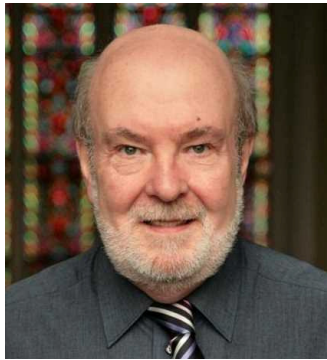


National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian
and Free Christian Churches

Viewpoint



Book Believers

by

Bill Darlison

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INTRODUCTION

The NUF invited Bill Darlison to speak at the recent annual meetings of the Unitarians at Keele University. His brief was to talk about sacred texts. This was to follow on from the discussions and workshops we had at the last NUF House Party held at Great Hucklow last autumn.

Bill is erudite and scholarly. He has recently retired from full time ministry with the Dublin Unitarian congregation. The church is on St Stephen's Green. When Bill first went there the congregation numbered about 20. When he left it was close to 200.

Bill's talk to us was about the Bible and some of those who read it.

Book Believers

Reading

Dr. Laura Schlessinger is a radio personality who dispenses advice to people who call in to her radio show. Recently, she said that, as an observant Orthodox Jew, homosexuality is an abomination according to Leviticus 18:22 and cannot be condoned under any circumstance. The following is an open letter to Dr. Laura penned by an east coast resident, which was posted on the Internet. It's funny, as well as informative:

Dear Dr. Laura:

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's Law. I have learned a great deal from your show, and try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind them that Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to be an abomination. End of debate. I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the other specific laws and how to follow them:

When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odour for the Lord - Lev.1:9. The problem is my neighbours. They claim the odour is not pleasing to them. Should I smite them?

I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?

I know that I am allowed no contact with a woman while she is in her period of menstrual uncleanness - Lev.15:19- 24. The problem is, how do I tell? I have tried asking, but most women take offence.

Lev. 25:44 states that I may indeed possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighbouring nations. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians?

I have a neighbour who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?

A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination - Lev. 11:10, it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this?

Lev. 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?

Most of my male friends get their hair trimmed, including the hair around their temples, even though this is expressly forbidden by

Lev. 19:27. How should they die?

I know from Lev. 11:6-8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?

My uncle has a farm. He violates Lev. 19:19 by planting two different crops in the same field, as does his wife by wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread (cotton/polyester blend). He also tends to curse and blaspheme a lot. Is it really necessary that we go to all the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone them? - Lev.24:10-16. Couldn't we just burn them to death at a private family affair like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws? (Lev. 20:14)

I know you have studied these things extensively, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging.

Your devoted fan,

Jim

Book Believers

Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture they do not understand, but the passages that bother me are those I do understand.

Mark Twain

My new year's resolution this year was to read the Bible through from cover to cover. I've done it before, about twelve times, but I had to stop in the early nineties because my wife Morag said it was becoming something of a fetish. I felt obliged to read my three or

four chapters every day no matter where we happened to be, and at times this could be very inconvenient and even embarrassing. I suppose I have a mild dose of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Anyway, I decided to stop and for many years I restricted my Bible reading to finding relevant passages for use in Sunday morning worship.

Reading it again after all these years has proved quite interesting. To begin with, I've been greeting some of the characters like old friends – Adam and Eve and the snake; Noah and his ark; Joseph and his coat of many colours; Moses and the burning bush – all the old familiar stories reconnect me with earlier times in my life in a rather satisfying and comforting way, and, as with all stories, they seem to speak differently to me as I reach different periods in my life, so what should be simply boring recapitulation actually turns out to be a relatively fresh encounter. In addition, I think that the Book of Genesis, and the early part of the Book of Exodus, the Book of Job, some of the Psalms, various chapters in the works of the Prophets, and the Gospels, are among the world's great works of literature, so revisiting them is both intellectually stimulating and spiritually rewarding.

However, I seem to have been more disturbed than uplifted this time round, and there have been times when I have put my Bible down and wondered to myself why exactly people think that this book is the inspired word of God. For example, the Book of Leviticus consists almost entirely of outdated and barbaric laws such as those we heard about in our reading today ('Dear Dr. Laura'), or of instructions for the proper protocol involved in offering animal sacrifices – how to kill the animal, where to kill it, what to do with the blood, how to divide up the portions and the like. One wonders what possible value such a document can have as a spiritual text in the twenty-first century.

