

What is the Bible to Unitarian Universalists?

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January 19, 2014

Blurb: Sources of the Unitarian Universalist living tradition include “wisdom from the world’s religions” and in particular from Jewish and Christian teachings. The Bible contains origins of these teachings and is the single most widely read and influential book in the western world. But the Bible itself has been a source of complexity and controversy. What is the Bible, actually?

Quotation for frontispiece:

The Living Tradition we share draws from many sources, including:

- *Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;*
- *Wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;*
- *Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.*

! excerpted from the Unitarian Universalist Association Principles and Purposes

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Closing Circle

I have been wanting to prepare a talk about the book we call the Bible. Like it or not, we have been shaped by it. It has shaped us individually and it has shaped our culture.

In older times in our country, the family Bible was often the only book in the house and was handed down from generation to generation. Family events and genealogy were recorded in it.

The Bible is used to solemnize ceremonial oaths and the truthfulness of the oath of the oath-taker. "I do solemnly swear ..." President Obama took the oath of office with his left hand on President Lincoln's Bible.

Many people love the Bible. They feel close to God when they feel they are reading "God's Word." They regard it as the ultimate source of truth. They find inspiration in passages like the 23d Psalm-- "The Lord is My Shepherd."

Some people hate the Bible. They feel that the Bible is used to judge other people according to dogma that they do not accept.

In the name of the Biblical religions, thousands, no millions, have been slaughtered. Even Christians have killed each other because of disagreement over interpretation of the Bible.

The Bible was used to promote the wars of the crusades and the slaughter of Muslims, and the expelling and killing of Jewish people from Spain and elsewhere. Christian people cited the Bible as justification for slavery and the justification for the denial of rights to some classes of people.

Even today there is an uneasy truce among citizens of England where Protestants and Catholics have killed each other since Elizabethan times. And even today we are embroiled in controversy, including here in Virginia, regarding the denial of the rights of people to legally affirm their loving relationship with a partner of the same sex -- and the Bible is used to justify this discrimination.

But also, many people simply are fascinated by the Bible as a rare treasure of ancient writings handed down through many ages.

How fascinating it is to experience the feelings of ancient writers and to read the stories passed down from ancient times that were so different from our own world.

Recently there was a highly publicized culture clash when one of the popular national booksellers' catalogs listed the Bible under their fiction category. They had to fix that fast! But IS it fiction? History?

These UU words are reprinted in frontispiece of your bulletin today. As Unitarian Universalists we include the Bible as a source of the "words and deeds of prophetic women and men..."; as "*Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life*"; and as a source of "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves."

But already, in this talk, I have been perpetrating a common misunderstanding: I have been referring to THE Bible.

There are many Bibles -- and they are substantially different from each other.

These diverse Bibles have engendered differing religious interpretations that are theologically incompatible with each other.

To make nice with people we gloss over these fundamental differences in how we take the Bible.

But the truth is, for example, that there are people who, based on their interpretation of their Bible, judge me to be a hellfire-bound heathen.

I, in turn, disagree with their interpretation of their Bible.

My own fascination with the Bible started early.

Being raised in a fundamentalist, Pentecostal, Christian home, the Bible occupied a prominent place.

Mom and everyone else in our church lugged their big, black King James Authorized Bibles to church every Sunday, so that as scripture was being read they would ritually open their Bibles to follow the text as the preacher read it.

Their Bible was the symbol of their faith.

My family, with me in tow, attended "Bible Study" every Tuesday night.

The kids of the church were taught Bible lessons in Sunday School every week.

But, as a curious boy, and an emerging critical thinker, Bible Study was shallow, and not very satisfying.

I had questions that were not answered in a straightforward way.
Like--How did "God's Word" get written down anyway?
Obviously men did the writing -- how did God tell them what to write?
How did they know for sure it was God dictating to them, and not their own thoughts?
Why did God quit telling people what to write in the Bible?
It has been some 1,800 years since God told people what to write in the Bible.
Hasn't the world changed since then?
I asked: If the Bible is "God's word," why are there conflicting accounts of the same event in different places in the same Bible?
Even important events like the creation of the Earth and Jesus' resurrection have completely different versions in different scriptures.
Couldn't God get it right?

