding formulae, prayer formulae, and persuasive analogies.[41] The tablets might be placed in a number of locations: wells, springs, or places associated with the victim or chthonic powers.[42]

Roman literature of the 1st centuries BCE-CE notes the use of binding spells: references are found in Ovid (*Am.*, 3.7,27-30; *Her.* 6; *Fast.* 2. 571-82), Seneca (*Ben.* 6.35.4), Tacitus (*Ann.* 2.30;69, 4.52, 12.65, 16.31) and Pliny (*Nat.* 28.4.19).[43]

Throughout Graeco-Roman antiquity there is evidence to suggest that harmful magical practices were illegal.[44] Greek law codes of the classical period made no mention of κατάδεσμοι, perhaps because they were proscribed under different categories such as φάρμακα (potions) or ἀσέβεια (impiety).[45] Plato, *Leg.* 933a appears to ban binding spells in its proscription of φάρμακα.[46] Roman Law, on the other hand, legislated penalties for the use of *defixiones* and *venenum*. Of particular note is the fifth section of the *Lex Cornelia de sicariis et veneficiis*, published in 81 BCE by L Cornelius Sulla, which deals with *venenum malum* (dangerous drugs). Given that Roman categories differed from those of the modern period, *venenum* meant substances with "occult or canny power to affect something else".[47] As the legal definitions evolved, *venena* also came

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40 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 5.

41 C.A. Faraone, "The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells" in *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (ed. C.A. Faraone and D. Obbink; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 3-32 (10).

42 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 18-21; D. Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Ancient World: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 210; Ogden, "Binding Spells", 15-26.

43 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 250-55 for translations and commentaries.

44 Ogden, "Binding Spells", 83-84

45 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 23; Phillips, "*Nullum Crimen*", 262

46 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 249-50; Phillips, "*Nullum Crimen*", 263.

47 Rives, "Magic in Roman Law", 320; Phillips, "*Nullum Crimen*", 264.

to include *mala sacrificia* which were essentially *devotiones* (cursing rituals). Later *venena* which were not fatal were also proscribed.[48] By the 50s BCE, *magus* and *maleficium* appeared as cognates of *venenum*.[49] Roman law contemporary with Luke-Acts knew of magic as a legal category, and legislated for rites causing death or other forms of harm.

Recent social scientific studies of the honour/shame cultures of the ancient Mediterranean have shown them to be agonistic:[50] there is a highly competitive dimension to social interaction. This agonistic context includes κατάδεσμοι and *defixiones*, and manifests itself in several areas of public life: commerce, sport, love and judicial matters.[51] There are even accounts and spells which invoke death, although these are rare in frequency in the classical period.[52] Two cases are near in date to the time of Acts.

Tacitus' *Annales* may be dated to the early second century CE.[53] In books 2 and 3, (*Ann.* 2.69; 2.74; 3.7), an account is given of the death of Germanicus, the nephew (and son by adoption) of the emperor Tiberius, at Antioch in 19 CE. Tacitus' account depicts Germanicus as convinced that he was the victim of sorcery (*veneni*). A search of his house is claimed to reveal the remains of human bodies, spells and binding curses (*devotiones*). Whilst a number of potential causes for illness are mentioned in the account (poison and illness as well as sorcery) it is worth noting the description of the magical finds as "malefic devices by which it is believed that souls are consecrated to

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48 Rives, "Magic in Roman Law", 321.

49 Rives, "Magic in Roman Law", 321

50 J.H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998) 19-21; J.J. Pilch & B.J. Malina, *Handbook of Biblical Social Values* (2nd ed; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2000) 111-112.

51 Faraone, "The Agonistic Context", 10-17.

52 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 37, n. 98; Faraone, *"Context"*, 8; 26.n38

53 Tacitus, *The Annals* (with introduction and notes by A.J. Woodman; London & Cambridge: Hackett, 2004) x.

the infernal divinities".[54] If nothing else, this suggests magical beliefs and practices were assumed capable of causing death.

