

UU Views of the Bible

This service is dedicated to looking at how Unitarian Universalists view the Bible. The format will be different from our usual approach. The content is based on the Unitarian Universalist Association's pamphlet "UU Views of the Bible". We will hear six of our members read the spiritual journeys of six UUs from various parts of the USA and Canada who, I would say, are fairly representative of our varied congregations. All of the journeys are refreshingly thoughtful, a bit provocative, and even humorous. There is no critical analysis of the Bible, interpretation of the historical Jesus, or promotion of the Darwinian theory of evolution over and against creation theory. Instead, we hear a very frank approach to a text that is often misquoted, misinterpreted, and mistreated.

The six UU contributors describe their particular relationships to the Bible, and address more generally the relevance of scripture to religious liberals. All contributors agree that the Bible is riddled with historical errors but nonetheless can serve as an important repository of human truth. Does the Bible have any significance in their lives at all? Let's listen and find out.

Reverend David McFarland
Cache Valley Congregation Unitarian Universalists
Logan, Utah

The Bible is like Santa Claus and sex. Children hear about it on the playground or on the street, whether or not their parents discuss it with them. And as an adult, if you don't enjoy it and wish to abstain, you can successfully avoid it only by taking extreme measures such as total social deprivation or profound isolation.

The Bible is holy scripture because it is the living document and foundation of many important faiths, including Unitarian Universalism. To abandon the Bible would mean alienation from one of the world's most important influences on religious thought-liberal and otherwise. Our UU Principles and Purposes are saturated with biblical concepts and ideals. Our concept of respect for the web of existence, for instance, emanates from a stream of thought that flows through the Psalms and the Prophets from that same God of Genesis who declared the goodness of creation.

No universalistic faith can relinquish the Bible and claim to be either religious or liberal. Unitarian Universalism has been influenced and will continue to be influenced by the Bible. UU congregations that seek a vital, relevant, liberal religious voice will read, study, interpret, and invoke the Bible with honesty and integrity, with a soft heart and hard head. This is our heritage. This is our calling.

Jack Conyers
Unitarians and Universalists of Coastal Georgia
St. Simon's Island, Georgia

While I was growing up as a genuinely committed Southern Baptist in Rock Hill, South Carolina, and St. Simons Island, Georgia, the Bible was an integral part of my life. Daily Bible readings sponsored by the Baptist Young People's Union were part of my life. I was even champion of the First Baptist Church of Rock Hill in the Bible Sword Drill (a competition answering biblical questions quickly by identifying chapter and verse). At the age of eleven, I won the district competition.

By my thirteenth year I approached my minister in an effort to discuss the idea of making science compatible with religion. He just gave me a big hug and said, "Why Jack, you don't think you come from no tadpole, do you, boy?"

In 1961, at age thirty, I joined the Unitarian Church. At sixty-nine, I now find myself almost never referring to the Bible for guidance or inspiration. But I do enjoy the fact that I readily understand the significance of a pillar of salt, Naomi's daughter-in-law, Rachel's late pregnancy, and Martha and her siblings without having to do much research. And if necessary, I can find the chapter and verse relatively easily.

I also have some understanding of the fundamentalist acceptance of biblical teachings. While I enjoy the UU tendency to challenge damned near everything, I appreciate the comfort of having answers rather than questions, certainty rather than doubt, and firm guideposts rather than openness to different beliefs. Unwilling to give up my liberal faith, I can still empathize with those who choose a different path, using the Bible as their guide.

Reverend Amanda Aikman
Everett, Washington

My love for the Bible comes from the same place in me as my love for David Copperfield, Romeo and Juliet, and Leaves of Grass, from the part that loves a stirring story, unforgettable characters, and rich, earthy imagery.

Having studiously avoided the Bible for most of my life, I was stunned-and instantly converted-when, in an adult religious education class, I first encountered the story of Saul, David, and Jonathan as told in First and Second Samuel. Moody, mercurial Saul seemed to me fascinatingly complex and, in his angst, almost modern. The chronicle is full of adventure, violence, and treachery. In addition, it presents the story of a passionate, doomed friendship. When David receives the news of Jonathan's death, he mourns extravagantly. His grief seems to be not just for his beloved friend, but for all whom war destroys: "How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished."

I draw strength from lyrical passage like Psalm 104 ("I will sing praise to my God while I have being"), and the eighth chapter of Proverbs ("For wisdom is better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it"). The sexual imagery in the Song of Songs delights me not least by the very fact that it is found in the Bible at all.