With all of this emphasis on the Bible I decided to read it myself.
I started my project at the age of 14 with Genesis Chapter 1, Verse 1.
I finished reading the Bible from cover to cover shortly before my 17th birthday.

This is the Bible I read. **[show Samaritan Bible]**

Some passages were boring -- like the pages of genealogy.
Other times I was fascinated, curious, astounded...
How did the sons of Adam and Eve find wives since there were no other people?
If they married unmentioned sisters, wasn't that a "no-no?"
As a teenage boy, having been sheltered from coherent knowledge about sex, I found some parts amazing.
It turns out that Lot's wife was not the villain of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, as I had been taught in church.
All she did was look back at her home.
The bad people in this story were Lot and his two daughters.
He let them get him drunk and then he had sex with them.
Then I read how the sons of the patriarch Jacob got him to agree to a truce with a local Canaanite tribe if all the Canaanite men would agree to be circumcised.
The Canaanite men agreed and circumcised themselves, en masse.
It was a bloody scene.

While the Canaanite men were lying around recovering from their wounds, Jacob's sons came and killed them all and stole all their wives, children, and animals.

Then I read how Judah, Jacob's son, picked up who he thought was a prostitute, but who was actually his daughter-in-law, Hagar.

Judah paid her with the promise of a goat from his herd.

The twin boys she produced from that union became the patriarchs of the royal line of Judah, including David, Solomon, and, according to the New Testament, Jesus the Christian Messiah --all from a union between the Jewish patriarch and his daughter-in-law posing as a prostitute..

If Judah hadn't taken succumbed to temptation with Hagar, there would be no nation of Judah.

I learned more about David than his slaying of the giant.

David wanted one of King Saul's daughters to be one of his wives.

Saul, fearing David as a threat to his throne, agreed that David could marry the girl if he brought in 100 philistine foreskins.

Saul expected David to be killed.

But David went out and killed 200 local philistines for good measure and got the girl.

The Bible says God found favor in David so I learned a bit more about what God was about.

And, I never could feel comfortable about a God that killed all of humanity, men, women, and children, plus all the sweet dogs and cats, except for Noah and his family who were considered obedient to God.

After finishing my straight-through reading of the Bible, I never found much time or passion to pursue my Biblical interest.

It was always just a gnawing uncertainty.

A turning point for me came when I read Albert Schweitzer's memoir, "Out of My Life and Thought." **[show book]**

Schweitzer was a prominent Lutheran theologian and teacher who made the "mistake" of undertaking a true scholarly pursuit of matters handed down in biblical scripture.

The published results of his landmark 1906 study, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, gave me awareness that the biblical accounts can be measured against history and archaeological research.

The “historical Jesus” that Schweitzer found undermined much of what had come down to me via religious indoctrination.

(Schweitzer’s candid findings undermined his own theological career as well -- making him an outcast from his church.)

This was a breakthrough for me -- If Albert Schweitzer could apply reason and critical analysis to the Bible, so could I.

Since then I have been fascinated by learning more about the history of Christianity as well as other religions.

To learn the history of the Bible is to learn the history of Christianity -- with all of its villains and saints.

And the history of the Bible is a way to study the history of western civilization.

As I noted earlier, there is no such thing as THE Bible.

The “Bible” is a collective term that refers to a number of different collections of writings for Jews, Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox Christians.

Hebrew Bible (roughly = Old Testament)-- known as the TaNaK -- 3 groups of writings

" It is the ancient literature of a formerly nomadic people

" Much of it began as oral tradition long before anything was written

1) The Torah - consists of the 5 books of Moses (Pentateuch)

" (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy)

" The stories date from about the 10th century BCE onward

" The Torah is the story of the formation of Israel

" It also includes commandments/laws and philosophy

" Only the Torah was recognized by some Jewish groups

2) The Prophets (Neviim) 21 books

3) The Writings (Ketuvim) 13 books

Total 39 books

Chronology of the Jewish writings

1000 BCE (approx) origins of Pentateuch (first 5 books)

200 BCE Septuagint “LXX”: Jewish (Hebrew) Bible translated into Greek.

This Greek translation is the version later used by Christians as their “Old Testament.”

