

Acts 5:1-11

Introduction

In this module, we explore a story from the New Testament where violence occurs under the watch of Jesus' followers.

Orientation to the Text

The New Testament book of Acts tells how some of Jesus' earliest followers – known as “apostles” – spread the message about Jesus and repentance. This happens after Jesus' death and resurrection, and the text presents the apostles as guided and empowered in their work by the Holy Spirit.

The first part of the story takes place in Jerusalem, where the apostles, led by Peter, preach to the crowds and work miracles through God's power. Many people accept the message.

Just before the passage printed below, the story reports that there were no needy people in the group, because some people would sell land or houses that belonged to them and lay the proceeds at the apostles' feet, and the money would be distributed to any people in the group who had need (see Acts 4:32-37). Two of the characters in our passage – Ananias and Sapphira – seem to be members of the group, and do something similar.

The book of Acts was written in Greek in the first or early second century CE.

Getting Familiar with the Text

Read the short excerpt from Acts printed on the next page. As you read, answer the following questions, which are designed to help you get familiar with the contents of the text.

1. According to the text, what do Ananias and Sapphira do that is problematic? (Pay special attention to Peter's remarks in verses 3-4.)
2. What happens as a result? Name at least two things.

Acts 5:1-11 (translation: New Revised Standard Version)

¹ A man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira,^a sold a piece of property; ² with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet.

³ "Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!"

⁵ Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men^b came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

⁷ After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

⁸ Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price."

And she said, "Yes, that was the price."

⁹ Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out."

¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

Digging Deeper

After discussing questions 1-2 above, take some time to reflect more broadly on the following issues:

3. What is your initial reaction to the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in the story? What thoughts or questions do they raise for you? Discuss these with other members of your group.
4. Do you think your reaction to the story would be different if Ananias and Sapphira had been killed by physical force (for example, if Peter had physically struck them)? If so, how?

^a The text does not say anything else about Ananias and Sapphira beyond what is included here.

^b The text does not say who these "young men" are.

5. This story is found in the New Testament.
 - a. How do you feel about the fact that the New Testament contains this story? Discuss.
 - b. How do you think you would feel if the story was from the Muslim tradition and the main character was the Prophet Muhammad rather than the apostle Peter? Discuss.
 - c. How do you think you would feel if the main character was Moses rather than Peter? Discuss.
6. Suppose a friend asks you, “Do you think that the presence of this story in the New Testament might encourage people to be violent?” How would you respond?

Further Reading

- To help put Acts 5:1-11 in context, you may enjoy reading the rest of the book of Acts, which is freely available on the internet. As you read, pay attention to other miraculous events that occur, and notice any similarities and differences.
- For other examples of miraculous “punishments” in the book of Acts, see Acts 12:20-23 and 13:4-12. What similarities and differences do you notice?

Summary of Key Takeaways from this Module

- The New Testament contains stories where violence occurs under the watch of Jesus’ followers.
- Violence in scriptures is sometimes carried out physically by humans, and at other times without human physical action.