

THE BIBLE TAKE 2: WHY AND HOW

A 'Second Sunday' Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro
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When I announced that the theme for my monthly sermons this year would be the Bible, I got some interesting reactions. Some folks welcomed the opportunity to approach the Bible from a fresh perspective that was radically different from the fundamentalist version they had learned as children. For them, it has been years since they seriously considered what the Bible has to say to them. There were others who were appalled by my choice of topics. For them, the Bible is an oppressive document that has nothing positive to say to them. There are still others who have little or no knowledge of the Bible, and therefore could be described as biblically illiterate.

I am reminded of the story told about Harry Cohn, who was the head of Columbia Studios for many years. Following the enormous commercial success of blockbuster Bible movies such as "The Ten Commandments" and "The Greatest Story Ever Told," Harry and his brother Jack discussed the possibility of producing still another biblical epic. But they had a problem. "What do you know about the Bible?" cried Harry. "I'll bet you fifty dollars you don't even know the Lord's prayer." Jack began, "Now I lay me down to sleep . . ." Harry pulled fifty dollars out of his pocket. "Well, I'll be damned," he said, handing the money to his brother. "I didn't think you knew it." [Clifton Brown (ed.), *The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes*, p. 133]

Sadly, many UUs young and old share the Cohn brothers' ignorance of the Bible. Ignorance can be bliss, but willful ignorance of the most influential book in Western history is self-defeating. Every year more than 25 million copies of the Bible are purchased by Americans. A recent Gallup poll found that more than 30 percent agreed with the statement, "the Bible is absolutely accurate and should be taken literally word for word." [Barry L. Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament* (4th ed.), p. 6] How ironic it is that mindless devotion to the literal truth of the Bible is so often combined with an abysmal lack of knowledge about what it actually contains. In a recent TV interview, one of the outspoken supporters of placing the Ten Commandments in public buildings was unable to recite even half of them. How many can you remember?

Don't get me wrong. I am not advocating a return to an uncritical acceptance of everything the Bible says. There are huge chunks of it—especially in what Christians call the "Old Testament"—that are truly appalling. The same tribal deity who issued the commandments "Thou shalt not kill" and "Thou shalt not steal" time after time approved the slaughter and pillaging of innocent people as the Israelites swept into the Promised Land of Canaan. The book of Leviticus, which is the source of Yom Kippur, is also filled with grisly punishments for violations of the purity rules, especially for skin diseases and sexual behavior. Women are treated as the property of men. Homosexual contact between males is punishable by death. Some of the sexism of the Old Testament survives in the writings of the Apostle Paul in the New Testament.

If these deeply offensive passages were all that there is to the Bible, we would be justified in rejecting it as an instrument of oppression. Unfortunately, the same literalist interpretation that makes fundamentalists run **to** the Bible has led many religious liberals to run **away** from it. The goal of my monthly sermon series is to understand the Bible as a body of literature that carries meaning at several different levels. We must dig our way through the layers of meaning that many of us—myself included—rejected long ago, and reappropriate its significance at a deeper level. That’s why I have titled my sermon series “The Bible Take 2.” Harry Emerson Fosdick, the best known liberal minister of the 20th century, once wrote, “An intelligent understanding of the Bible is indispensable to anybody in the Western world who wishes to think wisely about religion. By no possibility can any one of us be independent of the Bible’s influence. Our intellectual heritage is full of its words and phrases, ideas and formulas. Ignorance of it constitutes a hopeless handicap in the endeavor to understand any great Western literature.” [quoted in John A. Buehrens, *Understanding the Bible*, p. 3]

How can we begin this new journey of understanding? Here is what John Buehrens, former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association has to say at the beginning of his book titled *Understanding the Bible: An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers, and Religious Liberals*. “When we ask ‘Who wrote the Bible?’ we are immediately reminded that the Bible is often called, at least by those who accept its full spiritual authority, ‘the word of God.’ Yet its various parts are all attributed to named human beings. Nowhere in the Bible is there a claim that God literally wrote or dictated the Bible [repeat that sentence]. The books of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures are attributed to mere human beings, however inspired they may have been.” [Buehrens, p. 14]

Even though it is bound within a single cover, it is actually, in the words of one biblical scholar, “an anthology of books—a virtual library of separate works. In fact, the term *Bible* derives from the Greek *ta biblia* . . . which means ‘the books.’ The individual books came from a variety of authors who wrote over a span of a thousand years or more.” [Bandstra, pp. 7-8] We should study the Bible **not** because it is the final word from a single divine source, but because it speaks to us across the centuries with many different and even contradictory voices. In other words, the Bible itself exhibits two characteristics that many fundamentalists find otherwise unacceptable: evolution (development over a long period) and pluralism (multiple points of view).

