

## READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

# *Laying Down the Sword*

by

Philip Jenkins

### INTRODUCTION MOTES AND BEAMS

1. Many people view religions in terms of stereotypes. What are some common ideas and terms commonly used about Islam and the Islamic scripture, the Qur'an? Can you think of news stories or discussions you have heard that stress the link between the Qur'an and violence?
2. What do you think of the idea that violent acts follow directly from the words of any scripture? How might someone argue with or challenge that idea?

3. Jenkins declares that “the Bible overflows with ‘texts of terror’ ... and biblical violence is often marked by indiscriminate savagery” (p. 6). In your own reading of the Bible, have any particular passages been especially challenging for you? How have you interpreted these passages? Do you think that words like *terror* and *savagery* can be applied to these passages?
4. According to Jenkins, “Believers develop various strategies of coping with texts that have become repulsive. If a text cannot be actively suppressed or removed, then it must be tamed in various ways” (p. 14). Are you personally familiar with some of these coping strategies? If so, which of these strategies have you used?
5. In this book, Jenkins aims to show how religions can “grow past their bloody origins, but at the same time ... be able to admit those origins, come to terms with them, and understand where they fit into the broader scheme of faith” (p. 23). In doing so, Jenkins suggests, believers “would be equipped anew to live in a world alongside Christians of very different traditions, and alongside followers of other faiths” (p. 25). Do you agree that this approach to the Bible’s violent verses could promote truth and reconciliation? What might be challenging about this approach?

## CHAPTER 1 EVERYTHING THAT BREATHES

1. Jenkins deals with controversial material throughout this book, and he makes arguments that other scholars might disagree with. In *every* chapter, you should ask yourself: am I convinced by his arguments? How might someone else approach the same material differently?
2. Read through the passages included in table 1, “The Most Disturbing Conquest Texts” (pp. 36–39). Which of these passages have you encountered before? How have you interpreted them?
3. This chapter focuses on the Israelite conquest of Canaan as recorded in the biblical books of Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua. In response to the violence of this conquest, Jenkins suggests that many Christians reply that it represents “standard operating practices of ancient warfare, and we have to understand [it] in that light” (p. 40). Are you familiar with this theory—the “everybody did it” theory, according to Jenkins (p. 40)? Why does Jenkins suggest this is an inadequate reply to this difficult, violent section of the Bible?
4. What do you make of Jenkins’s claim that the “savage violence, mass killings, and torture” of the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda is a modern parallel for the Israelite conquest of Canaan (p. 44)? Does this parallel illuminate aspects of this biblical conquest that you had missed before?

## CHAPTER 2 TRUTH AND HISTORY

1. In this chapter, Jenkins notes that very little archaeological evidence exists for either the Israelite conquest of Canaan or a mass migration of Israelite settlers from outside Canaan around that time. How do you interpret this archaeological perspective? How does this affect your thinking about this section of the Bible?
2. Imagine for a moment that “the tale of Joshua’s invasion is a mythical construct designed to show how the nation of Israel emerged within its later boundaries” (p. 62). What does Jenkins mean by “mythical construct”? Is he right about this?
3. If the Joshua story is mythical, why, then, is that tale so violent? Could the story have been told differently?
4. This chapter raises an intriguing question about the relationship between truth and history. In this context, how do you define “truth”? How do you define “history”? And how do you understand the relationship between the two—especially in light of Jenkins’s argument in this chapter?

## CHAPTER 3 WORDS OF THE SWORD

1. Jenkins argues that many passages used to show the violence of the Qur’an are exaggerated or misstated. Do

you think his discussion is fair and reasonable? Are you convinced by his arguments?