During the period 70-135 CE the Jewish religious leadership settled on the Hebrew canon (as above)

“New Testament”

70 CE (approx) first writing of gospels (“good news”). (Like writing down events that occurred in my great-grandfathers time.)

First appeared the book of Acts, then Mark, then Luke and Matthew. (Not Matthew, Mark,..etc.)

Luke had also written Acts of the Apostles.

The identities of the writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are unknown.

We know they were educated and wrote in Greek.

Many other books of the New Testament are letters that are attributed to Paul. Paul had heard about Jesus but never met him.

By the 3d Century CE Christian writings appear in other regional languages -- Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopian.

It was in 313 CE that Emperor Constantine legalized the cult of Christianity. (Edict of Milan.)

In following years Christianity replaced the Greek and Roman religions and became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

In 325 CE the Council of Nicea was convened to decide the origin and nature of Jesus; and to establish doctrine and rules for the church.

Today many of us are familiar with the doctrine laid down in the Nicene Creed.

An event that shaped the future of the western world occurred in 330 CE when Emperor Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire to Byzantium (Constantinople)

Even at this point, almost 400 years after Jesus was said to have lived, there was no agreed collection of writings that constituted the definitive New Testament canon. (“Canon” is a collection of writings to be read in worship.)

Christian teachers (Tertullian, Irenaeus) had been pushing for an agreed, defined collection.

Finally, at the Council of Carthage, in 397 CE, the committee agreed on which Christian writings to include in the Bible. The committee issued an agreed [canon](#) of the [Bible](#) quoted as, "Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua son of Nun, Judges, Ruth, 4 books of Kingdoms, 2 books of Chronicles, Job, the Davidic Psalter, 5 books of

Solomon, 12 books of Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Tobias, Judith, Esther, 2 [books of Ezra](#), [5] 2 books of Maccabees, and in the New Testament: 4 books of Gospels, 1 book of Acts of the Apostles, 13 letters of the Apostle Paul, 1 letter of his to the Hebrews, 2 of Peter, 3 of John, 1 of James, 1 of Jude, and one book of the Apocalypse of John.[6]" The Council of Carthage rejected proposed shorter and longer versions (gnostic gospels).

Before this period, there was no "book". And remember, no original manuscripts exist of any biblical books.)

Constantine put his imperial scribes to work producing 50 copies of this collection of writings as it existed at this point.

Now the Bible was an imperial publication, and as such was the official religious literature of the state.

While the eastern capital of Christianity (Constantinople) retained the Greek Bible, the Western church began developing a Latin Bible in the North African colonies. --

St. Jerome (342-420) began his translation of entire Bible of that time (Hebrew OT and Greek NT) into Latin.

St. Jerome's translation became known as the "Vulgate Bible." In the 1600s it became the official Bible of the Catholic Church. The earliest copy of the Vulgate in existence is a 6th century copy.

The Reformation -- a key landmark in biblical history

The German monk, Martin Luther, proclaimed his "95 Theses" critique of the Christian Church in 1517.

Luther "protest" was the beginning of the Protestant movement.

Luther's activism and his Bible translation gave new emphasis to Scripture as sole authority; his interpretation introduced the radical concept of individual interpretation of the Bible.

Constantine's dictum: "the religion of the prince is the religion of the realm" (Unity of Church and State) led to religious wars across Europe -- Catholic states vs. Protestant states.

After the Reformation -- four main western Bibles:

Jewish: 39 compositions in Hebrew

Protestant: 66 books

Catholic: the Vulgate -- 74 writings

Eastern Orthodox -- 77 writings

Translations followed into German, Spanish, Dutch, Swedish, Czech, Finnish, Hungarian, English and Polish.

English translations --

John Wycliffe did a translation from the Vulgate (1300s)

Henry VIII divorce (1533) led to split with Rome and establishment of Church of England. Led to King James (James I) Protestant version 1611. About 80% based on William Tyndale's version.

Uncertainties of translation. There are over 5,000 Greek manuscripts, with many differing writings, many are fragmentary, and require deciphering.

There are other thousands of manuscripts in all the ancient versions.

How do these many versions of Bibles vary from each other. There are "tens of thousands of variants" according to Dr. Luke Timothy Johnson.