These lyrical passages say to me that our bodies, indeed the bodies of all beings, are holy and can be conduits of the divine. Does this idea contradict all the images of slaughter in the Book of Samuel? Of course it does. One of the pleasures of reading the Bible is discover its rich variety. It mirrors the dazzling diversity of the human experience and also transcends it, showing visions of what might yet be, if we are noble enough.

Laura Spencer
First Unitarian Universalist Church
Ann Arbor, Michigan

I grew up with a formal religious education. My exposure to the Bible was limited. As an adult I am interested in learning more. While the Bible contains many valuable lessons, I read it with caution and sensitivity. It helps to have some sense of the time in which it was written and the many alterations and translations it has undergone in reaching its present form.

The Bible offers me an excellent learning opportunity. It offers me a chance to think about what is right and how to live my life. In it I find parallels to our UU Principles. Stories like that of the Good Samaritan are illustrations of our Unitarian Universalist Principle of the inherent worth and dignity of all people and our Principle that we must be compassionate in our relations with others. The Bible provides a high-water mark for living out my Unitarian Universalist values. It offers much to reflect on, inspiring me to have faith that things happen for a reason and trust in the process. It reminds me to seek the divine spark within myself and everyone else, to see the magnitude of how my actions affect the world around me, and to work to make the world better.

I choose to make the lessons of the Bible my own. I will not let the judgments and beliefs of others spoil the messages that are available to me if I read and learn with an open mind. I claim the Bible as one more chapter, among several religious texts, in the Unitarian Universalist guide to living.

Reverend Donna Morrison-Reed
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario

When Humanism blew the lid off Toronto Unitarianism in the 1950s, I was there. My parents joined the newly formed Unitarian Congregation of South Peel when I was three years old. I loved Sunday School: building Styrofoam models of the pyramids, playing the triangle during worship service, visiting other churches and synagogues and discussing their beliefs. My Unitarian Sunday school did not include in its curriculum a firm foundation in the Bible.

In theological school I took the requisite Old and New Testament courses but never felt secure among my Baptist and Methodist classmates. The Jesus Seminar leaves me cold. Who wrote which parts of the Bible and when are issues that have never felt central to my struggle. The Bible has never entered into my bones.

On the other hands, neither did I grow up with any negative reaction to the Bible. This has left me free to draw on it when and where I wish. Last Easter our text was from Mark 16. I served Communion that day with bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ. What a visceral symbol of the human capacity for rebirth and transformation. Last February I wove an intergenerational service around the story of Adam and Eve. What a haunting tale about the hazards and rich rewards of freedom.

I have never told stories and read poetry from the Bible throughout the twenty-one years of my Unitarian Universalist ministry. Yet the Bible remains for me but one rich source among many human records that speak to us of the joys and challenges of being alive.

Mark Christian
UU Church of Las Cruces
Las Cruces, New Mexico

“Revelation is not sealed,” we have long proclaimed. This is a keystone and distinguishing feature of the free church. However much truth we discover in the world we remain open to new truth, “from wherever it may come.” For the Transcendentalists of the nineteenth century this meant experiencing nature directly. For the Free Religionist of that same century it meant exploring world religions. For Humanists in the twentieth century, it means turning to science. For me as a third generation Unitarian Universalist, ironically, it has meant rediscovering the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

When I entered seminary, I worried about my ignorance of the Bible. “Growing up as a UU,” I explained to my seminary’s president, “I didn’t learn much about the Bible. I know I’ll have to work overtime to overcome this deficit.” He reassured me: “Don’t worry. You’re already aware that you know very little about what’s in the Bible. That lesson is painful for many seminarians.” He was right.

As I explored the Bible free of traditional interpretations, I found compelling insights to add to my sources of revelation. The complexity of Jesus’ parables caused me to reorient my world-view. The archetypal truths in the Genesis stories, the human anguish of Job, and existential angst of Ecclesiastes all unfolded before me in a way I found forceful and inspiring.

Interpretations of the Bible can be outmoded, sexist, racist, and excessively violent. The Bible can also be a source of hope-filled compassion, honest introspection, motivation toward justice, and comforting inspiration. If indeed “revelation is not sealed,” then we must remain open to the possibility of new and higher truths that may come to us from diverse sources...including the Bible.