The second is a lead tablet to Pasaniax, from Megara or Arcadia (2nd-1st BCE). In some ways, it is a conundrum, as it both depends on the strength of a ghost (Pasaniax) for its effectiveness, yet also considers ghosts "ineffectual and nothing". It may suggest a curse unto death, intending that its victims (Acestor and Timandridas) become ghostlike, that is, "ineffectual and nothing".[55]

Such evidence indicates analogies to sorcery syndrome in the ancient world. Even educated writers like Plato and Pliny who may have doubted the efficacy of such practices recorded them,[56] and the existence of legislation across different epochs of Graeco-Roman culture suggests that, to the ancients, magic "worked".[57] However, we need to look further afield. Our study of sorcery syndrome in modern contexts reminds us that magical activity serves social purposes, often linked to inclusion and exclusion. If this is done with reference to the world of Luke-Acts, two non-magical texts seem worthy of consideration: 1 Cor 5:5 and the gospel texts about binding and loosing (Matt. 16:19, 18:18 and par.)

Whilst the worlds of the Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism do not yield evidence for κατάδεσμοι or *defixiones*, it must be remembered that magic was not a purely Graeco-Roman phenomenon, and was identified as occurring within Judaism.[58] Semitic language is also found in the convoluted forms of some surviving spells.[59]

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54 Tacitus, *Annals*, 75.

55 Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts*, 211.

56 Faraone, "Agonistic Context", 4; Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 250, 253.

57 Ogden, "Binding Spells", 82-85.

58 Ogden, "Binding Spells", 81.

59 Thus *PMG* 7.643-51 in H.D. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (Volume 1; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 136.

A number of Judaic accounts describe deaths which result from disobedience, sometimes uncanny, such as Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1-2) and "rule miracles"[60] (for example, I Kings 14: 1-18).[61] Such deaths may also afflict those who stand outside the community of faith. 2 Macc 9:11 describes the death of Antiochus in this way. In due course, similar deaths will be seen in the narrative of Luke-Acts.

1 Cor 5:5 describes a malefactor within the congregation being handed over to Satan. For our purposes we may quickly put it aside. It does not use the language of binding and loosing, and the one handed over is intended for redemption, entailing rather what Anthony Thiselton calls the "destruction of the fleshly" than literal physical death.[62]

Matthew 16:19, 18:18 and John 20:22-23 share a common tradition about the forgiveness of sins, but their language is different.[63] Raymond Brown notes that the Johannine κρατέω (retain, hold) is a strange idiom in Greek.[64] Richard Burridge holds that the Johannine version reflects concepts of binding and loosing, but his contention that the presence of ἀφίημι in the Lazarus story indicates the

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60 G. Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* (SNTW; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983) 106.

61 I.H. Marshall, "Acts" in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 513-606 (554). For criticism of the view that the Achan story informs Acts 5:1-11, see Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian*, 172-174.

62 A.C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 392-400; F. S.N. Sendegeya, *Mwongozo wa Waraka wa 1 Wakorintho* (Dodoma: Central Tanganyika Press, 1999) 109-110.

63 R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to John* (Vol.3; New York: Crossroad, 1982).

64 R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Anchor Bible Volume 2; London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1971) 1024.

"unbinding" of Lazarus from his bandages does not hold up (John 11:44).[65]

Matt talks of "binding" and "loosing", but uses neither of the technical terms (καταδέω and καταλύω): δέω and λύω are the preferred terms. Significantly, authority to bind and loose is given to the disciples. Might this language have any connection to the world of magic? Whilst some commentators suggest this is possible, the majority tend to discard it.[66] Yet, Dale Allison and W.D. Davies comment that a magical interpretation "is possible only for some pre-Matthean stage".[67] This suggests that magical understandings may have been a part of early Christian experience, but were later viewed as erroneous, heterodox or unacceptable. Perhaps, it is tentatively suggested, the story of Ananias and Sapphira might reflect such understandings and their practice, and could be contemporary with such pre-Matthean interpretations given its setting in the early days of the new community. Such a claim, however, will need to be judged on its own terms.

