

The Bible from Below¹

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I wanted to start our reflections by asking a few questions among us. I grew up with the Bible as an important part of my religious upbringing, but I know that that is not true for all of us. I am curious how many of you grew up with the Bible as an important part of your upbringing? And how many did not? How many of you have read any part of the Bible as an adult? How many of you now have a Bible in your home? Finally, how many of us have had the bible used as a weapon against some part of our beliefs or heritage or identity?

Last June, during the Gay Pride march, our church was one of several that marched in support of the dignity of all people. A member of the Christian Civic League accused those churches who were marching of going away from the Bible, especially the Old Testament. I was asked for a comment, by a reporter, and though he didn't publish this part of my response, I said that I was unwilling to yield any testament of the Bible to validating hate. The sacred books that some Christians call the Old Testament, and scholars prefer to call the Jewish Scriptures, contain tremendous support for human dignity, for an ethic of love, and for fighting against oppression.

But the Bible has been a book used by both sides of many struggles for human dignity. Perhaps the most compelling example of this was in the long battle against slavery here in America. Slave owners used the Bible to support owning slaves, but slaves themselves took inspiration from the story of the Jewish people coming out of slavery.

So why should Unitarian Universalists concern ourselves with the Bible? There are several reasons that might be considered.

First of all, the Bible is the central literary influence on our culture. Our language is full of biblical references, and even some jokes don't make sense without familiarity with the Bible. Our own Unitarian and Universalist movements began through a thoughtful and courageous reading of the Bible, during the effort to bring human reason and scholarly research into our relationship with this ancient document.

A second reason to concern ourselves with the Bible is that the Religious Right has turned the Bible into a weapon against all that we hold dear. If we don't bring to light its liberating messages, we will have relinquished an important shield against the oppressive messages they are wielding. The Bible is also pivotal for many people who might be our allies in the great ethical and social concerns that we are facing. If we want to be part of shaping our country's future, we must be able to enter the conversation going on in our time. We can do that more fluently if we have a better understanding of the Bible.

Stephen Colbert, who hosts a tongue-in-cheek quasi-news program on the Comedy Central channel, has a regular segment in which he interviews representatives to Congress. In his interview with Rep. Lynn Westmoreland of Georgia, Colbert talked to him about the bill he co-sponsored to require that the Ten Commandments be displayed in the U.S. Capitol.

“What are the Ten Commandments?” Colbert asked.

“What are all of them?” Westmoreland said. “You want me to name them all?”

The segment showed Westmoreland struggling to name just three. His press secretary said he actually named seven, and the remaining ones were somewhat obscure. Needless to say, this was an embarrassing moment for the Bible-belt conservative.²

Ironically, even if Westmoreland had come up with Ten Commandments, a Scripture savvy commentator could have raised the question, which Ten? There are different versions of the commandments among Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish traditions. So, even discounting all of the other faith groups in America, choosing one version would be privileging one type of religious heritage over another. If we know how to ask, “Which version of the Ten Commandments?” it might change the nature of the debate.

A third reason to reclaim the Bible is that, more deeply understood, it can be a spiritual and ethical resource for our lives. It reflects the struggles of people with great human questions. The name “Israel” meant one who wrestles with God. The writings of the Bible are full of such wrestling. When I think about the many contradictions that found their way into these scriptures, I might even say that the Bible is an argument about God. It is an argument about being a human being, about how to live. A good argument is a great way to gain a deeper understanding of important questions.

For me, finally, in regard to the Jewish Scriptures, the most compelling reason to reclaim these writings is that a central theme of the Jewish scriptures is the Exodus story: the journey of the slaves in Egypt going forth into freedom, with the help of divine power. The God described in the Exodus is a liberating God, a God on the side of those who are down-trodden. That is both a comfort and a challenge. As a woman, as a lesbian, as someone who grew up in a working class family, I am empowered by its liberating message of radical equality. On the other hand, as a citizen of the most powerful nation on earth, I am challenged by this message of radical equality.

Because I believe this message is the heart of the Bible, I have a shield against those who use the Bible as a weapon. And I am appalled by the hypocrisy I see in people who claim to follow the teachings of the Bible, and yet ignore its central themes to devote themselves to obscure and petty aspects of its stories.