Current Bibles in English:

- King James Authorized Version
- King James Version, Revised Version (1885),
- American Standard Version (1901),
- Revised Standard Version (1946, 1952, 1957),
- New Revised Standard Version latest in this line.
- New International Version and New English Bible are latest attempt to produce a more "literal" Bible.

I read about another translation underway, and -- I kid you not -- it is called the Conservative Bible Project.

Some American political conservatives feel that the Bible portrays Jesus as too wimpy, too socialist, too soft on the poor, too critical of the rich.

They maintain that the Bible was translated by liberal scholars.

The conservatives say Jesus would never have said "Blessed are the meek,..." or when hanging on the cross, "Father forgive them..." They say the liberals turned Jesus into a well-meaning social worker.

This brings up the whole problem with the authenticity of the Bible in its many versions.

The four gospels

The best-known books in Christianity, are the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

The mainstream scholarly view is that ***the Gospels are anonymous works, written in a different language than that of Jesus, in distant lands, after a substantial gap of time, by unknown persons, compiling, redacting, and inventing various traditions in order to provide a narrative of Christianity's central figure, Jesus Christ, to confirm the faith of their communities.***

Translations from the Greek and Hebrew are subject to much interpretation. As all who have studied foreign languages know, a particular word may not have any direct counterpart in another language.

Sometimes a word can have several meanings.

So the translators, throughout all those years would change the wording to what they thought it should say.

Bible researchers cite many cases where it is obvious that the translator changed the meaning from that of an earlier manuscript because he thought it made better sense or that it conformed more to what he thought it should say.

We have no idea what the first texts said because the originals do not exist.

Copying is also a source of the uncertainty faced in knowing what the various biblical writings originally said.

Since no original copies of any early manuscripts exist, the oldest copies available are copies of copies from several hundred years after the originals were said to have been written.

Before the printing press was invented, all copies were made hand, individually.

Copyists made many errors and willful changes, some intentionally and some unintentionally.

The Gnostic Gospels

During the 3d-6th centuries CE many other Christian writings, many known as gnostic writings, were translated into coptic or were written in coptic. Most of these writings were lost until discovered by two farmers in 1945 at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, buried in an urn. (The farmer's wife burned a number of papyrus manuscripts in her cooking fire before the farmer realized they might be valuable. You may have read or heard of the Gnostic Gospels -- popularized by their reference in the novel *The Da Vinci Code*.

In the year 397 at the Council of Carthage when the delegates were deciding what books to include in the Bible there were many other Christian writings, such as the Gnostic Gospels, that did not get voted in.

The Gnostic Gospels consist of some 52 writings.

Some of the Gnostic Gospels may be older than the other, traditional New Testament gospels.

Much of the content of these lost gospels is mysterious and intriguing.

Some scholars, like Elaine Pagels, see the influence of Eastern religious traditions in the gnostic teaching.

The gnostic spiritual path emphasizes that salvation is found within oneself, not from an outside source such as a church or priest.

This may have been a reason why the gnostic writings were rejected when the church fathers were deciding on the official biblical canon.

In many respects these additional gospels are not in agreement with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (which as I mentioned, also don't agree with each other.)

Some of the Gnostic Gospels include:

- Gospel of Mary (recovered in 1896)
- Gospel of Thomas 1898 and again in Nag Hammadi
- Gospel of Truth (Nag Hammadi)
- Gospel of Phillip (Nag Hammadi)
- Gospel of Phillip (recovered via antiquities black market in 1983)

The Gospel of Mary (refers to Mary Magdala or Magdalene, not Jesus mother) is very interesting to me.

According to this gospel, Mary was one of Jesus disciples and very close to Jesus.

Sometimes the other disciples complained that Jesus went off alone with her, and they saw him kissing her.

Mary spoke to the other disciples about some of the esoteric teachings she received from Jesus, and these are explained in the Gospel of Mary.

According to this Gospel, another disciple Andrew, "I at least do not believe the savior said this. For certainly these teachings are strange."

Peter also was skeptical: "Did he really speak privately with a woman and not openly to us? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did He prefer her to us?"

Then the disciple Levi intervened: "But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Savior knows her very well. That is why He loved her more than us."