MAGIC AND UNCANNY DEATHS IN LUKE-ACTS

John M. Hull notes that Luke is the only NT writer who "specifically refers to the church's attack on magic",[68] and includes reflections on angels, demons, magical power and authority.[69] The gospel of Luke is shaped in part by a magical world-view, though scholars argue the

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65 R.A Burridge, *John: The People's Bible Commentary* (Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2008), 233.

66 For example, W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *Matthew- Volume II: VIII-XVIII* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh : T&T Clark, 1991), 635-641, D.A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* (Word Biblical Commentary 33B; Nelson,1995) 472-473, C.S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical* Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 429-431, 454-455, C.H. Talbert, *Matthew* (Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010) 196-97, 220-222.

67 Davies & Allison, *Matthew- Volume II*, 637.

68 Hull ,*Hellenistic Magic*, 87.

69 Hull, *Hellenistic Magic*, 87-115.

details.[70] While Luke-Acts does not include the δέω/λύω combination, both volumes know binding as a supernatural condition. Susan Garrett has noted that magical activity may be ascribed to Satan or Satanic impulse: Luke 13:16 even identifies binding as a supernatural condition with the agency of Satan.[71] This is, of course, significant in suggesting a magical dimension for the story of Ananias and Sapphira as their crime is linked to a Satan (Acts 5:3),[72] even perhaps as an echo of the transgression of Adam and Eve.[73]

Magic intrudes at several points in the narrative of Acts. Acts 8:4-25 details Philip's encounter with Simon, a practitioner of magic (Acts 8:11). The confrontation raises issues about the abuse of spiritual power and rejection of its use for financial gain (Acts 8:20-22).[74]

Acts 13:6-12 outlines an encounter between Paul and Elymas (Bar-Jesus): this portrayal of Paul as a worker of magic resonates with details from the Pauline writings (Rom 1:18; 1 Cor 16:22; Gal 1:7, 8-9; 3:1,28; 4:3,9; 5:10),[75] and also with archeological and literary evidence for magical activity on Cyprus which may implicate the Jewish community there (Pliny, *Nat.* 30.11; Josephus, *Ant.* 20.142-144).[76] This passage suggests that Luke shares the presuppositions on

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70 Garrett, *Demise*, 22-36.

71 Garrett, *Demise*, 129, fn.15; I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (NIGTC; Exeter: Paternoster, 1978) 557 attempts to identify the disease using a Western biomedical pattern which takes no account of cultural particularity.

72 A.J. Thompson, "Unity in Acts: Idealization or Reality", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51/3 (2008) 523-42 (535).

73 Marguerat, *First Christian Historian*, 170, 174-76.

74 P. Hertig, "The Magical Mystery Tour: Philip Encounters Magic and Materialism in Samaria" in, *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context* (ed. R. L. Gallagher and P. Hertig; Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004) 103-113 (106).

75 Walz, "The Cursing Paul", 176-78.

76 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 132, n.44.

which magic was based: that "words backed up with sufficient authority could wreak terrible damage".[77]

Acts 19: 13-20, the story of the seven sons of Scaeva who mistake Paul's power for magic and are duly vanquished by forces they claim to control, reveals that Luke was acquainted with the ways in which magicians worked.[78] This may lead to the apostles being perceived as magicians or quasi-magicians, and usually shows their superior power.[79]

Graham Twelftree's work brings such phenomena close to Acts 5:1-11. In his reading, there are magical elements in both Acts 4 and 5. Thus, the prayer of Acts 4: 29-30 asks for bold speech on the basis of God acting so that miracles and exorcisms are performed. This prayer is, in part, answered in Acts 5:12.[80] The supernatural theme continues at the end of this short section with the description of the healing power of Peter's shadow (5:16).[81] In other words, the story of Ananias and Sapphira is sandwiched between two markers which might suggest magical resonance to the audience.