2. Pages 84 to 89 address the common claim that “the motif of Anti-Semitism runs through the Qur’an, that the whole text is founded upon ‘Jew hatred’” (p. 84). Have you heard this claim before? If so, where or from whom did you hear it?
3. “The tragedy,” Jenkins writes, “is that uninformed observers will take ... bogus pseudo-scriptures as faithful reflections of the [Qur’an]. In reality, the Qur’an has nothing that need be taken as a condemnation of Jews, or of any ethnic group” (p. 94). Does this quote affect how you think about Islam or the Qur’an? Why or why not? How might someone disagree with or challenge Jenkins’s arguments here?
4. Jenkins locates both the Bible and the Qur’an in the historical contexts in which they were written (pp. 94–95). How does knowing more about these contexts enrich your own understanding of these texts? How can understanding the historical contexts of any text—religious or not—help interpretation?

## CHAPTER 4 SONS OF JOSHUA

1. “Ideas of exodus and conquest are the inescapable foundations of biblical religion” (p. 100). Do you agree with this claim? Where have you seen themes of exodus and conquest in your faith community?

2. Speaking of the Israelite conquest of Canaan, Jenkins writes, “While many Christian apologists have presented the violence in symbolic and spiritual terms, other thinkers over the centuries have indeed accepted the material and historical reality of the conquest and have explored its moral problems” (p. 105). Which of these two groups—predominately spiritual interpretation or predominately historical interpretation—more closely resembles your own approach to grappling with this conquest?
3. Jenkins describes how two major figures from Christian history—Augustine of Hippo and John Calvin—interpreted the Israelite conquest of Canaan (pp. 106–10). How do their interpretations strike you? Are these interpretations helpful or frustrating?

## CHAPTER 5 WARRANT FOR GENOCIDE

1. “The fact of chosenness gave divine authorization to subjugate and evict the former inhabitants of conquered lands. Among nations rooted in Protestantism—the English, Americans, Dutch, and Germans—believers came to view rival races as utterly evil, to the point that, in extreme instances, these enemies should be utterly destroyed” (p. 124). How have you seen this “divine authorization” throughout history? How have you seen it in our own times?

2. On page 133 Jenkins writes, “Biblical notions of extirpation [total elimination of a people group] influenced colonial America from the earliest days of the settlement.” He goes on to quote some of the leaders responsible for that settlement, including Robert Gray, John Winthrop, and Cotton Mather (pp. 133–34). How do such quotes affect your understanding of the founding of America? How does knowing more help explain the nature of race relations in America today?
3. Jenkins writes, “When emerging churches read about the evils of Amalek or the Canaanites, they are happy to explore those names as allegories, as symbols of evil impulses to be fought and overcome. Usually, but not always” (p. 140). What factors lead some communities to interpret these stories allegorically and other communities to interpret them literally?

## CHAPTER 6

### AMALEKITE NIGHTMARES

1. This chapter addresses, among other things, the violence of Jewish extremists. According to Jenkins, why is the violence of Muslim extremists so much more widely known than that of Jews or Christians? What factors contribute to that difference?
2. “But viewing one’s enemies in . . . supernatural terms could have dire consequences for the conduct of real-world warfare. If your worldly enemies are literally of the Devil, then there is little need to treat them humanely”

(p. 151). Do you agree that this helps explain religiously driven conflicts?

3. “The extremist focus on biblical images of evil makes it exceedingly difficult for Israeli governments to contemplate any compromise peace that would yield sovereignty over any part of Palestine. From the radical-right stance, such a concession would not only mean negotiating with Amalek, but actively collaborating with it” (p. 162). According to Jenkins, what biblical stories in particular play a role in preventing peace and cooperation between Jews and Arabs in the Holy Land? Why are these ancient stories so powerful today?

## CHAPTER 7 JUDGING GOD

1. “Reading the Old Testament, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris find not a source of inspiration or a model for conduct, but rather a catalyst for horror and bafflement. How, they ask, can any sane person reconcile such atrocities with a belief in a just or loving God?” (p. 168). If someone asked you this question, how would you respond?
2. “Marcion continues to exert a real influence among millions who have never heard his name,” suggests Jenkins. “Marcionism is in evidence whenever ordinary Christians imagine the Old Testament God as a ferocious, vengeful, and judgmental figure, the smiter of Amalekites and the issuer of Thou Shalt Nots, while the



New Testament deity is the doting Father of the Jesus who gave the Sermon on the Mount” (p. 173). Have you ever thought along these lines? If so, where and from whom did you learn to think this way?

