



Laying Down the Sword: Why We Can't Ignore the Bible's Violent Verses

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Commands to kill, to commit ethnic cleansing, to institutionalize segregation, to hate and fear other races and religions—all are in the Bible, and all occur with a far greater frequency than in the Qur'an. But fanaticism is no more hard-wired in Christianity than it is in Islam. In *Laying Down the Sword*, “one of America’s best scholars of religion” (*The Economist*) explores how religions grow past their bloody origins, and delivers a fearless examination of the most violent verses of the Bible and an urgent call to read them anew in pursuit of a richer, more genuine faith.

Christians cannot engage with neighbors and critics of other traditions—nor enjoy the deepest, most mature embodiment of their own faith—until they confront the texts of terror in their heritage. Philip Jenkins identifies the “holy amnesia” that, while allowing scriptural religions to grow and adapt, has demanded a nearly wholesale suppression of the Bible’s most aggressive passages, leaving them dangerously dormant for extremists to revive in times of conflict. Jenkins lays bare the *whole* Bible, without compromise or apology, and equips us with tools for reading even the most unsettling texts, from the slaughter of the Canaanites to the alarming rhetoric of the book of Revelation.

Laying Down the Sword presents a vital framework for understanding both the Bible and the Qur'an, gives Westerners a credible basis for interaction and dialogue with Islam, and delivers a powerful model for how a faith can grow from terror to mercy.

Laying Down the Sword: Why We Can't Ignore the Bible's Violent Verses Details

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Larry says

The Suras from the Islamic tradition that support violence are matched by books of the Old Testament (Joshua, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Numbers) that do the same. Having made that awful similarity clear, Jenkins writes interestingly about how to not "invalidate the text as part of a savage antiquity (232)."

M Christopher says

Another fine book by Philip Jenkins! I've read his speculative work on the Church (The Next Christianity) and two of his Church histories and been very impressed with all three. This new volume is more of a Biblical study: how should one deal with the violent passages in the Bible? Jenkins begins with a survey of some of the most egregiously violent pericopes in the Old Testament and compares the number and type to what popular culture believes is a far more violent book, the Qur'an. He clearly demonstrates that it is actually the Judeo-Christian Scriptures that are more bloodthirsty and then turns to a study of how these "texts of terror" have influenced Church and society over the centuries. After surveying how theologians and preachers have attempted to ameliorate the negative influence of these passages over those same centuries, he offers some guides to current scholars and speakers on how positive results might be achieved.

These problem texts are often cited as reasons for people to drop out of church, disbelieve in God, or discard the Bible. I am glad to have this volume as a tool for teaching and preaching.

Paul Froehlich says

Which text is genuine?

- a. "Allah is a God of war: Allah is his name."
- b. "The Lord is a man of war: the Lord is his name."

The answer is b, which is found in the Old Testament, Exodus 15:3.

Ever since 9/11, it has become an article of faith on the political right that Islam is a violent religion. Conservatives cite violent texts from the Qur'an as proof. Christian evangelist Franklin Graham claims that the Qur'an "preaches violence." Conservatives contend that "Islam is, quite simply, a religion of war". Violent texts from the Qur'an were spotlighted during the 2010 debate over building an Islamic Center near New York's Ground Zero.

Unfortunately, it's easy for Christians to spot the speck in someone else's eye while missing the board in our own. The fact is the Bible has its own bloody and violent passages. Professor Philip Jenkins compares the violent passages in the Old Testament to those in the Qur'an. He concludes that one book clearly has more divine approval of violence, including the most extreme violence of extermination, than the other. It's not the one conservatives think.

Rick says

I went into this book hoping for clear cut explanations of why the God of the Old Testament ordered the Jews to kill all the men, women, and children and then move onto their land. (see Deut. 7:1-2, and lots of other verses) The explanations weren't that clear. The only way to understand these genocide texts is to see them as mythology and/or symbolism and allegory. It's easier to understand the Amalekites as a trope for evil within, than to see them as people who are being murdered for their land. In which case the Bible isn't really an historical document but rather a sacred book full of stories meant to teach something important about God. But, boy, those verses are bloody!

