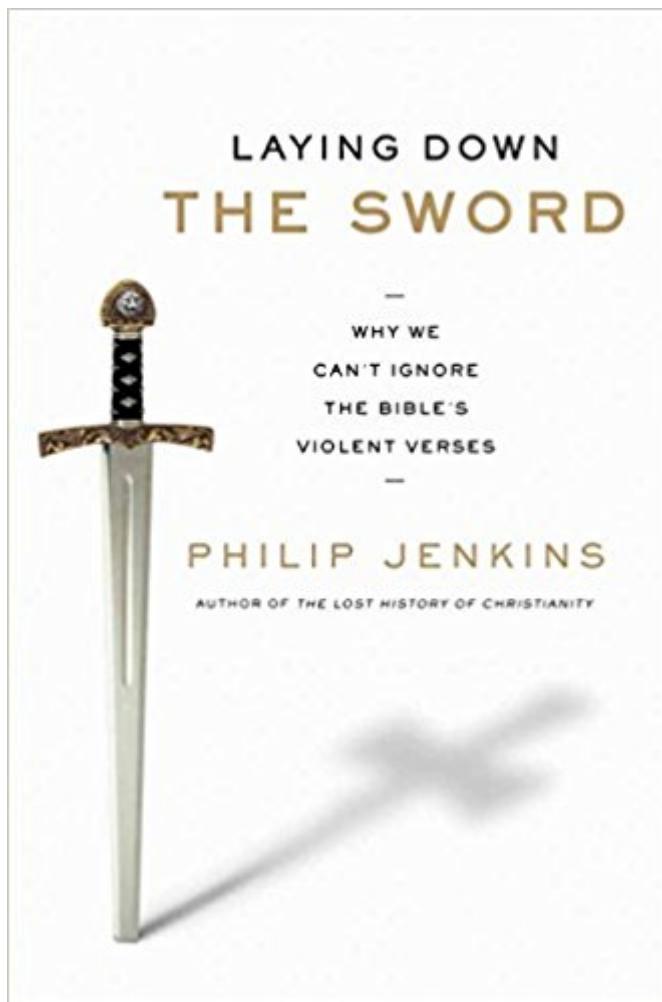


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Laying Down The Sword: Why We Can't Ignore The Bible's Violent Verses



Synopsis

Philip Jenkins delivers a fearless examination of the dark and violent verses of the Bible—“and a call for us to read them anew in pursuit of a richer, more honest faith. From “one of America’s best scholars of religion” (The Economist), this daring exploration of the Scripture’s most difficult passages forces us to confront and accept the violence that was integral to the formulation of Christianity’s message as it was for many other of the world’s religions, and shows us how a full understanding of the Scripture will allow us to finally move towards a more peaceful, spiritual world. Readers of Bart Ehrman’s God’s Problem, John Selby Spong’s The Sins of Scripture, and Jenkins’s own The Jesus Wars, as well as every Christian eager to square the recurrent violence of the Scripture with Christianity’s enduring message of peace, will find these difficult questions explored in full in *Laying Down the Sword*.

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Customer Reviews

“A provocative and timely comparison of the legacies of violence in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. With verve and sweeping insight, Jenkins challenges all of our stereotypical assumptions about religion, bloodshed, and terror.” (Thomas S. Kidd, author of *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution*) “This book is a wonderful example of the kind of rigorous work Christians must do if they are to retain intellectual credibility.” (Patrick Allitt, *The American Conservative*) “Jenkins has outdone himself. This is by far the best piece of

work he has ever done, dealing with one of the most controversial issues Christians struggle with day-in and day-out. (Tony Campolo)

A New Vision for Understanding Bloodshed in the Bible Laying Down the Sword brings to light biblical texts that have been hidden from view and overturns popular stereotypes that continue to generate more heat than light. Jenkins offers a way to read these troubling passages, presents a vital framework for understanding the Bible, and calls believers in every tradition to create a more honest and deeper-rooted faith.

