



SCRIPTURE AND VIOLENCE

Edited by
JULIA SNYDER AND DANIEL H. WEISS

ROUTLEDGE 

SCRIPTURE AND VIOLENCE

In the public sphere, it is often assumed that acts of violence carried out by Muslims are inspired by their religious commitment and encouraged by the Qur'an. Some people express similar concerns about the scriptures and actions of Christians and Jews. Might they be right? What role do scriptural texts play in motivating and justifying violence in these three traditions?

Scripture and Violence explores the complex relationship between scriptural texts and real-world acts of violence. A variety of issues are addressed, including the prevalent modern tendency to express more concern about other people's texts and violence than one's own, to treat interpretation and application of scriptural passages as self-evident, and to assume that the actions of religious people are directly motivated by what they read in scriptures. Contributions come from a diverse group of scholars of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity with varying perspectives on the issues.

Highlighting the complex relationship between texts and human actions, this is an essential read for students and academics studying religion and violence, Abrahamic religions, or scriptural interpretation. *Scripture and Violence* will also be of interest to researchers working on religion and politics, sociology and anthropology of religion, socio-political approaches to scriptural texts, and issues surrounding religion, secularity, and the public sphere. This volume could also form a basis for discussions in churches, synagogues, mosques, interfaith settings, and government agencies.

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PREFACE

Conflict, war, and violence are prominent features of the world today, and people often wonder what role religion and scripture might play in fanning the flames. This volume helps to address that question by examining the relationship between scripture and real-world acts of violence.

While there have been other academic studies of “religion and violence,” this book focuses specifically on *scripture* and violence, providing insights into the dynamics of textual interpretation and the relationship between violent-looking texts and concrete actions carried out by contemporary Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Through careful analysis of these specific issues, the volume offers a new perspective on broader questions about “religion and violence.” Readers will be equipped to recognize problematic assumptions about scriptures and (particular) religious communities, and to evaluate claims about “scripture and violence” encountered in the media, scholarship, or daily life. This will help to enable more fruitful and effective approaches to addressing conflict, violence, and injustice in the world today.

Given the contemporary relevance of our focus, we have made an effort to ensure that the essays in the volume are grounded in academic scholarship but also accessible to a fairly broad readership, including religious leaders, policy-makers, graduate students, advanced undergraduates, academic researchers, and everyday readers – whether religious or non-religious – who are interested in the topic. The volume could form a basis for discussion and training in university classrooms, churches, synagogues, mosques, interfaith settings, government agencies, etc.

The volume arose out of an academic collaboration called “Scriptural Reasoning in the University,” hosted by the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme in the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. During two international conferences in 2016 and 2017, scholars with expertise in Jewish, Christian,

and Islamic texts and traditions engaged in discussion and interreligious scripture study on the topic of “scripture and violence.” Drafts of the essays in this volume were circulated, followed by extended conversation and feedback from other conference participants. While the essays are presented in this book under the names of individual authors, the ideas were thus shaped by input from a variety of scholars from different traditions and with different areas of expertise.

We would like to thank the various individuals, groups, and institutions that have helped to make this project possible. Generous funding for the 2016 and 2017 conferences was provided by the Polonsky-Coexist Fund at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Divinity. Barbara Bennett provided important assistance with organization. We also thank Murray Edwards College, where the conferences were held. Along with the authors in this volume, numerous additional participants in the conferences also played a key role in helping to suggest and hone the ideas that eventually found their way into this book. Additional thanks go to David Ford and Peter Ochs for their vision and mentoring. We are also grateful to the staff at Routledge for helping bring this volume to press.

In addition to preparing this volume, we have also been seeking to carry forward our work on “scripture and violence” in other ways, and to engage in two-way conversations with various groups and individuals outside the walls of the academy. The team at the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme, especially Giles Waller and Charity Green, have been key contributors to those endeavors, and we have also had the good fortune of being able to partner with other organizations. Among others, thanks are due to Nadiya Takolia and Sarah Snyder of the Rose Castle Foundation, Michael Wakelin of Coexist House, and Krish Raval of the Senior Faith Leadership Programme. We also thank the Arts and Humanities Impact Fund at the University of Cambridge for enabling us to carry out ongoing additional impact events stemming from the project. Further resources and information will be made available at www.scriptureandviolence.org as the project continues to develop.

We would also like to thank the institutions that provided us with our intellectual homes and financial support while this volume was being completed, namely, the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge (Daniel H. Weiss) and the Faculty of Catholic Theology and Centre for Advanced Studies (“Beyond Canon,” DFG FOR 2770) of the University of Regensburg (Julia Snyder).

Finally, we are grateful to our parents, family, and friends, who provided us with support and encouragement throughout the multiple years during which this project was gestating.

Julia Snyder and Daniel H. Weiss
8 March, 2020

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ABBREVIATIONS

BT	Babylonian Talmud
ESV	<i>The Holy Bible, English Standard Version</i>
NIV	<i>The Holy Bible, New International Version</i>
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society TANAKH translation
NRSV	<i>New Revised Standard Version of the Bible</i>
PT	Palestinian Talmud
Q	Qur'an

1

INTRODUCTION

Scripture and violence – is there a bomb in this text?¹

Julia Snyder

What role do scriptural texts play in motivating or justifying violence? Does something in the Qur'an make Muslims likely to perform acts of violence? Are the biblical texts read by Jews and Christians equally dangerous? Why do many people seem to *think* that devotion to scriptural texts leads to violence? How should one respond when someone expresses concerns about these books? These are the sorts of questions addressed in this volume.