Paul Heidebrecht says

This was one of the hardest books I've had to read but when I got to the end, I was glad I had. Jenkins whose scholarly credentials and his integrity as a Christian make him someone I must read, takes on the violent, bloody texts of the Old and New Testament as well as the Qur'an. He makes a case that the Qur'anic texts are actually less supportive of genocide and brutal treatment of unbelievers than the Biblical text. He explores all the ways Christians have tried over the centuries to evade and sometimes apply the disturbing verses in Deuteronomy and Joshua and I Samuel. In the end, the texts are there and they have to be preached. Jenkins ends up with a wonderful discussion of how to preach these sections of the Bible which most of us prefer to pass over. Muslims actually have the same problem. We could be a little more sympathetic toward Muslims and humbly acknowledge that zealous believers in all three religions have wrongly called on these violent verses to justify their acts of terror. We all have reason to confess.

Mehdir says

As author Philip Jenkins indicates in the prologue to this brilliant masterpiece, *Laying Down the Sword* is a book on "how we understand and remember texts." Jenkins challenges the prevalence of Western hegemony over specific and targeted interpretations of and approaches towards Islam and Christianity's primary religious texts, the Quran and the Bible, respectively. Professor Jenkins rightly notes that in the Western view, 'the Quran and Islam' and 'Christianity and the Bible' are in stark contrast—the former aims to spread hatred, animosity, and violence, and the latter works towards disseminating love, kindness, and peace. Quoting a number of verses of the Quran, notoriously narrated by anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim circles and on the internet, in which 'believers' have been ordered to kill, Jenkins demands and encourages the Christians to set aside their "wholly amnesia" and us to find texts in the Bible that are far more egregious and violent than those criticized by the media in the Quran; verses that have been intentionally disappeared and obliterated from Christian dialogues and Sunday sermons.

Jenkins closes his arguments with a loud and clear statement: Religious violence is not derived from religion. Those who commit atrocities and violence in the name of religion have already formed their commitments to violence and their ideas. They have only cloaked their actions and ideas with targeted verses of a holy book. In fact, they are terrorists masked as a religious follower.

The second important concluding remark that Jenkins makes is about the veracity of violence in the nature of

religions. For example, he rightly and cleverly asks , If Islam is inherently a violent religion, why have terrorists been such latecomers? Why are their tactics drawn from Western anarchists and nihilists, Catholic IRA, Zionist Jews, Communists and fascists, rather than the Quran itself? And how is it that the same scripture which is being misused by terrorist, is pushing billions of believers towards peace and social justice?

Darcy says

This was one of the most challenging reads I've encountered--not intellectually but emotionally and spiritually. In typical Jenkins style he presents the evidence of what Biblical and Qu'ranic texts say and how they have been used for violence in both religions. I think it would be a misreading of Jenkins to think he is glossing over violence in the Qu'ran. He recognizes it is there. His message, however, seems to focus more on Christians to recognize how troubling our sacred text can be. And as much as Christian history has its profound successes and positive impacts on society, the history of my faith is, unfortunately, riddled with violence and oppression.

A few things, however, left me wanting. First, I am not sure whether Jenkins is arguing that violence in Islam is due to some notion that Islamic society is 250 years behind Western society's secular renaissance. Notwithstanding, having many friends who have come out of oppressive conditions for Christians in Islamic states, one cannot minimize the issues by pointing to issues within Christianity. (Am I guilty of misreading Jenkins when I argued above we must not?).