But by far the most disturbing feature has been its presentation of God as a tyrant, which I'd seen before of course, but which had not struck me quite as forcibly as it seems to be doing this time round. You can find it in the early books – the first five books, which the Jews call the Torah, and which, to them, are the holiest books in existence – but with the Book of Joshua, God the unmerciful tyrant really comes into his own.

You remember the story: the Children of Israel have been freed from their slavery in Egypt and spent forty years wandering in the Sinai wilderness under the care of Moses. But Moses dies before they can enter the Promised Land, so it is left to Joshua to take them in. But the land wasn't empty. It was said to be a land 'flowing with milk and honey', so it would be only natural to find that people were already living there. So 'entering the Promised Land' was nothing short of an invasion into territory that the Israelites had no claim to. How can this be justified? The Bible writers justify it by claiming that God had given this land to 'his people', and furthermore, that the people who were already there were 'an abomination' to the Lord and had forfeited their right to live there. The original inhabitants had to be exterminated, and this is precisely what Joshua and his men proceed to do. Here are a few lines from chapter 10 of the Book of Joshua, just to give you a flavour:

Then Joshua and all Israel with him went up from Eglon to Hebron and attacked it. They took the city and put it to the sword, together with its king, its villages, and everyone in it, just as they had done to Lachish. (10: 36)

They slaughtered the whole city – men, women, and children, and then went on to the next city and repeated the procedure. Many years ago I put it to a Jehovah's Witness friend of mine that such behaviour was simply inexcusable barbarism, but he replied that

the people were so wicked – even the children, even the babes in arms – that they had to be destroyed. It is strange how normally civilised and humane people can justify the most flagrantly inhuman acts if they believe that God somehow approves of them.

One of the most barbaric and shocking episodes comes a little later, in the first Book of Samuel (chapter 15). By this time, Israel has a king, Saul, and Saul has been instructed by God to ‘go, attack the Amelekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys’ (verse 3). Saul does as he’s told – up to a point -, but he takes Agag, the king of the Amelekites, alive, plus the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs – ‘everything that was good’ the text says. But God does not countenance such disobedience, and so Saul has the kingdom taken away from him. As for Agag, he is slaughtered in cold blood by the prophet Samuel himself. The New International Version of the Bible simply says that he ‘put Agag to death before the Lord at Gilgal’ (verse 33), but this is a sanitised translation. The Authorised Version says that Samuel ‘hewed Agag in pieces’.

These so-called ‘historical’ books of the Bible not only present God as vengeful, they also depict him – and he most certainly is male – as jealous, as unwilling to countenance the worship of any other deity. This accounts for the appalling treatment that is meted out to the 450 prophets of the god Baal who are slaughtered at the command of the prophet Elijah.

Liberal scholars will generally explain and excuse this sort of thing – and there are plenty more examples of it – as the jingoistic tub thumping of an embryonic nation flexing its muscles, and they will often suggest that it is all exaggeration and probably didn’t happen this way. Or they will excuse it on the grounds that it describes the

behaviour of primitive peoples who didn't know any better, and that the revelation from God has been gradual, moving through this early barbarity to the exalted theology that we find in the Christian scriptures.

This may indeed be so, but the Christian scriptures themselves are not entirely free from the kind of narrow, exclusivist attitudes that characterise much of the Jewish scripture. On a recent visit to Dublin I was given a leaflet from a member of the Knocklyon Church of Christ, which tells me that I will die in my sins if I don't believe that Jesus is God's Son, and that if I am not 'born again' I will not see God's kingdom. Which means that, since the vast majority of human beings who have lived in the past or who are living now have never even heard of Jesus Christ, we are all pretty much damned.

But I'm also reluctant to accept the excuse that the people who wrote the Bible a couple of millennia ago belonged to an age that had not developed the kind of sensitivities we are accustomed to today. Hundreds of years before the Christian era, at the time that the Jewish scriptures were taking the form they have today, there was the greatest outpouring of sublime spiritual teaching that the world has ever seen. The German philosopher Karl Jaspers called the period from about 800 BC to 200 BC the Axial Age, a notion explored more recently by Karen Armstrong in her book *The Age of Transformation*. This was the time which saw the birth of the Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tzu, whose humane and human centred, universalist teachings broke through the sectarian barriers of their times and gave us enduring messages of enlightenment which continue to inspire and which have probably never been surpassed. While the authors of the Book of Joshua and the Books of Kings were telling us of a jealous God who brooked no rival and who encouraged the extermination of his enemies, and who were boasting of the fact that when Solomon's temple was opened, 22 thousand

oxen and 120 thousand sheep were sacrificed (II Chronicles 7:5), the Buddha was teaching that ‘hatred was never ended by hatred; only love can put an end to hatred’, and Lao Tzu was writing the *Tao Te Ching*, as sublime a piece of spiritual wisdom ever come from the pen of a human being. (It is only fair to point out that Karl Jaspers includes some of the great Hebrew prophets – such as Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah – among the spiritual luminaries of the Axial Age.)

