

How This Unitarian Universalist Reads the Bible  
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One of the things I dreaded most when I was in school was the pop quiz. Do you remember them? Or perhaps you're a teacher, and you inflict them on your students. You walk into class, expecting a discussion of the homework, or a lecture, or perhaps you're hoping for a substitute teacher or a fire drill, but instead, just as the bell stops ringing, the teacher announces: "This morning, let's start with a short quiz. Please put all your books on the floor and take out a clean sheet of paper."

Thank God we don't have to worry about pop quizzes in church.

But, wait a minute – wouldn't that be a good way to begin a sermon on the Bible, to find out how much we already know? You won't need paper for this; we'll do it by a show of hands.

Here's the first question. Who performed Adam and Eve's wedding. Was it–

- A. God
- B. Adam and Eve were Quakers; they did the ceremony themselves.
- C. They had their children out of wedlock.

Here's the second question. What was the name of Noah's wife? Was it–

- A. Harriet
- B. Joan
- C. Mrs. Noah.

Here's your last question. According to the genealogy found in the Gospel according to Matthew, which of the following were among the ancestors of Jesus? [Matthew 1:1-16]

- A. A prostitute (Rahab) [see Joshua 2:1]
- B. An adulterer (David, also a polygamist and possibly bisexual) [see discussion below and 1 Samuel 19 & 20]
- C. The child of an incestuous relationship, or (Perez) [see Genesis 38]
- D. All of the above.

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There are three basic Big Questions with respect to the Bible – if I’ve missed others, please let me know.

First, is the Bible the Word of God?

Second, is the Bible without error?

And third, does the Bible tell us how we should live?

You might notice that the first two questions are related. If the Bible is the Word of God, presumably then it is without error, since God knows everything, and God wouldn’t lie to us. Or, if you start with the second question, if the Bible is without error, then it must be the word of God, for how else could it have avoided error? A question that arises if you’re trying to answer the inerrancy question is whether the Bible should be read literally, from cover to cover, or whether some parts of it can be understood metaphorically.

Now, I could go on with a discussion of the big questions, but I’m afraid I’d lose half the congregation. Indeed, half of you have probably tuned out already. So here’s what I’m going to do instead. It seems to me that it is much more helpful to consider particular stories or passages within the Bible, to start with the Bible itself, rather than to start with theories about the Bible.

Indeed, I don’t understand how anyone could have an informed view of the three Big Questions who had not spent quite a bit of time studying the Bible itself. So let’s take a look at what is actually in the Bible.

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Let’s start in Genesis, with Abraham. Abraham, you’ll recall, is the man chosen by God, with his wife Sarah, to start the great nation that will later be known as Israel. (Genesis 12:1-3) Abraham is the first patriarch. One day, Abraham and God are chatting, and God decides that he really has to share with Abraham his plans for Sodom. This is from Genesis chapter 18. (Genesis 18:16-33)

“Abe,” God begins, “Abe, I’ve decided to wipe out the city of Sodom, just to wipe it clean off the face of the earth. Their sin is just too grave. The outcry against them is too great.”

Note that God doesn’t mention what Sodom’s sin is, nor does God appear to have followed any kind of procedural due process – God is simply responding to the outcry that God has heard. [see Genesis 13:13 “Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD.” and Jude 1:7 “Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.”]

Abraham senses that there's a problem here. "Well, sir," he says, "this comes as quite a shock to me. One of my favorite restaurants is in Sodom. But suppose, just suppose that there were fifty righteous men in Sodom, would you still sweep it away?"

God considers Abraham's question for a minute, and then responds, "OK, Abe, if I find 50 righteous men in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake."

Abraham is encouraged by God's response, but he's also somewhat amazed by it. He had assumed that God was someone who would always stick to his guns, someone who got it right the first time and therefore would never budge. Abraham knew that he could be getting into dangerous territory, but he could not help but dig a little deeper. "What if there were only 45 righteous men; what if 5 of the 50 were missing and there were only 45? Would you still sweep Sodom away?"

God was not at all pleased with where he feared this conversation was headed, but he felt that only one response was possible. "OK, if I find 45 righteous men, I'll spare the city."

Abraham was getting nervous. He had heard that God had quite a temper. But he felt compelled to continue: "What about 40?"

"OK, I'll spare them.

"Thirty?"

"OK"

"Twenty?"

"OK"

"Ten?"

"All right!" God shouted, "If I find ten righteous men, I'll spare the whole blasted city!" Actually, God used some words here that I can't repeat from the pulpit.