I’m not saying the Bible is an easy read. I feel deeply grateful for my professor at Aquinas College, Sister Amata Fabbro, who first gave me the tools to understand the Bible in the light of modern scholarship. Have any of you, by chance, ever read old English poetry? Then you know that language changes over time and literature can be almost unintelligible outside of its original context. Every modern English Bible is a translation and interpretation, of writings created and gathered over centuries in an ancient culture, and transcribed in a language that is no longer spoken as it was at that time. If you want to study the Greek of the Christian Scriptures, you take a different course than a person who wants to speak modern Greek.

So the second question I reflected upon for this sermon was, “What tools can help us to reclaim and understand the Bible?”

The first tool is to recognize that all readings of the Bible are interpretations. Despite the slogan of some about the Bible, that “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it,” the Bible has never existed outside of human communities. It was first part of the oral stories and traditions of early Hebrew and Christian communities. It was written and edited in later communities. Decisions about which books to include were made in still later communities, which chose differing parameters. It was translated into other languages within other communities. It is meant to be a resource for a living community; it is meant to be in dialogue with a living and growing quest for truth.

Marcus Borg, a Christian Biblical scholar, raises a fundamental choice that people must make in interpreting the Bible: shall we interpret it as coming from God, or as coming from human beings? He teaches that the Bible is a human product, a human response to the experience of the Sacred. And by the way, this is the approach that has been taught in mainline Christian seminaries for about a hundred years. His viewpoint is not considered heretical, but deeply within the orthodoxy of Jewish, Catholic, and mainline Protestant denominations.

How does it make a difference? One illustration he uses concerns the Genesis stories of creation. He writes:

“If we see the Bible as a divine product, then these are *God’s* stories of creation. As God’s stories they cannot be wrong. ...But if we see the Bible as a human product, then we read the opening chapters of Genesis not as God’s account of creation but as ancient Israel’s stories of creation. Like most ancient cultures, Israel had such stories. If we ask, ‘What are the chances that ancient Israel’s stories of creation contain scientifically accurate information?’ the answer would be, ‘About zero.’”

Having said that, he adds that he thinks “Israel’s creations stories are profoundly true—but true as metaphorical or symbolic narratives, not as literally factual accounts.”³ As a Christian, he believes that the Bible is the Word of God in a metaphorical sense, somewhat like the Buddhist idea of a finger pointing at the moon. We are not meant to worship the finger, or the Bible, but to let it lead us to a deeper experience of divine mystery.

So, the first tool for Unitarian Universalist in reclaiming the Bible is to recognize that all readings are interpretations. The second tool is to adopt what is called the historical-metaphorical interpretation—that is, to understand the Bible as a human product, reflecting the human cultures in which it was produced. Once we adopt this perspective, we are able to appreciate all the literary and historical tools of the scholars in better understanding what insights we might glean from these ancient sacred writings.

This is in contrast to the literal interpretation of the Bible is central to fundamentalist and many conservative evangelical denominations. There are many problems with literal interpretation. Some literalists claim that they are *not* interpreting when they read. But they fail to acknowledge, then, that texts differ, translations differ, meanings from one time to another differ, and which books should be included differ.

Literalists also have the problem that the Bible disagrees with itself. In one place it says that God created the plants and animals before humankind. In the next chapter, man comes first, and then the plants and animals, and then women.⁴ In one story it says Noah took one pair of each kind of animal into an ark; in another, it says he took seven pairs of each kind.⁵ Literary analysis has shown that some of these discrepancies reflect the multiple oral sources that were combined into the written literature.

All of this means that one way anyone should avoid using the bible is by taking a verse out of context to prove a point. Many verses contradict each other, on issue of greater import than the number of animals in the ark. For example, we may be familiar with the verses found in both prophets Isaiah and Micah:

They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.⁶

But how many have heard the verse from the prophet Joel?

Stir up the warriors.
Let all the soldiers draw near, let them come up.
Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears;⁷

It is only within the context of their historical situation that we might understand such opposing messages. We can draw on passages that inspire us, but without context they don't prove that the Bible holds a particular view. The Bible preserves the voices of many perspectives, right up against each other. In this way it is a witness to the struggle of the human community to come to grips with spiritual and ethical questions.