Of course, there is another way of approaching these horrific biblical stories. It is an approach favoured by (among others) the 12th century Jewish scholar Maimonides, who said that the primitive and barbaric stories in the Jewish scripture were metaphors or allegories and should not be read literally. I’m all for that. I would say that most of what is in the Bible should be considered in this way, and that if we do look at it like this it can be illuminating.

The problem is though, that our Bibles do not come with instructions to that effect. Instead of a health warning pasted on the front, a bit like the health warnings on cigarette packets, telling us that unless we treat these stories figuratively we may be in danger of making colossal and dangerous errors of judgement, we get a beautifully bound book, printed on the best and thinnest paper, with the word ‘holy’ prominently displayed in gold on the front. Could it be given any more gravitas? Perhaps we ought to insist that all Bibles come with a sticker which says, ‘If you are reasonably intelligent, free from cultural prejudices, and have a modicum of historical and literary expertise, and an ability to appreciate ambiguity, metaphor and symbolism, then you can safely read this book. However, if you’re a bit of an eejit, or an inveterate literalist, you’d better leave it alone.’ Maybe that would do the trick.

But no such mental health warning is ever printed. Instead we have

inherited almost unquestioningly the notion that a particular book, completed nearly two thousand years ago contains special, and definitive revelation from God, and this has given rise to a series of beliefs which have had and still are having a profoundly negative effect on the human race. Here are just a few of them:

That the universe is only six thousand years old. 50% of Americans believe this. How does this affect scientific research and scientific education?

That there is only one way to worship God and all other ways are abominations; that only one religion is 'true' and all the rest are false. Even the new 'tolerant' Ian Paisley said recently that he would never take part in a Roman Catholic service.

That God punishes the wrong doer, so if your life is going badly it's probably because you've committed some terrible sin and now you're getting your comeuppance. We've all felt this at some time or another, and with good reason. Parts of the Bible seem to teach it unequivocally.¹

That Israel was given to the Jews by God many centuries ago and so they have a divine right to the land.

That Jesus is coming back within the next fifty years, and so there's no need for us to worry about ecology or global warming; according to a recent Gallup poll.

43% of Americans believe some version of this.
(*Letter to a Christian Nation*, by Sam Harris, page xv).

I sometimes wonder what those people who fought so hard to bring the Bible to the people knew what they were doing.

We must constantly bear in mind that, in the main, the Bible is a book of poetry, and poetry depends for its power on ambiguity, on nuance, metaphor and simile. To translate poetry into history or into prosaic doctrinal formulations is to destroy it. There is no one way to interpret a poem. The fact that we have so many sects in Christendom, each with its own interpretation of certain key texts demonstrates that attempting to find a consensus is futile. And this is particularly true when dealing with translations from another language. The Old Testament is written mostly in Hebrew, the New Testament in Greek. To become an expert in these two languages – plus Aramaic in which some of the Old Testament is written – is a lifetime's work, and, even then, scholars will have legitimate disagreement. Even native speakers of Hebrew disagree over fundamental matters of interpretation. Someone has said that 'all translation is commentary', meaning that there is no such thing as a 'simple' translation of anything. You bring your prejudices to bear on every translation.

For example, the student of Hebrew finds out early on that the very first words of the Old Testament are troublesome. They are: *bereshit bara Elohim*, customarily translated, 'In the beginning God created'. But *bereshit* does not mean 'in the beginning'. It could conceivably mean 'in a beginning' or 'in the beginning of' but Hebrew scholars, people who have studied these texts in the greatest depth, disagree over this. And the word *Elohim* is usually translated 'God'. But *Elohim* is a plural form, and God is singular. The verb translated 'created' - *bara-* is singular, too. So, we have a plural noun and a singular verb. Ahh!' say the Trinitarians. This shows that God is trinity in unity. No it doesn't, say others. It's simply the 'royal plural', a plural form which indicates majesty and power. You're both wrong, say those like Erik von Daniken who believe that God was an astronaut. The word *Elohim*, they say, shows that God wasn't a single entity, but a group of aliens who planted human life on

earth millennia ago! All this and we've not read beyond the first line of the text! As we read on we find similar problems; the first two chapters of Genesis alone contain at least half a dozen disputed readings. What chance has the ordinary person of coming to terms with this? Why do we persist in saying, 'Everybody should be allowed to interpret the Bible for himself'? How can we do it? Even if we devoted a lifetime to it we couldn't come to agreement.

