



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Good News about the Bible”

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Centering Thoughts:

The story of creation is not a description of how the world came into being but a song about the glory of the world's having come into being. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

The most enduring tradition in the 2,500 year history of biblical interpretation is that there is no one 'correct' interpretation, but an infinite number.

Reverend John R. Coats (Episcopal)

Today many otherwise well-informed, intelligent people... often speak as though the Bible says and means only what those fundamentalists say that it says and means! This shows not only a lack of understanding but also a failure of maturity and wisdom. Reverend John Buehrens □

Sermon:

(Holding up a Holy Bible) This is a special book. It is gilded with gold along the edges of the pages, and the lettering of its name is all in gold, too. It has an expensive leather cover. Everything about it shouts special, even holy.

But is this the word of the Lord? Is this the inerrant, exact, dictated word of God? Is this reliable science or history?

No. Few of us here would say yes.

Does that assessment mean the Bible should be tossed into the garbage bin of history? Not to me, though I once thought so.

I believe the Hebrew and Christian Bibles capture the words of mortal humans. I believe no supernatural deity dictated the content to its authors or editors, but their beliefs clearly inspired them. I believe the texts reflect the time period, the culture, and the particular location of its composers, collectively forming a context that is critical to understanding its meaning.

I believe these sacred stories formed a particular message for the people of the time in which they were told and later written down. We modern day readers have to struggle to make meaning out of it for our own context—our knowledge, location, and circumstances. Not knowing the difference between then and now creates distortions and what Episcopal priest and theologian John Shelby Spong calls a heresy unique to gentiles (non-Jews).

Spong claims the further in time that Christians moved from their Jewish roots, the further away they went from a correct understanding or interpretation of the material. They lost sight of the Jewish framework inherent to both Hebrew and Christian texts. The early Christian writers

were Jews with normative Jewish understandings. Reading the Bible literally is not Jewish tradition. It is the heresy Spong identifies. A confirmed Christian, he's trying to save the Bible from Christian fundamentalists. He is not alone in this effort.

I'd like to save Unitarian Universalists from literal interpretations, too. I'd like to rescue Bibles from the dustbin, not to convert you, but to awaken those who insist a literal interpretation is the only one possible.

When I applied to Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC, I was required to write an essay describing the difference between biblical scholarship and bible study. That simple requirement communicated to prospective students, "Beware!" My United Methodist seminary was claiming its scholarly approach to the Bible, that literal interpretations don't match history, science, or Jewish culture, and, that translators can easily change the meaning of the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek writings.

For example, in the Book of Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible, *almah*, meaning young woman, may get incorrectly translated as virgin, one who has never known a man, in order to further the theological idea that the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, was foretold in the earlier Jewish Book of Isaiah. This is theology influencing translation inappropriately.

Christian Bible study is mainly concerned with theological gleanings from the Bible, such as how God wants people to behave or believe. The average Bible study group doesn't know or ignores scripture's original context, purpose, or translation issues.

Jewish biblical study on the other hand encourages reading into the text what isn't there on the surface. The tradition of *midrash* suggests much lies hidden in the white space between the black words. Jews look for deeper meaning, not in the literal words, but in its poetic, metaphoric, or theological aspects. Jewish theologians love to discuss, ask questions, argue, and wonder why, just like many of us.

I appreciate that the Hebrew and Christian Bibles are not history, not science, and not absolute, capital 'T' Truth. Instead, they are truth told slant. Truth told through story and myth. I don't need to argue whether something really happened or not, whether Moses or Joshua parted the waters or not. Whether Jesus rose from the dead and proceeded to eat and drink with some of his disciples, or not. I know to look behind the words for the theological message they intend.

I've already mentioned that the creation stories in Genesis were partially intended to give comfort and assurance that God was in control, despite the social and political chaos around them. These texts were written at the time Jews were living in exile from Israel after they were defeated by Babylonian army. It was not written to be a scientific textbook 2,000 years later. It's a theological exhortation. It's telling the ancient Israelites that God calms the water. God orders the world. God is in control, despite all appearances. Have faith that all will be well. Be calm and carry on. Don't worry. Be happy.

