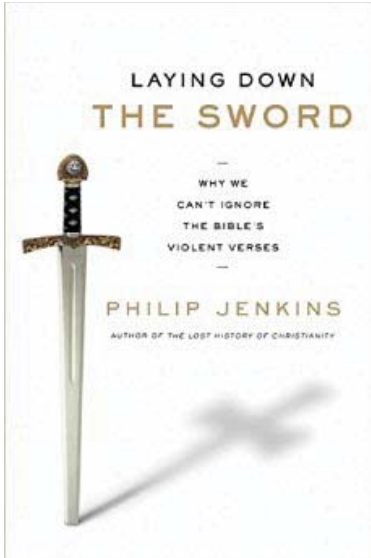


## The Ethics of Violence in the Bible



Book Title: Laying Down the Sword  
Author: Phillip Jenkins  
Publisher: Harper Collins, New York  
Year: First Edition, 2011  
Pages: vi + 310 pages

### What does Jenkins do well in the book?

Phillip Jenkins is able to meet the purpose of his book by providing specific ways to read violent texts in the Bible by comparing it to Qur'an and discuss them in a constructive way (p.23). He challenges the common idea among modern readers about Islam as a religion that loves war. He provides a convincing argument that this way of thinking is wrong because even though the Qur'an teaches its followers to fight, it also teaches them to show mercy to enemy. In contrast, in the Bible, Christians read about God who led the Israelites to wipe out their enemies in war with no forgiveness. Jenkins stated that *herem* in the Bible was an abnormal idea compared to the idea of loving God in Christianity. He assures readers that the Bible is worse than Qur'an when it comes to violent texts. Christians uses violent texts to justify their wrong actions, such as slavery. He reminds readers to approach the violent verses in the Bible with compassion to those who are victimized in the stories and to be aware of not always identifying themselves with the Israelites in the Old Testament. Jenkins alerts readers to build awareness of the historical background of the violent stories, to reflect on what happened in the Israelites social context, and to use it wisely in their life.

Using the history of Christianity, Jenkins did a good job in providing the damaging effect of violent texts in the Bible. From Augustine to the Holocaust era, Christianity was the one that provided reasons for holy war and genocide. Jenkins provided new information on violent practices by religious people in many different places in the world and related it to how religious people use violent texts. Jenkins urges the readers that in order to survive as a religion, Christianity must be open to a new model of critiquing the Bible. He did

well in explaining critical approaches to the Bible and transforms them into a practical level. Jenkins persuades readers by asking significant questions that touch the core of Christian identity. He asked readers: If the Bible is the source of violence then why are you still Christian? Either Christians did not read the Bible seriously or they are spiritually blinded because they still think of the Bible as the Good Book. In the last three chapters of his book, Jenkins invite readers to approach violent texts in the Bible differently. He did well in explaining many different methods to approach the Bible such as the evolutionary, canonical, and historical approaches. Jenkins also provided 'what not to do' as a practical way in preaching violent texts. His suggestions are practical, for example, reading violent texts from the margin and with the marginalized people. Jenkins ends the book perfectly by speaking about religion and violent texts as not the source of violence. It is people who killed people and not the violent texts. To say this does not mean ignoring the power of the violent texts to shape people's faith and behavior but to state that if religions are used to justify violence then it is the religious people that must change the way they read the violent texts.

### **What does Jenkins do poorly?**

Even though Jenkins mentioned that he would not offer himself as the historical expert in comparing the Bible and Qur'an, he ends up with doing it nonetheless, mostly because by showing his expertise in the historical background of the violent texts he was able to achieve the purpose of the book.

Jenkins in the first and second parts of his book steers readers to believe that the Bible, and in particular Christians, cannot stand proud in front of Qur'an and Muslims because there are much more violent texts in the Bible than in Qur'an. He argues that Qur'an promotes violence too but because the Bible promotes a more vulgar violent then Christians are the one to be blame for all the violent that happen in the world. This particular argument I find not helpful for readers who are extremist Muslims because it implicitly gives legalization to them to practice more violence.

When Jenkins compares violence in the Qur'an and the Bible he tends to blame one side rather than keep both in balance. In his three degrees of violence he stated that extreme violent texts mostly existed in the Bible; the Qur'an only consisted of alarming and disturbing texts (p.75). Jenkins in his argument focuses only on Deuteronomy and Joshua, two books in the Old Testament that I think are not sufficient to represent the violent stories in the Bible.

Jenkins' claim is that it is important to understand the gap between acknowledging a violence theme in the holy book and presenting a religion

as a source of violence. Sadly, on the one hand, he only uses this strategy in approaching the Qur'an as he described it emerged from the society of war. On the other hand, Jenkins blamed the Bible for its violent texts and presented Christianity in the first and second parts of the book as a hypocritical religion that told people to love but did not practice it. Jenkins by doing this violates his own rules in approaching violent texts in the Bible.

Jenkins uses the term 'Christian jihad' while explaining the holy war. The using of this term is problematic because he did not provide an explanation on why or how this term fit into Christian context. He did describe how the war in Joshua was to defend the true religion but he did not describe its relation to the concept of jihad in Islam's teaching. By doing that he orients readers to assume that the concept of jihad in Islam is the same as the concept of war in Joshua. This is contradicted to his previous argument where he stated that Islam is better than Christianity in terms of violent texts. However, I understand that what he tried to do here is to lead readers from thinking of Islam and Christianity, in particular, as the source of violence into thinking that religion is not the source of violence.

### **How might this popular book be used within a congregation?**

For a local congregation in the United States, this book has a potential to be accepted and discussed together as a community. *Laying Down the Sword* is one example of an effort by a Christian scholar who recognized that religion is not the source of violence and it can be useful to help the congregation engage with violent texts in particular and violence in general. The practical approaches provided by Jenkins in the last part of his book can help the congregation to acknowledge that there are ways to deal with problematic stories in the Bible constructively.

On the other hand, for a local congregation in Indonesia I think this book would be refused if not spurned. What Jenkins explained in *Laying Down the Sword* did not match to the reality of Christians' life experiences in Indonesia. Almost 80 % of the Indonesian population is Muslim and being a part of the 20 % of population shaped the way Christian understand and relate to Islam and its followers. In relation to Jenkins' book, it is hard if not impossible, to believe that Islam did not teach extreme violence when Christians experienced violence by Muslims in their everyday life. For Christians in Indonesia, suppression to build new churches, killing of ministers, burning of churches done by extremist Muslim groups are part of their life experience. Therefore, asking Christians in my local congregation to think of the Biblical text as a far worse source of violence than Qur'an is not helpful if not only aggravating the situation. I appreciate Jenkins for exploring a very sensitive issue of how religious people who read violent

texts in their holy book should acknowledge it and come up with a new way of interpretation in order to live together in peace but this excellent idea is hard to be implemented. This does not mean that ignoring the violent texts is an option for Christians in Indonesia. This simply means that “before individuals may be ready to read nonviolently, they may first need to gain a greater understanding of the many effective ways of responding to injustice and oppression that do not require the use of violence.”<sup>1</sup> Otherwise what Jenkins wrote will always seem unrealistic. (**Irene Ludji**, Lecturer at Faculty of Theology, Satya Wacana Christian University, Salatiga)

### ***Endnote***

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<sup>1</sup> Eric A. Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 156.