Uncanny deaths also intrude at two points: the deaths of Judas (Acts 1:18) and of Herod (Acts12:20-23): both recorded in "vivid, 'ekphrastic' language".[82] Judas's death is uncanny. It has a magical dimension inasmuch as his actions stem from Satanic influence. The Lukan Passion states that Judas' handing over of Jesus comes after "Satan entered Judas called Iscariot" (Luke 22:3). His death is

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77 Garrett, *Demise*, 98.

78 Garrett, *Demise*, 86.

79 B. N. Kaye, *The Supernatural in the New Testament* (Guildford: Lutterworth, 1977) 9; Malina & Pilch, *Acts*, 219.

80 Twelftree, *In the Name*, 142-43; Conzelmann, Acts. 39.

81 Twelftree, *In the Name*, 143-44; Haenchen, *Acts*, 246-47 on the difficulty of this verse for "reformed theology", which raises a number of issues about the criteria and presuppositions through which the text is judged.

82 Parsons, *Acts*, 33.

uncanny: no medical reason is given for his death, nor is suicide invoked (unlike Matthew 27:5), simply a grim and gory fall (πρηνὴς γενόμενος ἐλάκησεν μέσος, καὶ ἐξεχύθη τὰ σπλάγχνα αὐτοῦ). His death may even be related back to Jesus' predictions about the fate of the one who hands over the Son of Man (Luke 22:22), and possibly that of Simeon (Luke 2:34).[83] Land also figures in Luke's account of Judas, using the money he received to buy land for himself (Acts 1:18).[84] This is peculiar to Acts: in Matt, the field is bought after Judas' death as a burial ground (Matt 27: 1-10).[85] Judas' motives fall short of the model exemplars of the new community (Acts 4:32-35) and foreshadow those of Ananias and Sapphira.

Acts also records a tradition of uncanny death in relation to Herod (Acts 12:20-23), where his own pride precipitates a graphic death. In Acts, the death of Herod is the culmination of an episode in which he has overseen the persecution of the church in which James has been killed and Peter imprisoned (12:2-3). This story, in turn, reverses the order of previous Lukan patterns in which Herod both imprisons John the Baptist, oversees his death (Luke 3:30; 9:9), and becomes complicit in the death of Jesus (Luke 23:6-12). In Acts 12, this order is triumphantly reversed: Peter is freed and Herod perishes as a result of his pride (Acts 12:20-23).[86] Herod's fate is not unique and stands in the tradition of other presumptuous monarchs such as Antiochus Epiphanes (2 Macc 9:5-9).[87] It defies our modern understandings of death and illness, using a theological rather than a biomedical causality, shunning even ancient medical terminology: σκωληκόβρωτος is not a technical term.[88]

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83 Parsons, *Acts*, 33.

84 Haenchen, *The Acts*, 160 prefers "small farm".

85 Parsons, *Acts*, 33.

86 F.J. King, " 'De Baptista nil nisi bonum': John the Baptist as a Paradigm for Mission", *Mission Studies* 26/2 (2009) 173-91 (176).

87 Parsons, *Acts*, 178.

88 BAGD s.v. σκωληκόβρωτος; Haenchen, *The Acts*, 387.

Finally, Acts 28:3-6 offers a stark reversal of pattern of uncanny death. Paul, after escaping a shipwreck, is bitten by a viper. This might well be interpreted as a sign of divine retribution or punishment. Yet Paul confounds the ancient expectations by surviving the snake's bite.[89]

In conclusion, we may note that, whatever our modern predilections, magic and uncanny deaths were part of Luke's world. These magical themes are even found in close proximity to the story of Ananias and Sapphira. It does not seem, therefore, to overstep the mark by looking at this passage through such a lens. What will differ from the dominant pattern of interaction with the world of magic is that Peter is compromised in his response to the deceit of Ananias and Sapphira.

AN UNCANNY READING OF ACTS 5:1-11

The above examination of Luke-Acts suggests that the writer is familiar with magical world-views and that these even intrude into the narratives bracketing this episode. That said, the language of binding and loosing is not found, nor does the dispute contain anything which approximates to either κατάδεσμοι or *defixiones*. Do such absences mean that this line of approach must be suspended?