Let me illustrate by talking about the creation stories found in the book of Genesis. Notice that I said “stories” (plural). Did you know that there are two different versions of “the” creation found in the Bible, and each of them reflects a different voice and a different emphasis? Before discussing them, let me make two important points. In doing so, I will rely heavily on the words of Marcus Borg, author of *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*. He says, “It is important to realize that the Genesis stories of creation are *myths*. That term needs careful explanation, because it has been virtually ruined by its most common modern use. In popular language, ‘myth’ is a dismissive term. To call something a myth is to dismiss it: one need not take it seriously. A myth is seen as a mistaken belief, a falsehood. But the term means something very different in the study of religion. Myths are not explanations. Myths are not primitive science. Myths are not mistaken beliefs. Rather, myths are metaphorical narratives about the relation between this world and the sacred. Myths typically speak about the beginning and ending of the world, its origin and destiny, in relation to God.” [Borg, p. 71]

The second point is that the order of appearance in the Bible **rarely** corresponds to the order in which the text was actually written. In the “New Testament,” for example, the first books written were those attributed to the Apostle Paul. The four Gospels were written several years or even decades later. The stories about the miraculous birth of Jesus were one of the last parts of the New Testament to be written.

In the case of the creation stories in the Hebrew scriptures, “The creation stories were written relatively late. Israel as a people came into existence with the exodus from Egypt in the thirteenth century BCE. At the earliest, Israel told a story of creation some three hundred years later. . . . In short, Israel told the story of the exodus and God’s creation of her as a people long before she told the story of God’s creation of the world. The first three chapters of Genesis contain two stories of creation, written about four hundred years apart. The first one, Genesis 1.1-2.3 was probably written in the 500s BCE. Commonly called the ‘priestly’ or ‘P’ story, it is part of a larger block of material . . . reflecting priestly and ritual concerns. The second one was written earlier. It begins in Genesis 2.4 and continues through the end of chapter 3. Perhaps written in the 900s BCE, it is commonly called the ‘Yahwist’ or ‘J’ creation story, because the author uses ‘Yahweh’ as the name of God. . . . The two stories are quite different. [Borg, pp. 62-63]

The P (priestly) version of the creation story, appearing at the beginning of Genesis but actually written hundreds of years later, describes the primeval earth as a “formless void” cast in darkness. The Spirit of God (expressed in the multilayered word Hebrew word *ruah*, which can also mean “wind”) then begins to move over this primordial chaos, creating the ordered universe in only six days, culminating with the simultaneous creation of man and woman in God’s own image. The older version of the creation story, which begins in the second chapter of Genesis, “focuses on the creation of humankind and barely treats the creation of the world. . . . Rather, it begins with the creation of *adham*, a Hebrew word meaning ‘humankind’ and often translated [as] ‘man.’” [Borg, pp. 63-64] In this version woman is created by God as a companion for man.

This version of the creation story also contains the story of the Fall—the account of how humankind fell out of favor with the creator God. “No longer alone, *adham* exclaims, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.’ Into this paradise comes a talking snake. The serpent tempts the couple to eat from the forbidden tree, ‘the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.’ He promises them that if they do, they ‘will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ They accept the serpent’s invitation and their lives change dramatically.” [Borg, p. 65] They are punished for their disobedience. They are banished to a lifetime of hardship “east of Eden.” Life in paradise is over for them and for all future humans.

What do these mythical creation stories in the Bible mean to us? Here is Marcus Borg’s answer. “‘This’—the universe and we—is not self-caused, but grounded in the sacred. ‘This’ is utterly remarkable and wondrous, a Mystery beyond words that evokes wonder, awe, and praise. We begin our lives ‘in paradise,’ but we all experience expulsion into a world of exile, anxiety, self-preoccupation, bondage, and conflict. And yes, also a world of goodness and beauty: it is the creation of God. But it is also a world in which something is awry. The rest of the Bible is to a large extent the story (and stories) of this state of affairs: the human predicament and its solutions. Our lives east of Eden are marked by exile, and we need to return and reconnect; by bondage, and we need liberation; by blindness and deafness, and we need to see and hear again; by fragmentation, and we need wholeness; by violence and conflict, and we need to learn justice

and peace; by self- and other-centeredness, and we need to center in God,” which I define as the most inclusive wholeness that we can imagine [Borg, pp. 80-81]

This is the story told over and over again dramatically and often imperfectly in the Bible, and this is the journey I invite you to join with me in the months ahead.