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Ruach-Filled Community Life

4: 32-37

31-33 AD

Ruach-filled community life DIG: How did persecution affect the early Messianic community? Was this the beginning of communism? Compare verses 32-35 here with 2:42-47. What qualities mark this first Messianic community? Why did the apostles change the name of Joseph? And why did Luke mention Barnabas in his description of the life of the Community?

REFLECT: If you were to describe your Messianic congregation or church, which of the phrases here could you use to do so? Which ones would not fit now? How well does verse 32 fit your relationship with others in your place of worship? What would have to change for such sharing to be more possible?

This is a summary statement that prepares us for what is to follow. These summary statements in Acts can be seen in four places (2:43-47, here; 5:12-16 and 8:1b-4). It is important to distinguish between summary statements and transition statements; the former only occur in the first eight chapters of Acts, and the latter occur in various places throughout the book.

The Messianic community started out with about one-hundred-twenty in the upper room (1:15), then about three thousand souls were added at Shavu'ot (2:41), and the number of men (not counting the women) who came to the Lord was about five thousand as a result of Peter's preaching on Solomon's Colonnade (4:4). Therefore, Messiah's community had grown in a very short period of time to approximately thirteen thousand people.

Now the whole group of those who believed was one in heart and mind. Because of their unity, they regarded *people* more important than *things*.⁹⁴ No one would say anything he owned was his own, but they had everything in

common (4:32). They recognized **God’s** ownership of everything; it all belonged to **God** and **His people**. As stated earlier (**to see link click [Ao](#) - The New Covenant Community Begins**), we shouldn’t regard this as “early communism,” because it was voluntary (**5:4**), temporary, and flawed. The voluntary sharing of property to meet the physical needs of others is not communism. Communism says, “What’s yours is mine.” However, **the Messianic community** said, “What’s mine is yours.” This was the logical extension of the practice of fellowship with one another.⁹⁵

With great power of miracles, **the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Yeshua**. This was the major emphasis of **apostolic** teaching. Although **they** knew that it greatly offended the **Jewish** authorities, **the apostles** never suppressed the truth to avoid that offense. Once again, the only people who had the power to perform miracles were **the apostolic** representative of **Jesus Christ**, or people delegated by **the apostles themselves** (see **[Av](#) - Deacons Appointed for Service**). This was not a miracle producing congregation, but a congregation with miracle working **apostles**. **And ADONAI’s grace, His abundant unmerited favor was upon them all (4:33).**

No one among them was needy, for all who were owners of lands or houses would sell them (also see **James 2:15-16; First John 3:17**). The Greek here doesn’t mean that everyone sold **their** property at once. Rather, from time-to-time this was done as **the Lord** brought needs to **their** attention. The imperfect tense of the verbs indicates continuing action. At no point did **they** pool all their possessions. This shows that they put **God** first, people second, and things a distant third. This giving was absolutely necessary to meet the needs of this rapidly growing community. Remember, many of these baby believers came as pilgrims from abroad, having responded to the gospel at Shavu’ot (see **[An](#) - Peter Speaks to the Shavu’ot Crowd**). Unfortunately, this generosity was soon abused.⁹⁶

They brought the proceeds and set them at the feet of the apostles. This was a clear indication of **apostolic** authority, and full control of the **distribution** of all **proceeds**. **And the proceeds were distributed according to the need each one had** and the conscience of the donor (**4:34-35**). This action was taken to some degree as a result of **their** understanding of the Second Coming. **The rabbis taught that when the Messiah came, the messianic Kingdom would begin.** Hence, there was a real belief that the Kingdom was just around the corner, therefore, **they** didn’t feel the need to hold on to **their land** and would **sell it** to help those in need within **the Messianic community**. It is important to realize that

this practice of distribution was limited to **Messiah's community** in **Yerushalayim** and you never see other Messianic congregations in the book of **Acts** following this practice. This practice may have been a factor in eventually contributing to **the Messianic community** in **Jerusalem** to become poverty-stricken needed support from the Gentile churches that **Paul** had started (**Acts 11:27-30, 24:17; Romans 15:25-27; Galatians 2:10**).

