

## THE BIBLE TAKE 2: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TODAY?

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Throughout my monthly sermon series about the Bible, I have emphasized that the Bible, far from being the singular “Word of God” proclaimed by fundamentalists, is itself a rich example of religious **diversity**. The Jewish and Christian scriptures speak in many different voices reflecting its long history, its multiple sources and their agendas. The more you read the Bible, the more you appreciate it as an impressive example of religious **pluralism**. As I have said more than once over these past few months, the Bible is not a book, it’s a library. The very fact that what began as an oral narrative about a nomadic Middle Eastern tribe would eventually become the most widely read literature in the history of humanity is itself an incredible story. The epic Bible story was more than twelve hundred years in its making and now more than two thousand years in its interpretation. The same source that has inspired people to lives of selfless devotion and service has also inspired despicable acts of violence and oppression. So the real question is not what the Bible “really” says, but which of its many different messages we choose to listen to. What bothers me the most about biblical fundamentalism is not that certain verses are remembered word-for-word, but that other passages are conveniently ignored.

This morning I will try to identify some of the major themes and tensions expressed in the Bible, and what they might mean for us today. In reflecting on these themes, I found myself returning to a conceptual scheme I have shared with you on other occasions. I think of the universe (and our life within it) as a field of energy that is animated by the dynamic tension between two opposite but complementary forces: **separation and attachment**. If there was only the force of separation, the universe would fly apart in fragments. So likewise in human life: when the forces of separation prevail, we experience isolation and alienation. However, if there was only the force of attachment at work, the universe would implode upon itself. Likewise, when we become overly attached to other people, we lose our personal freedom and jeopardize theirs. The key to a dynamic universe and a satisfying life is to strike a balance between separation and attachment. Healthy systems depend on it: from atoms and molecules to solar systems and galaxies; from cells and organisms to families and nations. In our lives and in the universe at large, the balancing act between the forces of attachment and separation never ends because the universe and our lives are constantly changing.

Now let’s see if this analytic framework can be useful in our understanding of the Bible and its meaning for us today. The intent of the Bible is to reveal profound truths about the relationship between humans and God. Therefore we will need to add two other ingredients into the mix: the different images of God and humanity that are embedded in its stories. True to its pluralistic character, the Hebrew and Christian scriptures offer many different and often contradictory images of God: as jealous tyrant and loving companion, as vindictive judge and forgiving parent. Nearly all of the biblical images of God emphasize his masculine nature and his **power**, reflecting the patriarchal worldview from which the Bible emerged and which it continues to support. Humans are also portrayed in a variety of ways, most of them negative: as disobedient, ungrateful, lustful, selfish—in short, **sinful**. From its beginnings, the Bible

expresses the tension between separation caused by human sinfulness and attempts at reconnection initiated by God. Just when the separation seems irreversible, there is a “godsend”—a prophet or messenger who offers the possibility of reconciliation. But let me also hasten to add that the biblical God is often portrayed as an agent of separation **between** humans: between the righteous and the wicked, the saved and the unsaved, the forgiven and the unforgiven.

The book of Genesis offers a dramatic account of the separation between the earliest humans and their divine creator. What begins as a majestic account of the origins of the Earth and its inhabitants ends up as a tragedy. The first humans are portrayed as innocent but inquisitive children whose sense of curiosity overcomes their sense of obedience. Like any modern two-year-old, they test the limits of parental authority to its limit. Do you recall the name of the tree from which the “forbidden fruit” is taken? [pause] It is the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” What is the problem here? Later in the story, the character of God says, “The man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; what if he now reaches out and takes fruit from the tree of life also, eats it and lives forever?” [Genesis 3:22] Who is “us” in this passage? What intrigues me most is the image of God in this story as an insecure figure who is so easily threatened by human autonomy.

Much of the remainder of the “Old Testament” revolves around the attachment or covenant between this possessive God and his chosen people—a covenant that demands their obedience to a strict code of conduct in exchange for his support of their tribal ambitions. The beneficiaries of these elaborate purity rules were the priestly caste who enforced it and the political authorities whose power and affluence it supported. One of the great ironies of the Bible and of all human history is how readily those who have escaped oppression become the agents of oppression. The Israelites who escaped their oppressive condition in Egypt were relentless in their violent suppression of rival groups in their conquest of the Promised Land. The Pilgrims and other groups who escaped religious persecution in Europe were relentless in their conquest of Native Americans and their lands. And more recently, the Jews who managed to escape from oppression in many different countries have established a nation that oppresses its Muslim population. These are compelling examples of our human preference for separation over attachment. They represent the type of abusive power structure that was confronted by the Old Testament prophets and by Jesus.

The life and teachings of Jesus offer a different paradigm based on **compassion and inclusiveness**. As Marcus Borg explains, the movement initiated by Jesus “included women, untouchables, the poor, the maimed, and the marginalized. . . . Whereas purity divides and excludes, compassion unites and includes. For Jesus, compassion had a radical sociopolitical meaning. In his teaching and table fellowship, and in the shape of his movement, the purity system was subverted and alternative social vision affirmed. The politics of purity was replaced by a politics of compassion.” [*Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 56, 58] “Yet the word ‘justice’ is utterly essential, for to speak of compassion without justice easily turns the Bible’s passion for victims of systems into the importance of individual kind deeds and charity. Charity and kind deeds are always good; there will always be need for help. But the individualization of compassion means that one does not ask how many of the suffering are in fact victims. Compassion without justice can mean caring for victims while quietly acquiescing to a system that creates ever more victims. Justice means asking why there are so many victims and then doing something about it.” [Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, p. 301]

Regrettably, Jesus' emphasis on justice and inclusiveness in the kingdom (or domain) of God is deeply undermined by the Apostle Paul's emphasis on sin and salvation. Paul's preoccupation with these themes provides the basis for what I call "Old Testament Christianity." Returning to the primal story of Adam and Eve, Paul claims that we are condemned as sinners and without the blood sacrifice of God's only son, we would be consigned to eternal punishment. The image of God portrayed in the doctrine of atonement is not meaningful to me, but it serves as the central message of many churches: Accept Jesus as your personal savior or risk eternal punishment. Paul shows little interest in the life and teachings of the person Jesus, but he is obsessed with Jesus as Christ the divine savior figure. That is not the religion **of** Jesus as he himself embodied it, but the religion **about** Jesus as Paul interpreted it.

My venture into a reexamination of the Bible over the past several months has reminded me what a rich and complex resource it is in understanding the human quest for meaning, but also how easily that quest can become self-serving. The tension between separation and attachment persists as the tension between personal salvation and social justice. The cardinal sin of Unitarian Universalism is not the distinction between the saved and the unsaved, but between the wise and the ignorant. That is what separates us from other traditions and also what separates us from one another. That is what all too often leads us to believe that we can somehow solve the vexing problems of our time with our words and ideas rather than our actions. The Judeo-Christian Bible serves as a reminder that every attempt to capture ultimate truth in mere words is destined to fail. Contrary to the bold claims of biblical literalists, the Bible teaches us to be humble in the presence of the Mystery that surpasses all human knowledge, and it is a lesson we must continue to learn.