

Rescuing the Bible for UUs

Clay Nelson © 5 October 2014

I had not planned to focus on the Bible this early in my ministry with you. I didn't want to spook the humanists amongst us, but I blame an email from one of you acknowledging being biblically illiterate and not sure how to respond when some Christians use the Bible as a club.

In reflecting on my long relationship with the Bible, which I'll recount in a moment, I realised that I have spent most of the last 30 years trying to convince my Christian congregations that calling it the Word of God is neither accurate or helpful. It is a very human document that tells us a lot about humanity then and now, but little about God. At most it tells us the many ways people experienced God or gave divine sanction to their prejudices and self-serving behaviour during that particular slice of human history. In a Unitarian context I don't have to convince most of you that the Bible is a human creation. I don't have to convince you of the sins of scripture. What I would like to suggest is that it is critically important to have a working knowledge of both the good and ill it contains. This is especially true if we are committed to becoming the flesh and blood of our seven principles. I will get into some of the specifics of that in future sermons, but today I want to give you the reasons it is clearly not the Word of God. We need to understand that even in a secular society, the authority that our culture has given it over the millennia continues to make it too often a destructive force.

My own journey with the Bible didn't really begin until I was twelve. I must've had lots of opportunities to hear the Bible in Sunday school or in church since we attended nearly every Sunday, but I have no memory of being engaged by it. But when I was twelve I went to confirmation class like every good Episcopalian child. There I was given a number passages to memorise: The Ten Commandments, the 23rd Psalm, the Lord's prayer, the 13th chapter of First Corinthians and others I've long since forgotten. The prize for doing so was to get a Bible with my name embossed in "gold" on it. Apparently I took the bait for here it is, my first Bible, embossed as promised. It is the King James Version, "red letter" edition. That meant all the words Jesus spoke in Elizabethan English are in red ink. The whole process was designed to instil within me a sense of awe and respect for it as God's book.

That was undermined the first time I read it from Genesis to Revelation at the same age. It took me a couple of attempts because I would stall out at some of the really boring parts in Genesis and Leviticus. What I do remember was being challenged from the very first chapter describing a seven-day creation. I could kind of move on by accepting such accounts as myths. I was also into reading Greek mythology at the same time. When I got to the Red Sea parting I tried to explain it to myself as simply the tides making it possible. The real challenge was when I got to the Gospels. There, recorded in red ink, were Jesus' miracles. They were harder to explain away, but no easier to accept. Paul and the Pastoral Letters were impenetrable for a 12-year-old mind, and sometimes still are for my 65-year-old mind. When I got to Revelation I just thought, "Wow! That was a really weird fantasy." So, when I finished it I ticked the "been there, done that, burned the T-shirt" box.

I didn't engage the Bible again seriously until University. While I was a fair student, the only D I ever got was in a paper entitled "The Bible as Literature." Clearly, I couldn't take it very seriously, even as literature. Years later, at an interview for acceptance to my seminary, I was asked, to the committee's great amusement, about that long-forgotten lonely D amongst all my As and Bs. Not sure how I answered, but I was accepted.

While I had a strong sense of being called to ministry, I didn't know what I was going to do with my scepticism about the Bible. Was I going to be expected to believe everything in it literally? Was I going to have to believe God dictated every word? If so, I was going to have to cross my fingers a lot.

So with trepidation I began my introductory classes on Hebrew Scriptures and Christian Writings. In both cases my fears were quickly alleviated as I learned the scholars' tools to understanding the scripture. For me it was an exciting time; for my more conservative classmates it was a crisis in faith. No longer was the Bible the literal, inerrant Word of God, but inspired by the Holy Spirit. I wasn't so sure about the latter, but that was a lot easier to swallow than the former.

I was reminded that the Bible isn't a book but a library to which no new books are added. It is organised by great epics such as the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses; histories including the stories Saul, David, Solomon and the other kings of the Southern and Northern kingdoms; legal writings that define what it is to be Jewish as in Leviticus; poetry found in the psalms and the Song of Songs; wisdom literature in Proverbs, the Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiastes; social critiques found in the prophets, as well as in Jonah, Ruth and Job; biographies provided by the Gospels and Acts; correspondence that includes not only Paul's letters but letters by authors claiming to be Paul and the pastoral letters of later Christian leaders, and fantasy which includes Daniel and Revelation.

I learned that, except for the prophets and some the letters of Paul, we aren't able to go to the card catalogue and look them up by author. We don't know who they were. Part of the fun of biblical studies is being a detective to find clues about them. Just to make it more interesting the books in the Torah for example, have two different authors and neither of them was Moses, whom tradition says wrote them. They were from different time periods, geographical regions and theological perspectives writing about events that may have happened one thousand to five hundred years earlier. Then their works were just mashed together. Centuries later there were two different editors who modified them further to reflect the theology of their very different eras. This is one example of why the Bible has so many conflicts and contradictions within itself. More specifically, that's why there are three creation stories, the first of which is the newest. That's why there are three different versions of the Ten Commandments. Keep holy the Sabbath day was a late edit to one of them to account for God resting on the seventh day in the newest creation story.