So, using the Bible as a proof text, as the basis for doctrines and creeds is bound to result – as it has resulted – in fruitless and interminable dispute and division. To imagine that a sensible God would make a person's eternal salvation dependent upon coming to the 'right' conclusions about such texts is beyond belief. In short, to look upon the Bible in this way is to invite trouble.

Another reason why I rejected the notion that the Bible could be used as an inerrant text to support doctrines was my discovery that the 3rd century Christian writer Origen had declared that, far from being free from errors and contradictions, the Bible was full of them – *deliberately* placed there, according to Origen, so that we wouldn't be tempted to take the text literally, so that we would go beneath the surface to discover the poetic depths conveyed by the words. Of course, we have paid no attention whatsoever to Origen's advice and have continued to spend our time trying to explain away obvious contradictions, anomalies, and absurdities, and fighting with each other over our differing conclusions.

These days, I'm conscious that I shall never be able to grasp every nuance of the Bible's total message, and I realise that I'll always have to rely on someone else's translation, regardless of my own linguistic expertise. But as soon as I stopped thinking of it as sacred I found I could begin to think of it as sublime. I could enjoy it and

profit from it without being overawed by it, or even scared by it. The Bible is my friend now, and my companion. I honestly think that, approached in the right spirit, it contains all we need to know about the spiritual life.

But, what is the 'right spirit' in which to approach a religious text? An old Sufi story gives us an answer. There was once a brilliant preacher who, when asked why he had become so wise, would always reply, 'I am wise because I know what is in my Koran.' This was usually enough to satisfy his audience, but one day a questioner went further. 'Tell us,' he said, 'just what is in your Koran.' 'In my Koran,' replied the preacher, 'there are two pressed flowers and a letter from my friend Abdullah.'

As long as we keep in our holy book figurative reminders of the mystery and beauty of the earth (symbolised by the flowers), and the mystery, beauty, and importance of human relationships (symbolised by the letter), we will be able to profit from them. As long as we realise that all scriptures are human products, and that, to paraphrase a passage from Walt Whitman, we give life to them, they don't give life to us, then they can be beneficial to us. If we lose this dimension; if we treat these books as oracles which have dropped down from heaven, they will tyrannise over us and be sources of dogmatism, division, fanaticism, and fundamentalism, those volatile and uncompromising forces which are spreading such havoc in the world.

I am not against the Bible. I am just against the idea that this book – or any other book, including the Koran or the Book of Mormon or whatever – is a special revelation from God. It is probably the most irrational, dangerous and divisive idea that currently infects the human psyche. And, as Art Lester said to me recently, 'The book-believers are the ones who will destroy the world.' Sadly, Art might

just be right. And it is our duty to challenge the book-believers, by fostering a new kind of religious consciousness with the contrary message that knowledge and wisdom are the result of human thought, human experience, reflection, reason, scientific endeavour. They do not drop down from heaven fully formed, nor are they the preserve of one nation or one religion or one period in history. And they are certainly not to be found in one book. To suggest that they are is to turn works of literature into loaded guns.

Bill Darlison

^{1*} Jerry Falwell, leader of America's Moral Majority said after the 9/11 attacks, 'The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked...I really believe that the pagans, and the gays, and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union), People for the American Way – all of them who have tried to secularise America – I point the finger in their face and say, "You helped this happen".' On another occasion he said, 'Aids is not just God's punishment for homosexuals, it is God's punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals.' Falwell's church had 20,000 members. His Old Time Gospel Hour, the longest running religious broadcast on American television, had 21 million viewers in the 1980s.

Comments -

We welcome your comments on this issue. With your permission your comments might also be included in the NUF Newsletter.

Please send your comments to the editor,

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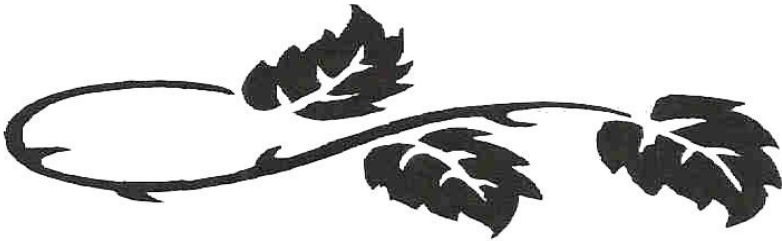
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