I was initially frustrated because I expected an immediate discussion about the Bible's violent verses, and instead the book seemed to digress a lot. Much of it is a polemic against people who point fingers at Islam, saying, "Islam is SUCH a violent religion!" while ignoring the violence in our own scriptures. It might better be titled "Laying Down the Sword: Why Islam is No More Inherently Violent than Christianity, and Why We Can't Ignore the Bible's Violent Verses." I would still say that the cover and inside flaps seem to avoid describing those aspects of the book. However, the author's Biblical scholarship and arguments were fascinating and very detailed, and I was left wanting to either re-read it or to read some of the many other books the author referenced. It's a definite keeper for my personal library, but I'm not sure it's for everyone. It's not a quick and easy read, but I found it well worth the effort. I also highly recommend Gil Bailie's Violence Unveiled but, perhaps tellingly, I have never finished reading Violence Unveiled, whereas I didn't really put down Laying Down the Sword until I had finished reading it.

This book is quite eloquently written. At first it may seem that Jenkins is attacking Christianity, but he is not. In fact, he stands up in defense of Christianity several times in the book, especially against Evangelical Atheists who desire to rid the world of religion because they mistakenly believe that religion, and not humans themselves, contain all the negative aspects of culture and society. But it's Jenkins' thesis that Christians need to understand their religious text in a historical sense that really hits home with me. Research has proven that madrasas (Islamic schools) actually prevent Muslims from becoming terrorists, and I believe that's because of the emphasis of WHY violent verses were revealed. Without the context of what was going on in Mecca/Medina, one is left with a narrative that can be twisted in order to fuel any hate-filled agenda. And, indeed, the same issues exist in both Christianity and Judaism because this historical context is lacking. Jenkins is not asking for anyone to abandon Christianity or Judaism, nor is he suggesting that either religion is

backwards. He is merely stating a simple yet eloquent observation, that without studying and understanding the context behind these verses which seem so foreign to the modern world, regular Christians have no way of stopping extremist Christians. There's no way of explaining to the next McVeigh or Breivik that their understanding of Biblical texts is skewed when the texts are no longer studied. This book is for anyone who wants to go beyond understanding what extremists believe and wants to stop the cycle before more innocent people (of any faith, race, ethnicity, or nationality) are killed again.

As a Catholic, I have a basic disagreement with both Fundamentalists on the one hand and Mr. Jenkins on the other as the principles for understanding the Bible: I accept neither textual literalism nor the historical-critical method that focuses solely on the development of the Bible as a human document. That said, however, I note that the Christian offenders--in his view--are almost exclusively Protestants, and in the Calvinist tradition at that (my blood, if not spiritual, ancestors, in some cases); I do agree with his thesis that we must not ignore the more cruel parts of the Old Testament (the massacre of the Canaanites, and so on), which are bowldeized not only (as he notes) in the Common Lectionary, but also in the Liturgy of the Hours (the last verses of Ps 137, the entirety of Ps 109). His method of using them, however, includes putting himself above the text and not treating it as part of divine Revelation, which I find unacceptable. (Not to mention that after condemning the "genocide" of the Canaanites, he proceeds to explain that it never happened.) His writing is also rather superficial and shallow; when he talks about European history, he is clearly ill-informed. For example, he speaks of the late seventeenth-century philosophers as recoiling against "centuries" of religious warfare. Even if you characterized all the European wars from the Schmalkaldic War through the 30 Years' War as religious (a dubious proposition when Cardinal Richelieu and Gustavus Adolphus were on the same side in the latter, and when you take into account the nonreligious origins of many conflicts), that only adds up to barely one century. If one only reads the first few chapters of the book, one could think that he is heading for a wholesale condemnation of Christianity and Judaism, with an unfavorable comparison to Islam. Perhaps this is overstated. He then changes direction, and the latter part of the book is, in my opinion, more valuable. He does return to terrorism in the name of Islam, with which he began, at the end. His point is that much of the use of the Qur'an by terrorists, and the impression given to Western non-Muslims about the Qur'an and Islam in general, is unjustified. That's as may be, but the terrorists are real, however theologically muddled, and one does not see mainstream Muslim religious leaders or masses of ordinary Muslims pointing out their errors. When he can explain why

Palestinians danced on the streets when the World Trade Center fell, I will take his arguments more seriously.

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