With that, Abraham lost his nerve, and in due course, Sodom was destroyed. But we're never told what their great sin was.

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Let's move ahead now to the time of Moses. It is Moses, you will recall, who leads God's Chosen People out of slavery in Egypt and sets them on the path toward the Promised Land. Moses spends a fair amount of time on Mount Sinai, talking to God, one on one.

On one occasion – this is from Exodus, chapter 32 – just after God has given Moses the stone tablets on which God had written instructions for the Israelites, God noticed something disturbing.

“Moses,” God said, “Moses, look down there, where your people are camped. What do you see?”

“My eyesight isn’t as good as yours, sir, it looks like they’ve gathered around a camp fire.”

“Moses,” God continued, “you’d better look again. That stiff-necked gang of ne’er-do-wells have made themselves a golden calf.”

“My goodness, sir,” Moses responded, “I wonder where they found the gold.”

“It doesn’t matter where they got the gold!” God shouted. “They’re worshipping a golden calf and making sacrifices to it. And one idiot just said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” Don’t they know that as far as they’re concerned, I’m their one and only god?!”

“Sorry, sir, I thought they understood.”

“Well, don’t just stand there,” God continued, “go down there at once, and let them know who’s boss.”

“Yes, sir, I’ll head right back down the mountain.”

“No, wait,” said God, “I’ve got a better idea. Just let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. But don’t worry; of you I will make a great nation.”

But Moses was very worried. “Sir, with all respect, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Think what the Egyptians will say if they hear about this: ‘He brought them out of Egypt just to kill them in the mountains.’ Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’”

And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

God changed his mind.

We’ve had now two examples of people challenging God, arguing with God, and persuading God to change what God was planning to do. God can be reasoned with – that’s the

good news. But God has a hot temper, and his conduct is unpredictable – and, don't forget – God is in charge. That should make you a little nervous.

I've done these two stories – Abraham bargaining with God about the fate of Sodom and Moses persuading God to back off from his hasty plan to wipe out the Israelites – I've done these two stories to set the stage for a third story. With this one we're back again to Abraham.

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Here's the scene. It's from Genesis, chapter 22. Abraham and Sarah, despite their old age, now have a son, Isaac, the son who will be the ancestor of a great nation. At least, that's what they have been led to believe.

One day, God comes to visit Abraham again.

“Hello, Abe, I'm back again. It's Me, God.”

“At your service, sir. It is an honor to have you among us again.”

“Abe, I've got a favor to ask of you, I hope you won't mind.”

“Your wish is my command, sir. Just say the word.”

“Take your son, Abe, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.” (Genesis 22:2)

“No problem, sir. Consider it done.”

Hello, Abraham, earth to Abraham. Do you know what you just agreed to do? Do you know how burnt offerings work? First you take a knife, a sharp knife, and slay the creature to be sacrificed. And then you light a fire under the corpse and burn it. You just agreed to murder your son!

“Well, yes, but God told me to do it.”

Abraham, wake up, we don't do that to our children. We don't do that to our fellow human beings.

“But God told me to.”

“Abraham, what about Sarah – you're going to kill your son without consulting with Sarah?”

“What would be the point? God told me to do it.”

“Abraham, for the love of God – for the love of humanity – how do you know that was God?”

“Well, he *said* he was God. And he had a deep, God-like voice. Who else could it have been?”

Here we have what I consider one of the most disturbing stories in the Bible. God tells Abraham to kill his son, and Abraham agrees. This is the same Abraham who earlier bargained with God in an attempt to save the residents of Sodom.

Now, as you probably know, at the last instant God intervenes, and Isaac is spared. “This a test. This is only a test.” Abraham has passed the test.

But let’s stop there. Did Abraham really pass the test? Here’s how I like to understand this story. God is testing Abraham, yes, but testing Abraham to see if he has a moral sense, to see if Abraham can tell right from wrong, to see if Abraham is willing to stand up to illegitimate authority. Abraham has flunked the test. And this makes God very sad.

“What shall become of humanity, of my beloved humanity,” God says to himself, “if they are willing to kill each other? If they are even willing to sacrifice their own children?” And God remains sad to this day, as we humans continue to kill each other, as we continue to sacrifice our own children. (see David Bumbaugh, *The Education of God*)

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Here’s another story from the Bible. Let me warn you that two principal themes in the Bible are sex and violence. In this story we have both. It’s R rated, at best. This is from Second Samuel, chapters 11 and 12. (2 Samuel 11:1 -12:19)

This is a story about King David. David is Israel’s greatest king, a leader without equal.