Let us approach the question from a different angle. On the assumption that sorcery syndrome works because it is believed that individuals or actions may cause death through "uncanny or occult means",[90] does Luke-Acts give any indication that Ananias and Sapphira might have thought Peter had such power at his disposal? Here again, we stress that the Lukan narrative does not directly include either the Matthean claims about binding and loosing (Mt. 16:19; 18:18) or the Johannine equivalent (John 20:22-23). However, examination of the social world which shapes Luke-Acts suggests

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89 Haenchen, *The Acts*, 713-14; Malina & Pilch, *Acts*, 175; Parsons, *Acts*, 360-61.

90 Rives, "Magic in Roman Law", 320.

that uncanny deaths, as in sorcery syndrome, might have a social dimension, linked to behaviour which breaches the conventions of the community. Judas is a prime example.

To explore this further, it is necessary to look at how Peter has been identified in the early chapters of Acts as a "moral entrepreneur".[91] To this end, he becomes both a creator and enforcer of rules for the community.[92] This identification is built up by two factors. First, his presence and key role as the Spirit is poured out on the believers and interpreted (Acts 2), and second, his subsequent portrayal as one who does what Jesus did: he preaches (Acts 2:14-36- even including material placed on Jesus' lips [Luke 41-44]), pronounces the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38-39), and heals (Acts 3:1-10), interpreting this, as Jesus had done, as ultimately about forgiveness of sins (Acts 3:11-26).

In so doing, he, like Jesus, functions as one of those figures who "provide access to divine or spirit forces...The logic is not that they can control natural elements, but that they can control the spirits in and of these elements".[93] The combination of these two roles identifies Peter as one who is the arbiter of behaviour with considerable spiritual power which may include even the spirits of life and death.[94]

At this point the agonistic nature of ancient Mediterranean society must be factored in: it may be that the actions of Ananias and Sapphira challenge Peter's authority, and that he reacts to this threat. This may not just be, as Richard Ascough has suggested, a question of their seeking honour as benefactors,[95] but a strategy which will, if successful, cause Peter to lose status, given the contemporary social

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91 Malina & Pilch, *Acts*, 25.
92 Malina & Pilch, *Acts*, 222.
93 Craffert, *Galilean Shaman*, 160.
94 Craffert, *Galilean Shaman*, 163.
95 Ascough, "Benefaction", 105.

construct of "limited good".[96] In such a situation, he ups the ante with his challenge to Ananias that his error is not merely fiscal, but Satanic (v.3), and not just lying to the leaders, but to God, emphasised by a two-fold repetition- first, to the Holy Spirit (v.3) and then to God (v.4). Such a scenario demands a different reading from Moxnes, who would see the apostles' role as breaking the normal cycle of honour and benefaction in which they do not receive any honour, but reveal "the spirit of unity within the community".[97] In this reading Peter is responding to a perceived threat to his leadership according to human conventions which he should have rejected.[98]

This gives the episode a realistic, rather than a utopian, feel. Alan J. Thompson notes that the style of Luke in relation to Acts 5:1-12 does not idealise the concept of unity:[99] disagreement among the disciples is a recurring theme within the narrative.[100] Philip Esler also suggests that Acts 5:1-11 serves to remind the audience of their own shortcomings.[101] The interpretation offered here suggests this is also true of leadership. If Esler's suggestion is followed, this is a warning to the audience that their patterns of leadership are flawed.

Pulling these strands together produces a reading of the Ananias and Sapphira story in which Peter, learning his new responsibilities, stumbles in his use of his powers. There is no attempt here to downplay the significance of Ananias and Sapphira's sin, which lies

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96 Neyrey, *Honor*, 17-18, Pilch & Malina, *Handbook*, 122-127.

97 H. Moxnes, "Patron-Client Relations and the New Community in Luke-Acts" in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (ed. J.H. Neyrey; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999) 241-67 (265)

98 Ascough, "Benefaction", 105. It would also provide a working out of the dispute about Greatness which Luke locates at the Last Supper (Luke 22: 24-27).