This is why, for me, a third helpful tool is to focus on discovering and understanding the central themes of the Bible, rather than on isolated texts. Part of the Bible itself suggests this is a good idea, particularly in the stories and correspondence of the early Christian community, as they argued over how to interpret the Jewish scriptures. One writer sums it up by saying, "For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."⁸

One such central theme of the Bible, in both the Jewish and Christian scriptures, is the worth and dignity of those who were considered at the bottom of the social hierarchy. That is why I speak of the Bible from below. There are multiple references to the poor and needy, the widows and orphans, the slaves and foreigners. The Hebrew prophets raged against kings and leaders who took bribes, or levied high taxes against the laborers, or cared only for their own profit, rather than for the welfare of the least among them.

This strong commitment to fairness was rooted in the story of the Hebrews as slaves in Egypt. They should be able to understand oppression, because they had been oppressed. Their God helped them out of Egypt, and led them into a new land. Therefore, they were never to inflict such oppression on each other.

Written into the Law were systems meant to foster fairness and equity and justice among the people. In Leviticus we read that every fiftieth year a loud trumpet was to proclaim liberty throughout the country. In this year of Jubilee, all people regained their ancestral homes and property. If the land had been sold during the previous years, it was returned to the original owner. Anyone who, compelled by poverty, had sold themselves as a bond servant would regain their liberty. In addition to this, in the Jubilee Year, as in every seventh year, the land was to lie fallow, with neither sowing nor reaping nor pruning of vines, and everybody was expected to live on what the fields and the vineyards had produced of themselves.⁹

At any time, when someone fell into poverty, there was to be no interest on any loans that were given to them, and no profit taken on any food provided to them. The Jubilee year would prevent the vast accumulation of land and capital by a wealthy few, and preserve the common good of the whole people. That doesn't sound like what the Religious Right evangelicals in America are promoting as the way of the Bible. Ironically, it is unknown historically, whether the ancient Jewish community ever carried out a year of Jubilee.

I want to close this reflection on the Bible, by sharing with you a few interesting but less quoted passages from the Hebrew Scriptures. I have asked several people to read them, and then we will share some moments of silent meditation.

Your princes are rebels, accomplices of thieves.
All are greedy for profit and chase after bribes.
They show no justice to the orphan, the cause of the widow is never heard.
Isaiah 1:23

If you lend money to any of my people, to any poor man among you,
you must not play the usurer with him: you must not demand interest from him.
Exodus 22:24-25

Woe to those who add house to house and join field to field
until everywhere belongs to them and they are the sole inhabitants of the land.
Isaiah 5:8

For six years you may sow your land and gather its produce, but in the seventh year you
must let it lie fallow and forego all produce from it. Those of your people who are poor
may take food from it, and let the wild animals feed on what they leave. You shall do the
same with your vineyard and your olive grove.
Exodus 23:10-11

Woe to the legislators of infamous laws,
to those who issue tyrannical decrees,
who refuse justice to the unfortunate
and cheat the poor among my people of their rights,
who make widows their prey and rob the orphans.
Isaiah 10:1-2

From Isaiah 58:3-8

[The people say:]

Why should we fast if you never see it, why do penance if you never notice?

[And the prophet in the voice of God answers:]

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers.

Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is not *this* the fast I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke

to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked to cover them,

and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,

and your healing shall spring up quickly.

Closing Words

As we prepare to participate this Tuesday in our country's democratic process, let us draw inspiration from the ancient tradition of challenge to power and justice for the lowly.

Blessed be!

Further Resources

These are books I would recommend to anyone who would like to learn more about the Bible, from a scholarly and UU friendly perspective:

Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but not Literally*, (Harper San Francisco, 2001)

John Buehrens, *Understanding the Bible: An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers, and Religious Liberals*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003)

John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture*, (Harper San Francisco, 1991)

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² Story recounted in the *Portland Press Herald*, October 25, 2006, in an article by Jim Pussanghera, *Los Angeles Times*.

³ Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally*, (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), pp. 23-24.

⁴ Genesis 1 & 2

⁵ Genesis 6 & 7

⁶ Isaiah 2:4 & Micah 4:3-4

⁷ Joel 3:9-10

⁸ 2 Corinthians 3:6

⁹ Leviticus 25