It’s springtime, the time of year when kings wage war. David’s army is off fighting the Ammonites, but David has stayed home. One afternoon he’s up on the roof of his palace – roofs were flat in ancient Israel, and it was cooler there than inside. He’s up on the roof and what does he see but a young woman, a beautiful young woman taking a bath on the roof of a neighboring house. David is the king, so he has no difficulty summoning her to the palace. Her name, he learns, is Bathsheba, and her husband, Uriah the Hittite, is off with David’s army. I’ll spare you the details, but in due course Bathsheba sends the king a message: “I’m pregnant.”

“Oh, bother,” says David to himself, “wait til my wife hears about this!” So he summons Uriah – that’s her husband – back from the battlefield, debriefs him about how the war is going, and then casually suggests that Uriah should go home and spend some time with his wife.

But Uriah is faithful to his duty and to his comrades. He doesn't go to his own house, but sleeps in the servants' quarters at the palace. The next day David asks him why he didn't go home to his wife.

"Sir, how could you suggest such a thing, sir?" Uriah responded. "My leader and my fellow soldiers, they're all encamped in the open fields, far from their wives and families. They don't have enough to eat; they're suffering either from heat or rain, or both, and they could get killed at any minute. There's no way I could go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife. It would be wrong. As thou livest, and as thy soul liveth, I will do no such thing."

So on the second night, David tries to get Uriah drunk, but not too drunk. But again Uriah stays at the palace, and doesn't go near his wife.

Finally, David sends Uriah back to the army camp, but with a sealed message for his general. "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die." (2 Samuel 11:15)

In due course, Uriah is killed, and David marries Bathsheba.

Did I mention that David already had a wife? Not a problem. He already had several wives.

But here comes the heart of the story. The prophet Nathan comes to visit the king. Actually, God sends him. And Nathan tells David a story.

"There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him.

"Now there came a traveler to the rich man." The rules of hospitality required that the rich man feed the traveler, but "he was loath to take one from his own flock to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, so instead he took the poor man's lamb, and had his servants prepare that for the guest."

Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die."

And Nathan said to David, "You are that man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel."

Nathan has it just right, doesn't he? The rich man, the person of power and privilege, should not take his poor neighbor's little lamb. Likewise, the king should not take his poor neighbor's wife. We can't argue with that. This is a story – the story of David, Bathsheba, and Nathan – this is a story that many in our society need to hear, and to take to heart.

But there are two things about the story that I find most remarkable. First, the prophet Nathan lived after rebuking the king – he might have been executed on the spot. And, secondly, this story made it into the Bible. It makes the great King David look pretty bad.

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You can hardly have a sermon about the Bible – the Bible of our Unitarian and Universalist forbears – without mentioning Jesus. Can I summarize Jesus for you in the next three minutes? Not hardly. But let me share with you a few passages that I believe are key in our search for the message of Jesus.

First, here's part of what Mary says about God while she's pregnant, realizing that God has made her special. This is from Luke, chapter 1.

51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:51-53)

Next, here are the words of Jesus, early in his career, when he has returned to Nazareth, his home town, and is speaking in the synagogue on the sabbath. This is from Luke, chapter 4.

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,

19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19)

The year of the Lord's favor, by the way, is the Jubilee year, when debts are forgiven. (see Leviticus 25:8-12)

Finally, here is what Jesus wants to be able to say to all of us. This is from Matthew, chapter 25.

35 I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,

36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' (Matthew 25:35-36)

40 Just as you did this for one of the least of those who are members of the human family, you did it for me.' (Matthew 25:40, paraphrased)

In short, Jesus is in favor of the poor and the oppressed, and distrustful of the rich and the powerful.

In case you were wondering what Jesus says about gay marriage, he didn't. He was silent on that topic. But what do you think he would say? (see Matthew 19:3-9 for Jesus on marriage)

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So here is my view of the Bible.

If I were going to a desert island, and could take only one book with me, I might well choose the Bible. Not because I believe it to be the Word of God, or somehow inspired by God, but because it is such a human book – the stories over more than a thousand years of how fallible humans, limited, just as we are, to their time and place, how they dealt with religious, political, and moral issues, how they dealt with what it means to be human. So let us take the Bible seriously. Let's engage with its stories, with an open mind and an open heart. Let's be ready to listen for the voice of God, but let us also be ready to argue back. Amen.