Philip and the Qur'an

In 2016, I was living in Germany. One day, I was talking with Philip, a Syrian man who had grown up in a Christian family and had come to Germany as a refugee. "Does your sister want to come to Europe, too?" I asked. "She has four children," he replied, "and the journey is too dangerous. Muslims don't worry as much about losing a child, so they come all the time." I remonstrated with him for suggesting that Muslims do not care about their children, but he remained unconvinced. Then he announced, "The Qur'an says it's okay to kill people of other faiths."

This was not the first time I had heard someone suggest that Muslims are more accepting of violence than others, and that this is somehow evidenced by the Qur'an. One regularly encounters such suggestions online, in the media, and in conversation. I have heard remarks about "the Qur'an and violence" made by both Europeans and North Americans, "liberal" and "conservative," "religious" and "non-religious," from a range of educational and socio-economic backgrounds.

Not everyone who makes comments about "the Qur'an and violence" would be prepared to point to actual scriptural passages, but one can certainly find texts

where violence is mentioned in the Qur'an, as well as in the scriptures of Jews and Christians. For example:

Wherever you encounter the idolaters, kill them, seize them, besiege them, wait for them at every lookout post.

*(Qur'an 9:5, trans. Abdel Haleem)*²

In the towns of the peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as a heritage, you shall not let a soul remain alive. No, you must annihilate them . . . as the LORD your God has commanded you.

*(Deuteronomy 20:16–17 NJPS)*³

Peter said to [Sapphira], “How is it that you [and your husband] have agreed together to put the Spirit of the LORD to the test? . . .” Immediately she fell down at his feet and died.

(Acts 5:9–10 NRSV)

Many remarks one hears about “scripture and violence” imply that contemporary Jews, Christians, and Muslims who affirm such passages as “scripture” might be more inclined to engage in violent acts than others.

So how should I have responded to Philip's remark about the Qur'an? What would you have said? And how does one best reply to other statements people make about “scripture and violence”? This book is designed to help us think through these sorts of questions, which turn out to be more complicated than one might think.

Summary of the volume

This volume explores the complex relationship between scripture and real-world acts of violence. The focus is not on violence *depicted in* these texts, but on assumptions about how they might inspire violent acts *today*. Is there reason for concern? The overall perspective taken in this volume is that the Bible and the Qur'an are neither intrinsically dangerous nor inherently safe, and that the relationship between scripture and violence is more complicated than many people assume – including “religious” and “non-religious” people, “liberal” and “conservative.” Perhaps you are skeptical that any significant connection between scripture and real-world violence exists. Or maybe you think that reading certain texts probably does, could, or should make people more likely to perform violent acts. Regardless, we hope the essays in this volume will spur you to consider the issues from new perspectives. The various contributions will encourage you to think deeply about what it means to read, interpret, and engage with texts. Some of the essays will highlight the societal tendency to speak as if *other people's scriptures* are a cause for concern, in contrast to one's own favorite texts (scriptural or otherwise). Others will point to the challenge of developing a satisfying response to such concerns that does not itself reflect a simplistic understanding of the relationship between ancient texts and contemporary actions.

Our goal is not to arm readers for black-and-white polemics either for or against the Bible or the Qur'an, but to help readers think through the issues. We hope in turn to encourage healthier, more productive types of conversation about these fraught topics on both individual and societal levels, in the interests of justice, peace, and better interreligious relations. This is especially important in the current world climate, where characterizations of "Muslims," "Jews," "Christians," "religious people," etc. continue to impact everyday social interactions, as well as public policy on matters ranging from headscarves and halal meat to immigration and overseas military engagement.

Topics covered in this introductory essay

This introductory essay will briefly survey some of the many topics that need to be addressed if one wants to think seriously about "scripture and violence." I will first make a few general comments about "violence." What is it? Is it something "religious" communities have a unique responsibility to address? I will then explore some questions more specifically about "scripture and violence," many of which will be taken up again in later chapters. What role do passages from the Bible and the Qur'an play in motivating or justifying violence in the world today? What is involved in interpreting and applying scriptural texts? And what leads people to think, say, or imply that those who consider certain scriptures "sacred" might be more inclined to violence – or less inclined to violence – than others? After offering a few thoughts on those issues, I will introduce the other contributions to the volume.

Before I begin, a note on terminology. Both Jews and Christians use the term "Bible" to refer to their sacred texts, but different people include different sets of texts in the collection. For some, the "Bible" includes only the texts sometimes referred to as the "Hebrew Bible" – equivalent to some versions of the "Old Testament" – while the "Bible" for others includes the "Hebrew Bible" and the "New Testament." Still others have "Bibles" that include additional texts known as "Apocrypha" that are not part of either the "Hebrew Bible" or the "New Testament." All of this makes it difficult to find a quick way to refer to the scriptures of Jews and Christians. For the sake of brevity, I will use the term "Bible" for all of the above. When I refer to the "Bible" in this essay, I am thinking of *any* collection of texts a Jew or Christian might designate with that term.

I would also like to clarify up front that my overall intent in this introduction is to give an overview of the wide range of questions that need to be asked if one wants to analyze the relationship between scripture and violence in a robust, holistic manner. Some of the individual observations may initially appear self-evident, but I have included them to make sure that one does not forget to think about these issues when assessing real-life cases, which tend to be very complex and can trigger strong emotions. Moreover, I encourage you to consider whether there are areas in which your explicit attitudes – your readiness to affirm the ideas I discuss – may exist alongside lingering implicit biases for or against certain scriptures or people from certain religious communities.⁴ As you read,