But more to the issue for me, I found Jenkin's solutions to the problem of genocide and violence in the Bible as disquieting and unsatisfying as those of my Calvinistic friends who dismiss the horror of Biblical texts with glib comments about God's sovereignty and righteous wrath against sin. I even had a friend seemingly dismiss the issue as a Western Christian anomaly--as if because the questions about things like the genocidal commands in Scripture are only asked by Western Christians make it an irrelevant issue. As vehemently as I reacted to that condescending view of my struggles, so too I really didn't like the options Jenkin's gave--namely a dehistoricizing of texts, claiming Biblical violence is a rhetorical device used by editors of the sacred writ who wrote many years after the events described.

So while I recommend wrestling through the book, prepare for some disquiet and for the enigma of violence in Scripture to remain. I keep searching ...

Bob says

Wide-ranging discussion of the herem passages in the Old Testament. Jenkins offers a variety of theories to explain and contextualize the violent passages in the Old Testament without engaging in the Marcionite heresy of excluding them. They speak about the consciousness of the Israelites after the exile and a return to fierce monotheism. Well-written and engaging.

Artyom says

One of the most important books on Biblical justification of violence that has been published in the past

decade. No-nonsense indictment of modernized, triumphant, self-righteous, charity-less version of Christianity. A version of Christianity that lacks humility, spiritual or otherwise. A magnificent way forward. If I am generous on platitudes, there usually is a reason.

Margie Dorn says

This is a book that needs to be read and re-read, and discussed, especially in company with the John Collins book, **Does the Bible Justify Violence?** which Jenkins also cites. The books deal with an ever-present problem of violence in Scripture that gets mis-interpreted and then mis-used and abused by extremists, or people who are just failing to look at contexts and scripture as a whole. Highly recommend. I should add that Jenkins also discusses the issue of violent texts in the Quran.

Sarah says

I've just finished watching a production of *The Merchant of Venice* performed at a Christian university. What will I tell my mom about it when I phone her tonight? Not much, because reading *King Lear* was one of the most rebellious things she ever discovered me doing as a young teen. Although Shakespeare's raunchiness is doubtless part of the problem, a significant issue that conservative members of my denomination have with Shakespeare is the explicit violence of many of the plays. One minister whom I was quite influenced by during my pre-teen years linked a staging of *Macbeth* to the 1849 Astor Place riots, implying that Shakespeare should never be read because the plays inspire violence. While I agree that enactments of violence should be subject to critical thought and careful semiotics, the simple equation of textual violence with physical is highly flawed. Ironically, however, many atheists who would not object to the staging of Shakespeare, would object to the Bible or the Qur'an on similar grounds, citing the crusades and genocides that have fed upon biblical "texts of terror". Unfortunately, the Christian has less deniability than the English professor. It is utterly dishonest for Christians to condemn the Qur'an as a work inspiring terrorism when their own sacred volume has an abundance of texts commanding religious warfare. Jenkins' scrupulously researched book shows the pervasive influence of such stories as Saul and Amalek, or Phineas and the Moabite woman in instances of religious and ethnic "cleansing". Even could such violence be relegated to the distant past of "an antique volume, written by antique men", for those seeking to find the character of God in the biblical record, these stories present an almost insurmountable road block.

When one begins to experience profound discomfort with the morality advocated in these texts, it's tempting to jump to easy answers, such as that the Canaanites were so wicked that their destruction was a mercy. Jenkins, however, takes the text and its historical, cultural and archaeological framework seriously. Respecting a text can be a painful process, and the recital of the atrocities patterned after biblical harem warfare is torturous.

Most of the time, Jenkins' is unflinching in his psychological and cultural instinct, such as when he declares that "If Hitler's Holocaust had succeeded, presumably Christians in some future era would have recalled the prowling Jew as a menacing symbol of depravity. The idea could scarcely be considered offensive as it was not linked to any existing human reality. No one would survive to be offended" (197). His honesty struck at a theory I wanted to believe: The genocidal texts of books like *Joshua*, and *Judges* are an example of the divine working with an Iron Age people, while the universal visions of prophets like *Isaiah* (or, that is, the authors of the *Isaiah* manuscript[s]) and *Jeremiah* present a move away from such xenophobia and harshness due to progressive revelation. Unfortunately, the dating of the texts simply does not support this conclusion – Jenkins reads the violent, quasi-historical texts as part of the same national moral ethos the Axial Age

prophets were attempting to instill.

