

Further Information for Leaders and Facilitators

General Guidance

General tips and guidance about how to organize an event and facilitate discussion are contained in the *Scripture & Violence Event Leader's Guide*, available at www.scriptureandviolence.org.

While the current module can be used on its own, it may help the quality of your discussion to have your group watch the introductory videos on our website first, or to read some of our other introductory resources. Scriptural interpretation is a complex process, and the relationship between scriptural texts and real-world actions is multi-faceted. Our introductory resources give a brief overview of key concepts and ideas.

Tips and Guidance on Module Questions

Here are some tips and guidance on the questions posed in this module.

In order to allow participants to make their own discoveries, it is best to read the scriptural passage and discuss the questions in an open-ended manner first, before referencing these notes. Often, group members will come up with these ideas themselves, as well as many other interesting thoughts and questions that are not discussed below.

This guidance is not meant as a set of “answers” that participants need to reach, but is designed to help leaders feel confident facilitating discussion. Leaders do not need to be “experts.” The group can have a stimulating discussion, even if some questions arise that no one in the group is able to answer.

Participants should generally be allowed to discuss freely. Leaders should draw upon the material in these notes primarily when the conversation gets stuck.

Getting Familiar with the Text

1. *According to the text, what criteria and steps need to be fulfilled for a wayward and defiant son to be executed? What people are involved in the different stages of the process?*

This question can be answered based on the passage itself.

2. *This passage has many “gaps” or things that are not specified in the text. For example, the passage does not talk about the age of the “son,” and it does not say precisely what sorts of behavior make a son “wayward and defiant.”*
 - a. *Does your view of the passage change if you think of the son as being seven years old, or fifteen, or thirty? How?*
 - b. *What types of “wayward and defiant” behavior came to mind when you first read verse 18? Did that change when you read the parents’ statement in verse 20?*
 - c. *What other “gaps” do you notice in the text?*

The purpose of Question 2 is to draw attention to the many “gaps” in the text – information that the text does not provide. Participants should be encouraged not to leap to conclusions about things that are not actually stated in the text, e.g., not to decide “The son must be younger than 12” or “Because the son is not described as giving a defense, the text assumes he has not been given the opportunity to do so.” Instead, the focus should simply be on noticing the gaps. The section on Exploring Later Interpretations provides one example of how certain interpreters have filled in some of these gaps, and participants can come up with other alternative ways of filling in the gaps themselves.

3. *What is your initial reaction to the passage? What thoughts or questions does it raise for you?*

The passage may make some participants feel uncomfortable. It can be helpful to acknowledge that openly, and to talk about why they might react that way. During the discussion, it may be helpful to return to the idea of “gaps,” especially if some of the ideas that make participants uncomfortable are things that are not actually stated in the text, but relate instead to their own interpretation of it.

Exploring Later Interpretations

4. *How many of the restrictions listed in the Talmud seem obvious from the scriptural passage itself? How many seem not so obvious?*

Question 4 highlights how interpreters sometimes say things in their interpretations that do not seem immediately linked to the words of a scriptural passage. For example: Does our scriptural passage’s use of term “son” obviously exclude adult males? Does the reference to “drunkard” obviously imply that a person *must* drink wine to count as a “wayward and defiant son”? Does the reference to “our voice” obviously imply that the parents must have identical voices, facial appearances, and heights?

5. *The Talmud never says the scriptural commandment is bad, but it puts restrictions on who can actually be executed.*
- a. *What sort of attitude toward scriptural commandments might this indicate?*
 - b. *How is the Talmud's approach to the scriptural commandment different from saying, "This commandment only applied back in the time of ancient Israel, but does not apply today"?*
 - c. *How is the Talmud's approach different from saying, "This commandment was not meant to be understood literally, but is a metaphor for our own inner rebellion against God"?*

Question 5 encourages participants to think about the Talmud's underlying attitude toward the commandment found in the scriptural text. Participants might notice that the Talmud does not explicitly criticize the scriptural passage or the commandment as being "unethical" or "immoral." The Talmud also assumes that the commandment continues to be valid, while also seeming to understand it as a command that was never expected to be carried out in actual practice.

The Talmud's approach differs from some other common ways of approaching scriptural commandments. For example, some interpreters in the Jewish and Christian tradition today have argued that scriptural passages like this one should be understood spiritually or metaphorically, rather than as calling for actual executions. Another common approach, especially in Christian contexts, is to say, "This commandment applied back in ancient times, but not today." The latter approach differs from that of the Talmud because it suggests that the commandment is no longer valid, and assumes that the commandment was expected to be carried out in practice at the time the book of Deuteronomy was produced (which the Talmud does not assume).

6. *Are you surprised by the Talmud's statement "There never has been a wayward and defiant son, and there never will be"? What value or significance could the scriptural passage have if the commandment is never carried out in practice?*

Question 6 encourages participants to reflect on their own assumptions about the purpose of scriptural commandments.

The rabbinic interpreters may view the commandment about the "wayward son" as written by God so that people can "engage in study of the issue and receive reward" (as the end of the Talmud passage says), rather than so that they will actually carry it out. What understanding of God and scriptural commandments would that suggest?

At the same time, rabbinic texts treat most other biblical commandments as something to be actually carried out. What might make the rabbinic commentators treat some commandments as "just to be studied," and not others?

7. *Some people today respond negatively to scriptural texts like Deuteronomy 21:18-21.*
 - a. *Imagine someone says to you, “Commandments such as Deuteronomy 21:18-21 make me nervous about any group today that would consider these sorts of texts to be sacred scripture.” In light of the Talmud, how might you respond?*
 - b. *Now imagine someone (perhaps from a Christian or non-religious background) says, “The Old Testament has problematic stuff in it – look at Deuteronomy 21:18-21!” What do you think a good response to this statement would be?*

The scenarios imagined in Question 7 are ones that participants might actually encounter.

Participants can discuss what fears or concerns the imaginary speaker in 7a might have. Is the speaker worried that people who consider the text sacred scripture might literally stone children who disobey their parents by eating and drinking too much? Or that such people would be likely to support the death penalty in modern society? Or advocate punishments for things that other people do not see as crimes? Or be judgmental toward people whom they see as transgressing biblical commandments? Responding directly to these concerns may sometimes be more productive than discussing the Bible itself. In addition, the Talmud illustrates that people who consider texts like Deuteronomy 21 to be sacred scripture do not necessarily understand them as calling for actual acts of violence.

Question 7b raises the question of whether the commandment in Deuteronomy 21 actually is “problematic,” as the imaginary speaker suggests, or whether it only appears “problematic” if one fills in the “gaps” in certain ways. One possible response would be to reflect on the Talmud’s approach to the commandment. Would the commandment still seem “problematic” if understood in the way it is presented in the Talmud?