

Chapter 8

Laurie Zoloth, “‘There never was and never will be’: violence and interpretive erasure in the Jewish tradition”

Introduction

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

Summary of Chapter

Laurie Zoloth discusses how classical rabbinic texts interpret and reinterpret Deuteronomy 13. In this Hebrew Bible passage, a commandment is given stating that Israelite cities that turn away from “proper worship” and serve other gods are to be completely destroyed. While some contemporary readers might worry about the impact of biblical passages like this, Zoloth describes a number of ways in which rabbinic commentators in the Babylonian Talmud – one of the most central texts in Jewish tradition – functionally did away with the possibility of actually enacting this commandment. The rabbis debated whether any such cities had been destroyed in the past, and some even asserted that there “never was and never will be” a city that would merit such punishment. Some rabbis suggested that the people who led the city astray all had to be male and from the city itself. Others suggested that if the city contained even a single mezuzah (a small box containing scriptural verses, placed next to a doorway), it could not be condemned.

Understanding the Argument

As you read Zoloth’s chapter, answer the following questions. These questions are designed to help you understand her argument.

1. Zoloth’s chapter begins with Deuteronomy 13:13-18, which is part of a speech made to the Israelites after the Exodus from Egypt, before they enter the “Promised Land.” What is the basic content of this short passage?
2. Using Deuteronomy 13:13-18 as a case study, Zoloth discusses various different strategies that rabbinic commentators in Late Antiquity used to “understand scriptural violence ordered in the name of God” (p. 101).
 - a. What different strategies are employed in the Babylonian Talmud when discussing Deuteronomy 13:13-18, according to Zoloth?

- b. What conditions do the various rabbis say would have to be met for a city to be destroyed as described in the Bible passage?
- c. Do the rabbis whose opinions are recorded in the Babylonian Talmud all approach the Bible passage in the same way? How much variety is there among the viewpoints that are expressed?

Digging Deeper

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

3. Do any of the rabbinic approaches to Deuteronomy 13:13-18 surprise you? How?
4. Suppose your neighbor says to you, “The Old Testament says some people should be stoned – that’s so harsh!” In light of Zoloth’s chapter, how might you respond?
5. Passages calling for harsh punishments are also found in the Qur’an and other early Islamic texts. Muslim scholars over the centuries have often approached such passages in similar ways to the rabbis discussed in Zoloth’s chapter. Compare the rabbinic strategies described by Zoloth with those in a legal ruling given by Muslim scholar Taqī al-Dīn ‘Alī b. ‘Abd al-Kāfī al-Subkī (d. 1356 CE), which is [available online here](#).¹

Suggestions for Further Reading

- The rabbis adopted similar strategies in connection with other Hebrew Bible passages. Another example is discussed in:
 - o Daniel H. Weiss (2012). “Just Peacemaking and Ethical Formation in Classical Rabbinic Literature.” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 30, pp. 76–95.
- For more on Islamic approaches to such passages, see:
 - o Jonathan Brown (2017). “Stoning and Hand Cutting – Understanding the Hudud and the Shariah in Islam.” *Yaqeen Institute*, 17 January [online]. Available at: [yaqeeninstitute.org/jonathan-brown/stoning-and-hand-cutting-understanding-the-hudud-and-the-shariah-in-islam](https://yaqeeninstitute.org/jonathan-brown/stoning-and-hand-cutting-understanding-the-hudud-and-the-shariah-in-islam/#h.m8ntvpsxmsqg).

¹ <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/jonathan-brown/stoning-and-hand-cutting-understanding-the-hudud-and-the-shariah-in-islam/#h.m8ntvpsxmsqg>