In frequently comparing texts supposed to inspire jihadists with even more egregiously unmerciful Judeo-Christian texts, Jenkins makes clear that violence does not spring from the text itself, but that as “political and social circumstances change, interpretations of fundamental scriptures... change likewise” (249). In other words, readers are fundamental to meaning, and the political is fundamental to the personal.

While Jenkins’ honesty has earned my admiration, this book is not all I wanted. Despite a generally neutral voice, the book appears to be written with the assumption that the whole of scripture is inspired and to question its unity is suspect. A few assertions I would have liked to have seen more thoroughly explored or defended include the easy dismissal of Marcionism, the statement “A bloodless Bible offers cheap Grace” (208), and “Without the Old Testament... the New Testament becomes a tree without a trunk” (225). While I was raised to credit such views, intellectual and ethical honesty compel me to explore why I believe this. Had Jenkins more explicitly explored these issues he might have written an interminably long book, but a more rich and rewarding text. Like *The Merchant of Venice*, the texts of scripture must be respected by readings that combine “uncompromising scholarly standards” with unmitigated human compassion for the victims of the texts and their historical-cultural contexts.

Carter West says

Philip Jenkins, professor of religious studies at Penn State and Baylor Universities, here tackles a thorny two-fold issue - on the one hand, the attachment of the Bible to narratives and themes of violence, particularly that of holy war; and on the other, the silence of church and synagogue regarding this morally repugnant material marring their sacred text. I brought to this book my own unease over Christians' and Jews' historic lack of accountability for violence in the Bible, a sense of a vestigial desire for worldly triumph and a corresponding reign of silence about the issues involved. And who would touch these issues unless pushed? Jenkins tackles them and explicates them with clarity and obvious concern, as both a scholar and a churchman. He identifies their roots in ancient Hebrews' need to consolidate their way of life amid conflicting faiths and the constant threat of war in the ancient world. He demonstrates that almost all Biblical narratives of holy war have little historical basis, likely being generated by their authors in order to cement monotheistic allegiance among Israel's tribes. Still, he minces no words speaking of how a tradition of holy war has sounded through the religious languages of Jews and Christians alike, echoing down to the present day. Too, he argues convincingly that the Qur'an of Islam is much less bloodthirsty a text than Scripture, emerging as it does from a culture nearly 1500 years younger, showing forth the general advance of civilization in the interval.

In these iconoclastic times, great transparency is required in order for religion to maintain itself. And here Jenkins's confidence is contagious: "The more honestly believers comprehend their faith, including its most unsettling components, the better they can engage constructively with other religions, and with the enemies of all religions." Jenkins's prose is lucid, almost conversational, and his dedication to truth-telling, while lightly worn, is serious. But the book cries out for some sustained treatment of holy war themes and tendencies in contemporary American Christianity, especially in conservative Protestantism. That may be another book for another author. In any case, Jenkins has done us a great service in shining light into some of the darkest corners of Biblical faith.

The American Conservative says

'Philip Jenkins's challenging new book *Laying Down the Sword* shows that the Bible contains incitements not just to violence but also to genocide. He argues that Christians and Jews should struggle to make sense of these violent texts as a central element of their tradition, rather than hurry past them or ignore them altogether.'

Read the full review, "Christian Jihad," on our website:

<http://www.theamericanconservative.co...>

Jay Hershberger says

This is a challenging read for those who take a traditional view of inspiration and the authority of Holy Scripture. Jenkins, a prominent figure in modern comparative religious studies, writes both as a scholar and as a Christian. *Laying Down the Sword* is a head on look at "herem" warfare, as found in Deuteronomy and Joshua, where Yahweh, the god of the Israelites, commands the Hebrew tribes to utterly destroy the Canaanite tribes via genocide, and take possession of their lands and spoils.