Though the **Jerusalem Messianic community** became poor enough to need Gentile support- **they** became a rich church for their giving brought them eternal rewards! **God**, who always knows the future and cares tenderly for **His** children, knew how **their** giving so generously would be taxing on **their** community, and **God** planned in advance to have the Gentile churches help **them** in their financial need. In doing this, **God** blessed both the **Jerusalem Messianic community** and also the Gentiles who gave, for **it is more blessed to Give than to receive (Acts 20:35)**. This was a historical event and no theology should be derived from it.

Of course, many societies have dreamed of the ending of poverty. The Greeks, for example, looked back to a golden age in which all property was public, and Pythagoras is said to have practiced it with his disciples, and to have coined the epigram “among friends everything is common” (Greek: *koina*). Plato later incorporated this ideal in his vision of a utopian republic. Then Josephus wrote that the Essenes, whom we know as the Qumran community, **lived the same kind of life as do those whom the Greeks call Pythagoreans**. Yet, the inspiration for the common life and love of **Messiah's community** in **Jerusalem** can neither from Pythagoras, nor from Plato, nor from the Essenes, but from the Torah, as illumined by **Yeshua**. For the Torah was quite clear on the matter: **There should be no poor among you (Deuteronomy 15:4)**.⁹⁷



Luke concluded **his** treatment of **the** early **Messianic congregations'** sharing with two specific examples – one to be followed, **Barnabas**, and one to be avoided, **Ananias and Sapphira** (see [At - Ananias and Sapphira Lie to the Ruach](#)).⁹⁸ **Now Joseph**, was also called **Barnabas** by the apostles (which is translated **Son of Encouragement**). **The apostles** renamed **him Barnabas** because of **his** spiritual gift of **exhortation**. **He was a Levite and a native of Cyrus (4:36)**. We know some other things from other passages. **His** name appears twenty-four times in the book of **Acts**, and five times in **Paul's** letters (**First Corinthians 9:6; Galatians 2:1, 9 and 13; Colossians 4:10**). **He** was the cousin of John **Mark**, who wrote the gospel of **Mark (Ephesians 4:10)**. We also know that **he** had a commanding appearance (**14:12**), fully controlled by **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh (11:24)**. When **Paul** returned to **Jerusalem** after **his** salvation, no one trusted **him**. But **Barnabas** persuaded **the Messianic community** in **Yerushalayim** to believe **his** story (**9:27**). Later, **Messiah's community** in **Tziyon** would send **Barnabas** to investigate Gentile salvation in Antioch (**11:19-24**). Still later, **he** would go and get **Paul** from Tarsus to help in the ministry of Antioch (**11:25-26**). **He** would be **Paul's** companion for the first missionary journey (see [Bm - Paul's First Missionary Journey](#)). At the conclusion of that journey, **Barnabas** and **Paul** represented the Antioch church at the crucial **Jerusalem** council (**Acts 15**). Sadly, **his** close association with **Paul** ended in the dispute over taking John **Mark** on the second missionary journey (see [Bu - Paul's Second Missionary Journey](#))

Barnabas was also an **apostle (14:14)**. **He** was of that second group of **apostles**. The first group of **the Twelve** had to be a witness of John's immersion of **Messiah** to **His** ascension. However, the second group of **the apostles** only had to see the resurrected **Christ**, and **Barnabas**, like **Paul**, was in that second group.