In the introduction to Hebrew Scriptures we were taught the importance of understanding the worldview of the authors. We have to keep in mind that in the oldest of the writings society was tribal. Tribes each had their own god. For instance the story of the plagues was a battle between gods, Pharaoh, who claimed to be a god, and Moses' Yahweh.

In this time in history the concept of the individual had not yet been formulated. What one member of the tribe did, the whole tribe did. So if a member of the tribe killed someone of another tribe, the whole tribe was guilty. It justified seeking to kill the whole tribe. If they succeeded, their god was stronger than the other tribe's god. It's why no one thought it barbaric that Yahweh killed the first born of Egypt while passing over the homes of the Jews that had put the blood of a sacrificed lamb on the lintels of their doors.

Their worldview was also pre-scientific. The earth was flat with a bowl called a firmament over it to separate the waters from heaven from waters on earth. Water was also under the dry land. They knew this because when they dug wells they would find water. On the other side of the firmament was heaven and the stars were peepholes into it and from which God watched and judged us. It is why no one raised an eyebrow when the prophet Elijah was taken alive on a whirlwind to heaven. It is why the Ascension of Jesus to heaven seemed reasonable. Someone has calculated that if Jesus ascended to heaven at the speed of light 2000 years ago he still wouldn't have reached the edge of our own galaxy.

As members of the flat-earth society they thought the sun and the stars revolved around them. We can laugh but we still speak of sunrises and sunsets. It was perfectly reasonable that their god could help Joshua at the battle of Jericho by stopping the sun. They did not know that meant their god would have had to stop the earth turning on its axis. If that happened not only would Jericho's walls come tumbling down, the earth would crumble.

Their worldview also had no true understanding of history. It never occurred to them that there was a time before human beings. Well, maybe for the first five days as God made the earth with its plants and animals for their benefit. That the earth is between four and five billion years old would have been inconceivable. Just as knowing that Homo sapiens are thought to have been around for nearly two million years would have boggled their minds. Which raises the question, why did God wait so long to give humans his Word?

Now if the Bible is the Word of God literally or even inspired by God, God was either quite ignorant about how he made the cosmos, or He (and in that time God was definitely a He) chose not to brag about the awe and wonder of the Big Bang and the mysterious complexity of evolution.

In the introduction to Christian Writings it was observed that most Christians don't really see the Bible as the unchanging Word of God as they ignore vast parts of Hebrew Scriptures. They work on Saturdays, the Jewish Sabbath. Ham and bacon are features of a grilled Sunday breakfast violating Kosher food laws. Slavery is frowned upon. Polygamy is illegal. Practices that were once normative for the Bible have become for us either illegal or, in some cases, immoral.

So for many Christians, the real Word of God is the New Testament, explaining why pointing out inaccuracies, prejudices or outmoded attitudes in it are resisted more fiercely. The need to defend the authority of their faith system intensifies. These

ARE the words of Jesus! See! They are in red! I went to seminary with some of these people.

They didn't like hearing that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were not Apostles. They were not eyewitnesses. They got their material second hand and each shaped it to grind their particular theological axe. They really got upset at the suggestion that Paul didn't write all the letters attributed to him. They didn't find it odd that Paul never mentioned his road to Damascus conversion described in Acts. He didn't because he never converted. He died a good Jew just like Jesus.

When inconsistencies were pointed out, like different birth narratives and resurrection accounts, my defensive fellow students resorted to the idea that the Holy Spirit inspired the authors, but as the Spirit had to work with humans, there were errors. It was like they thought the authors and the Holy Spirit had a bad phone connection.

My last and present relationship with the Bible is the fruit of the search for the historical Jesus. In the early days of my ministry I began following closely the work of a recently formed group of biblical scholars that referred to themselves as the Jesus Seminar. Their mission was to discover what Jesus really said and did. This wasn't the first time this had been tried, but it was the first time it was done without looking through the filters of the historic creeds and doctrines of the church. The Jesus Seminar studied the Gospels with new eyes; then they voted with red, pink, grey and black balls as to whether the words in the Bible were ever said by Jesus. Red meant yes. Pink meant maybe. Grey meant no, but he might have agreed with it. Black meant no way. It turns out; if my "red letter" edition were to be republished today, there would be very little red and only a little pink in it. In the Gospel of John, the one that has Jesus claiming, "I am the Truth, the Way and the Life," it is all black.

The methodology of the Jesus Seminar liberated me to study the entire Bible in a similar fashion. My conclusions were that not only was it not the Word of God, it was not inspired by a theistic intervening god I no longer believe in either. However, reading it free from doctrine allowed it to come alive for me in ways it had never done so before. No, it is not inspired, but it is inspiring. Many portions of the Bible touch both my humanity and the divine within me, and call me to a higher consciousness.

That said, as the majority of Christians have not reached these same conclusions, many portions of the Bible have been used and are used in ways that are counter to our seven principles. So, I would like to use the next two weeks to look at some of what I call the terrible texts of scripture. We cannot afford to be ill-informed as we call for a world of peace and justice.