We're living in a chaotic time, too. And for those who believe in a God who interacts in our lives, it's comforting to know that God has our back, that what seems out of control may not be.

Personally, I don't believe in a supernatural deity, but even so, I can take comfort in knowing that chaos won't last. Like a Buddhist, I know things will change. Like the Humanist I am, I know that you and I can affect change, we can make things better by what we do. Like the optimist I am, I imagine that the silver lining in the dark cloud, while not justifying chaos or suffering, will allow me to make meaning out of my chaos and suffering.

However, the story of Joshua, the battle of Jericho, and the conquest of Canaan are troubling. If, as the scriptures inform us, the ancient Israelites committed near-genocide of the Canaanite people so that they could take over the land God promised them, I am concerned. Taking this book literally, the Bible and God seem to promote evil behavior we now call war crimes. Other texts appear to endorse slavery, misogyny, bashing in the heads of innocent children, and prohibiting same-sex acts of love. This should trouble all of us.

But if we look deeper at what the writers intended and what was normative for their time, we might avoid a moral dilemma today. What might have been acceptable behavior then, we do not need to accept today.

Scholarship has proved that the events described in the Book of Joshua likely didn't happen as described. Archaeological evidence indicates the process of Israelite conquest did not involve an army of 40,000 soldiers in one defining battle. Jericho is a real place about 23 miles north of Jerusalem, but it never had the walls described in scripture. At the time of the Israelite movement into what is now Palestine Jericho was a small village without walls. Experts believe the 'conquest' took generations of immigration, emigration, and negotiation, plus a few minor battles.

If the story isn't true, what's its point?

The so-called battle of Jericho conveys a theological message that if you're obedient to God, God will deliver the Promised Land. Depend on God for all things. God's in command. Men can circle the town, blow their horns, and shout, but God brings down the walls, not armed men.

My favorite biblical passage illustrates how I, a humanistic religious naturalist, can be inspired. Recall the story of Moses on the mountain when he sees a burning bush. Here's one translation:

Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." And He (the Lord) said, "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground. (ed. By Jaroslav Pelikan, *Sacred Writings: Judaism, The Tanakh*, pub. by the Jewish Publication Society—JPS translation)

What I find inspiring here is that Moses is like you and me, just going about his everyday activities, tending the flock, when he notices something unusual. He notices and says, "I must stop and take a look at this marvelous sight." Haven't you stopped in your tracks and stared at a marvelous sight?

I have on numerous occasions stopped to admire rainbows, stars, the moon, mountains, my grandchildren, and yes, even your faces. And when I mindfully pay attention, I sometimes feel an incredible connection to all that exists. It's palpable and very real. It's as if these marvels call to me, "Alison, Alison!" and I answer. "Wow! I see. Here I am. I stand on holy ground."

I don't need to question whether Moses actually saw a burning bush and whether God spoke to him. Metaphorically, I too have seen the burning bush and heard the voice of God, or at least the (capital U) Universe.

I can understand the battle of Jericho meaningfully, too. I have walls that need to tumble down. Walls of privilege, walls of pride, walls of ignorance, and even walls of scarcity that drive my fear that I won't have enough if I give some away. Armies won't break these walls down, but spiritual growth, adhering closer to my highest values, these will help me break those walls down.

As long as I hold my values close, they will guide me to where I want to go. Like Joshua's faith in God, I have faith in our shared UU values.

If we don't take the Bible literally, we can save the good and toss what no longer serves our time and place. If the Bible is human-created and not sacrosanct, yes, we can pick and choose from its content. That's good news.

Let's not be guilty of gentile heresy. Let's look between the lines of words for what hasn't been said. Let's listen to how the stories might illuminate *our* struggles and *our* search for meaning in *our* chaotic world. If nothing else, it will help us better understand our neighbors.

And may the walls between our neighbors tumble down.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. What feelings or experiences do you bring to your understanding of the Bible? Do you come wounded from past encounters, jaded by fundamentalism, or curious about its possible value?
2. Do you look at scripture mythically, academically, spiritually, or something of all three? Share.
3. Do you find other religious texts meaningful, and if so, how do you make use of them?
4. What wall might you face right now? Where do you place your trust or turn for help?