The Scholars Version. The discovery of the Gnostic Gospels helped propel a new wave of biblical scholarship and the production of a Bible based on the latest historical and linguistic research.

The initial focus, and the product of this effort is a scholars version of the New Testament Gospels.

Their book, *The Five Gospels*, published in 1993, included the revised versions of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and after considerable research and study included the Gospel of Thomas, one of the Gnostic Gospels I mentioned. **[show book]**

This book was produced by a large group of biblical scholars known as The Jesus Seminar.

The Five Gospels was written by twenty-four translators and editors, and fifty additional reviewers and contributors; these scholars did not represent any religious particular religious faction.

The Scholars Version stands out among the previous biblical translations that I have mentioned in that "it is free of any ecclesiastical and religious control," according to the editors.

One unique feature of this book is that the writers analyzed all the words of Jesus in the traditional versions and made collective judgements about which words actually could have been attributed to Jesus based on historical evidence and reasoning.

"Eighty-two percent of the words ascribed to Jesus in the traditional gospels were not actually spoken by him," according the the Jesus Seminar.

This may be disconcerting to many Christians.

According to *The Five Gospels*, "***The Jesus of the gospels is an imaginative theological construct, into which has been woven traces of that enigmatic sage from Nazareth -- traces that cry out for recognition and liberation from the firm grip of those whose faith overpowered their memories. The search for the authentic words of Jesus is a search for the forgotten Jesus.***"

In *The Five Gospels* you will find all of the text of the gospels, as rendered in modern translation by the Jesus Seminar.

Within the text, the words of Jesus are color-coded to indicated authenticity based on the voting of the 74 writers, translators, and editors.

Where Jesus' words appear in black they are rated inauthentic; "There's been some mistake."

Words printed in gray are rated: "Well, maybe."

Words printed in pink: "Sure sounds like Jesus."

Words in red: "That's Jesus."

As you read these gospels you will find very few words in red.

Our founding father, Thomas Jefferson, also had a powerful interest in the Bible, and like the Jesus Seminar, he believed that writers and translators had made Jesus what they wanted him to be.

Jefferson, like the later Jesus Seminar, undertook his own revision of the gospels based on his own research and insight.

Jefferson stated he found many wonderful passages but he found that other passages were "***of so much ignorance, so much absurdity, so much untruth, charlatanism and imposture, as to pronounce it impossible that such contradictions should have proceeded from the same Being.***"

Again, Jefferson wrote: "***We find in the writing of Jesus biographers matter of two distinct descriptions. First, a groundwork of vulgar ignorance, of things impossible, of superstitions, fanaticism, and fabrications. Intermixed with these, again, are sublime ideas of the Supreme being, aphorisms, and precepts of the purist morality and benevolence, sanctioned by a life of humility, innocence, and simplicity of manners,.. absence of worldly ambition and honors These could not be the intentions of the groveling authors who related them.***"

To address his concerns, Jefferson prepared his own version of the New Testament and titled it *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. **[show book]**

Jefferson obtained copies of the Bible in four languages: Greek, Latin, French, and English.

He excised the passages he believed to be inauthentic from each of the four versions of the New Testament.

He also created a "Table of Texts" of the references to specific events from their differing accounts, then correlated the four gospels, into one narrative.

He pasted the four versions, Greek, Latin, French, and English, side by side so the reader could compare them. **[show example]**

What's the point of all this?

What I am not trying to do is make a judgement about the authenticity or inauthenticity of any of the many versions of the Bible that are available.

I have found a need to become comfortable with the Bible as it is, with all of its mystery and controversy.

I have learned that what we have is the product of men.

There are no original texts of any of the writings that appear in any of our various Bibles.

I do consider the Bible as a compilation of ancient wisdom and of stories that have shaped western culture.

Understanding the Bible helps us to understand ourselves, our culture, and our history.

I include the Bible among other inspiring sources of ancient wisdom, as outlined in our UU Principles and Sources.

Wisdom, morality, and just relations with our fellow travelers has been passed down to us from the Upanishads, Confucius, The Tao, words of the Buddha, Mohammed and the great Muslim poets, from Native American religious teachings, and from many other sources as well as the Bible.

We have much to choose from in charting our spiritual journeys and building our own theologies.