3. Jenkins writes that “all modern forms of liberal or progressive Christianity” are based on the “sense that humanity could legitimately pass judgment on words and acts attributed to God” (p. 175). What does he mean by this? Do you agree?

## CHAPTER 8 COMING TO TERMS

1. “When all else has failed, the only way of dealing with [the ‘texts of terror’] is to accept them, to acknowledge them, and to learn to live with them” (p. 184). Do you agree? If so, how might you personally accept, acknowledge, and learn to live with the Bible’s violent verses? What would it look like for your faith community to do this as well?
2. “Historically, one very common response to the conquest tales has been to spiritualize them, to deny that the actual violence was inflicted on real human beings” (p. 189). How does a spiritualized reading of the Bible’s violent verses benefit these passages? How does it present challenges?
3. Speaking about Christians who attend churches that use the *Revised Common Lectionary*, Jenkins writes, “Assume that believers ... never missed a single Sunday

or special holy day. If they listened attentively to the readings, over the three-year cycle they would hear just a small and unrepresentative selection of the controversial books” (p. 203). What place should passages from controversial books of the Bible have in lectionaries? How often should pastors preach on these passages?

## CHAPTER 9 HISTORIANS AND PROPHETS

1. “[Deuteronomy and Joshua] represent the clearest declarations of two essential ideas in the Bible and in the Judeo-Christian worldview—namely, monotheism itself, and election or chosenness” (p. 211). According to Jenkins, why is understanding these two ideas essential to a healthy interpretation of the Bible’s violent verses? Do you agree? How might these ideas help you interpret a particularly challenging passage in a new way?
2. Does the concept of “progressive revelation” appeal to you as a way to deal with the Bible’s violent verses (p. 212)? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this concept?
3. Jenkins writes that the two biblical genres of history and prophecy are “dual aspects of a single movement” and that the difference between the two is “one of avenue rather than destination, of genre rather than goal” (p. 221). What does he mean by this? How do biblical history and biblical prophecy illuminate each other?

## CHAPTER 10 PREACHING THE UNPREACHABLE

1. What do you think of Jenkins's "countercultural religious exercise" to have churches use "the severest and most nightmarish texts for their Bible study and preaching, the hardest of hard sayings" (p. 227)? Would your faith community be up for this exercise? Why or why not?
2. Jenkins offers three pieces of advice for those setting out to intentionally engage the Bible's violent verses: not to lightly invoke an "incomparable higher wisdom," not to suggest that a people "deserves ruin," and not to invalidate the text as part of a "savage antiquity" (pp. 229–32). Which of these in particular speaks to you? Why is that? How might you share these three pieces of advice in conversations with friends or family about certain challenging passages?
3. "Individual Bible passages often need to be interpreted in light of other texts" (p. 240). Have you ever experienced the benefit of interpreting one challenging text in light of another? If so, what verses were involved?

## CHAPTER 11 SCRIPTURE ALONE?

1. In response to the question of whether the Bible justifies violence, Jenkins replies, "The answer is simple: if the circumstances in which you live make you seek such justifications, then you will find them. ... If you

don't need them, you won't find them" (p. 244). Do you agree with his argument? What role do one's circumstances or experiences play in one's interpretation of scripture? How have you seen your own life affect your reading of sacred texts?

2. Jenkins mentions the "militantly antireligious governments of the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, Maoist China, and Communist Cambodia" (p. 249). How do these examples complicate the frequent connection between religion and violence?
3. "Some of what we call 'religious violence' may well be authentically religious in character, but we must find its origins in places other than the basic texts of the faith" (p. 252). Religion can be an easy culprit on which to place the blame for violence in society. What factors other than religion contribute to the violence we see today?

### CONCLUDING QUESTION

1. Has reading this book changed how you think about the Bible's violent verses? What, if any, changes will you make in your own spiritual life or in your faith community because of this book?