Barnabas owned a field (presumably in Cyprus), **but he sold it and brought the money and laid it at the feet of the apostles (4:37)**. The singling out of **Barnabas** also implies that the selling was voluntary. If it were compulsory there would have been nothing noteworthy about **his** actions. **Barnabas** was a Levite, and under the dispensation of Torah (see the commentary on **Exodus Da - The Dispensation of Torah**), **the Levites** were not permitted to own any **land (Numbers 18:20 and 23; Deuteronomy 10:9)**. But after the Babylonian Captivity (see the commentary on **Jeremiah Gu - Seventy Years of Imperial Babylonian Rule**), that commandment no longer applied because the **Jews** were not resettled in their original tribal divisions. Here we see **Luke's** superior writing skills as he quietly introduces **Barnabas** into the storyline as an important figure in the book of **Acts**.

A closer look at the social status and level of the earliest believers: It is fair to say that **Luke** only really presents us with sufficient detail in the descriptions of **the Messianic community of Jerusalem** and perhaps the church at Antioch to get any kind of clear picture of how things were in **Acts**. However, **Luke** gives us four clues to the social level and status of the earliest believers.

First, there is education. We have already learned that **Peter** and **John were laymen without** any rabbinic **training**, and that their powers of persuasion were inspired by **the Ruach ha-Kodesh** rather than learned. We learn nothing in **Acts 1-8** to contradict this assessment of at least the Galilean male leadership. There is, however, some evidence that there might have been a few female followers of **Yeshua**, such as **Joanna, the wife of Kuza, Herod's finance minister** who may have been of higher education and social status (**Luke 8:3**), and **Luke** locates them in **Jerusalem** during the events of Shavu'ot (**Luke 23:55; 24:10**) and probably afterward as well (**Acts 1:14**). One may also rightly point to **Mary**, the mother of John **Mark**, as a person of higher status who had a large enough home to allow various early believers to meet there, and had at least one domestic servant, but probably more (**Acts 12:12-13**). **Mark himself** was able to write **his** gospel in Greek, which reflects a more than basic education in and knowledge of Greek.

Second, is the whole issue of housing and hospitality. As seen above, the early church was dependent on the hospitality and the houses of members, presumably the more well-to-do believers, in order to provide a place to meet. For example, the apostles met in an "upper room" that was apparently not an unusual location for early **Jews** to gather to eat and study Torah. The implication of the fact that believers met in homes in **Jerusalem** is to suggest, especially in view of the

growing number of converts, that at least several believers had large enough homes to accommodate a good number of people, but that no one locale was sufficient to house them all, even very shortly after Shavu'ot. This suggests that there were a few early **Jewish** believers who were of some social status.

Third, is what is actually said about money and finances in **Acts 1-8**. We have already seen various hints that at least some early believers had **land** and houses that they could sell and give the proceeds to the community (**2:45; 4:36-37**). Even if this was overstated, it emphasizes that in this earliest period of **the Messianic community**, few were in need or want because believers shared their belongings. This also points out that some early believers were quite **poor**. Not only that, when we read all of what **Paul** had to say in the B'rit Chadashah, we see that there was a considerable number of **poor** believers in **Jerusalem** and Judea that needed to be taken care of, especially in times of famine (**Galatians 2:10; Second Corinthians 9:12; Romans 15:22-26**).

Fourth, is the mention of names, titles or functions, which may suggest a person of some social status. We see this in a figure like Barnabas who is said to be a Levite; or **even a great number of the Cohanim were becoming obedient to the faith (6:7)**; or perhaps with figures like Joseph of Arimathea or Nicodemus who seem to have been part of the Sanhedrin, both of whom were members of the Great Sanhedrin. The tomb of Joseph used to bury **Yeshua** suggests to most that Joseph was a reasonably well-to-do person. This evidence, however, is not absolute because various priests and Levites could be rather **poor**, and apart from their religious status not really better off than various merchants, craftsmen, or unskilled laborers. Sometimes Levites could supplement their income by being scribes. Therefore, **Messiah's community** was a microcosm of **Yerushalayim** itself. Neither wealthy nor the **poor** were excluded, and it is remarkable how seldom social or economic status is even mentioned in **Acts**.⁹⁹