99 Thompson, "Unity in Acts", 534-35.

100 Thompson, "Unity in Acts", 537-41.

101 P.F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivation of Lukan Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 196.

not in the failure to give over all the proceeds of the sale of their property, but in their deception that they were handing over the total proceeds, not a fraction.[102] Peter identifies Ananias' true mistake (and Sapphira's complicity) as lying to God. Threatened personally by their deceit, he spells out frankly the implications of their actions: they have lied to God. Ananias and Sapphira are left in no doubt about the magnitude of their offence: the oracle has spoken. The impression on them, intentionally or accidentally- we cannot say, is tantamount to a death sentence. Why might they both believe they were doomed? Consider recent events: was this not the fate of Judas, and does it not contrast completely with the highly praised actions of Barnabas? Believing that they have committed an irrevocable wrong- and that Peter, invested with the power of the Spirit, has pronounced judgment upon them- they, like the victims of sorcery syndrome, die.

Further evidence that this is a mistaken course of action is indicated by both the immediate evaluation of this event, and later outcomes from conflict. Admittedly, no blame is directly imputed to Peter. However, the incident serves only to increase fear (φόβος appears twice, in 5:5 and 5:11, and emphatically μέγας in the latter), and nothing else. Marguerat sees this as a negative:[103] his analysis of Acts 2-5 reveals three summaries in total with Acts 5:1-11 as a "counter model" to the second (Acts 4:32-35), whose "sole effect is to produce fear", and thus qualitatively different from the first (Acts 2:42-7) and third (Acts 5:12-16) with their positive effects on the new community.[104]

Finally, even in the more blatantly magical episodes which follow, those who contend with the apostles are not addressed in this way, simply leaving them in suspense after identifying their errors. Instead, a pattern emerges in which they see their mistakes, are corrected by their confrontation with the apostles, and brought to a

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102 Parsons, *Acts*, 75; Ascough, "Benefaction", 92-96, for a summary of literature on motives.

103 Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian*, 155.

104 Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian*, 159-161.

new understanding. Thus, Simon, who attempts to buy the power of the Spirit (acts 8:18-19), is warned of his error and encouraged to repent (Acts 8:22-23). So warned and encouraged, he accepts the chance to amend his ways (Acts 8:24).[105] Elymas (Bar-Jesus) suffers only a temporary loss of vision (Acts 13:11),[106] even if the narrative of Acts does not detail its ending. Peter does not set a precedent for the new community: nowhere else do the apostles "kill".

CONCLUSION

The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira are a tragedy within the life of the new community when the use of authority and the power that goes with it lead to death rather than to repentance and change. In this reading the ministry of reconciliation or the forgiveness of sins is compromised, as is the use of the power and authority which flow from the gift of the Spirit: Peter's actions sit uneasily with claims that Acts idealises the history of the new community.

This is not just a warning to those, like Ananias and Sapphira, who seek honour. It is also a warning to those who, like Peter, might also defend their honour within the community "according to human conventions rather than divine conventions".[107]

The cycle of events which unfolds in Acts 5:1-11 is without parallel. It is highly significant that no other conflict in Acts has such serious consequences, even when the authority of the apostles is challenged. The only possible exception is Herod's death, which involves no direct confrontation with the apostles (Acts 12:20-23). The disciplining of Ananias and Sapphira bears all the marks of a *via negativa.*

The implications of this episode should not be considered irrelevant in cultures and contexts which do not operate with magical

105 Malina & Pilch, *Acts*, 65; Parsons, *Acts*, 118.
106 Haenchen, *The Acts*, 400.
107 Ascough, "Benefaction", 105.

worldviews. Even modern and post-modern societies know a number of human and social experiences which may be described through analogies and metaphors of death. Acts 5:1-11 still holds value in warning those who hold authority of the damaging effect which their wielding of power and authority may have, intentionally or unintentionally, on those who come under their control, management or jurisdiction.

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