

## Chapter 2

# Daniel H. Weiss, “‘And God said’: do biblical commands to conquer land make people more violent, or less?”

## Introduction

This is a discussion guide for Daniel Weiss’ chapter in Julia Snyder and Daniel H. Weiss (eds.) (2021). *Scripture and Violence*. London: Routledge.

## Summary of Chapter

Daniel H. Weiss looks at narratives in the Hebrew Bible where God is presented as commanding the Israelites to conquer the land of Canaan, and kill or drive out the previous inhabitants. He notes that people in modern societies often wonder whether such texts might inspire violently oppressive acts and attitudes by Jews and Christians today, especially because the violence in the text is done “in God’s name” and by God’s command. In response, Weiss shows that historical readers have not always seen the text as a license to kill. He describes how classical rabbinic interpreters of the Bible – who highly valued the biblical text and its commands – insisted that one would require the equivalent of a “telegram” directly from God in order to have the authorization to engage in violence. Moreover, they thought that “telegram office” was currently burnt down, so no such authorization would be coming through.

## Understanding the Argument

*As you read Weiss’ chapter, answer the following questions. These questions are designed to help you understand his argument.*

1. According to the various biblical and rabbinic texts discussed in Weiss’ chapter, what conditions have to be met for a group to have God’s authorization to conquer land?
2. Weiss suggests that some “approaches to scriptural interpretation might well leave more space for promoting intergroup violence in the name of scriptural commitment” than others (p. 41). What different approaches does he name, and which does he suggest might be more conducive to violence than the rabbis’ approach?

## Digging Deeper

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

3. Weiss describes a classical rabbinic approach to conquest narratives in the Hebrew Bible. Does learning about that approach change your view of those biblical passages? If so, how?
4. Suppose your neighbor says, “Scriptures where God commands people to kill are dangerous! Anyone who considers those texts to be the word of God should be monitored by the government – they might become violent extremists!” How would you respond?
5. In many Christian contexts, it is common to avoid reading the sorts of biblical passages discussed in Weiss’ chapter in church services, because of their violent content. In light of the rabbinic approach to these passages, what alternative strategies might there be for dealing with them?

## Suggestions for Further Reading

- For an introduction to rabbinic literature, see:
  - o Barry W. Holtz (ed.) (1984). *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*. New York: Summit.