According to Jenkins, this is a timely examination of the commands to violence in the Bible, in view of the popular opinion of many Westerners that Islam is the pre-eminent religion of violence on the globe in this day and age. Those who believe this, fueled by the dubious historical claims of populist anti-Islamic think tanks and websites--Jenkins mentions Robert Spencer and Pamela Gellar by name, though only in passing--need to be confronted with the utter pervasiveness of Yahweh's call to genocide in the Pentateuch and historical narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures. The calls to violence against infidels in the Q'uran do not in any fashion rise to that level of extirpation, extermination, or genocide. There is simply no historical comparison between the herem warfare of the Hebrew Scriptures and other ancient religious texts.

The dilemma Jenkins addresses is not new. *Laying Down the Sword* is a re-casting of Marcion's questions in the 2nd century CE. Jenkins analyzes the various explanations and justifications of the presence and meaning of such passages from all sides, finds them all wanting (I have never heard a satisfactory explanation myself, including the standard fallback: "this is a mystery; we must let God be God), and calls Christians to confront these passages both with criticism (which will irritate orthodox traditionalists) and with acknowledgment and embrace as metaphorical patterns for self-discipline and mortification (which will irritate liberal revisionists). Without saying so, Jenkins affirms Marcion's questions as proper. This reviewer speculates that the Church has yet to adequately answer those questions with justice and mercy. Jenkins's book may be a first step.

Jenkins relies heavily upon the documentary hypothesis regarding authorship, compilation, and redaction of the Hebrew Scriptures, which is sure to make traditionalists unhappy. His searing moral questions regarding herem warfare echo Marcion, though Jenkins does not embrace Marcion's wholesale solution to the moral dilemma raised by the presence of these narratives. Jenkins also chronicles the history of various Christian groups that adapted and applied the Canaanite conquest narratives to their own situations. The historical reality is not pretty. For those Christians and Jews who like to point their fingers at Islamic history, Jenkins confronts them with the remaining 3 fingers pointing back at themselves. Perhaps silence, contemplation, and repentance are better responses to uncomfortable truths about Christianity's own checkered history.

There is little doubt that religious belief systems change over time, and in response to changes in the

historical and cultural circumstances that surround them. Jenkins admonishes Christians not to ignore or pretend that the herem warfare narratives do not exist, nor to affirm any value in them as patterns for political decision making. Rather, Jenkins calls the various faith traditions in Christianity to openly acknowledge these passages, and name the utter moral depravity embodied in such narratives as a warning for the Church. He offers no concrete or definitive solutions to the questions raised, but suggests that the herem warfare narratives can help Christians to see the tendencies in their own inner beings to embrace idolatrous patterns of thinking and behavior, or to respond in fear to the other with violence.

David says

Jenkins has long been one of my favorite authors, from his work on global Christianity today to his books examining parts of church history. Here he tackles the Bible and its violent verses. Jenkins compares the Bible, and the religions of Judaism and Christianity, to the Koran of Islam. Many would say that the Koran promotes violence. Jenkins' argument is that the Bible is just as violent, more violent actually, than the Koran. Throughout history Christians (and at times Jews) have used the Bible to commit violence. If mainstream and the majority of Christianity no longer do this, it is because they have figured out how to ignore or reinterpret those texts. Jenkins argues that the same tools are available to Islam.

He also argues, not surprising in light of his other works, that religious violence flows only secondarily from religious texts. Muslims may be more susceptible to terrorism today due to other factors, such as Muslim countries struggling economically or Muslims feeling under attack from the outside world. As Christianity grows in the global south, many of these growing churches may be (and are) open to violence since they exist in more tenuous circumstances than Christians in the global north. In other words, if you feel under attack you are more inclined to violently defend your faith. And when you do, you can find texts to support your violence whether you are Christian or Muslim.
