

Forbidden Tales of the Bible

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
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There is little one cannot find in the Bible, which is actually a fantastic grab bag of law, legend, history, politics, propaganda, poetry, prayer, ethics, genealogy, hygienic practices, military tactics, dietary advice, and carpentry instructions, among many other things.

Jonathan Kirsch, in *The Harlot by the Side of the Road*

God is no saint, strange to say. Much that the Bible says about him is rarely preached from the pulpit because, examined too closely, it becomes scandal.

Jack Miles, in *God: A Biography*

PRELUDE *Turn Back, O Man*, from *Godspell*

by Stephen Schwartz, performed by Kevin Allen-Schmid

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

INTRODUCTION

This morning I would like to share with you some thoughts about the Hebrew Scriptures. The scriptures are not always pretty. Like the best of stage, and screen, and folklore of every culture, they contain savagery and deceit, ineptitude and the abuse of power...all woven so closely with grace and generosity, that it's often hard to tell which is which.

We expect that kind of thing in popular film, TV, theater, books, and art. But for some reason, when we see this stuff in the bible, which we may have been told is the locus of all things bright and beautiful, we may be tempted to simply dismiss the Hebrew Scriptures as patriarchal, misogynistic, homophobic, and not worth our time.

I'd like to suggest today that we revisit some of these difficult stories, without the assumption that all of the players need to be seen as heroes. In so doing I think we might find in the Bible a resource for understanding our contemporary culture.

Let's start with a song whose ancient imagery was put to powerful use by African Americans around the time of the US civil war.

GATHERING SONG *When Israel was in Egypt's Land* #104

CHILDREN'S FOCUS

Dora's Box, by Ann-Jeanette Campbell

Summary: A witch offers to grant a young couple 3 wishes. They wish for a daughter; they wish she will never know evil or sadness; they wish she will be loved by all. The witch says yes...but not all 3 can be fulfilled at once. She gives them a daughter, Dora, and a box. They are to put tokens everything evil or sad in the box...and make sure that Dora never opens the box. This succeeds for many years, though Dora doesn't relate much to others. Finally, Dora is faced with a choice of opening the box (or not) to aid a grieving friend. She does, and is suddenly subject to the new experiences of pain, fear, and loss. This opens the door to the fulfillment of the third wish: that she may now have compassion, and be loved by all.

RESPONSIVE READING "For Everything a Season" #558

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

SILENCE (3:00)

BUF WOMEN'S ENSEMBLE *God, I Cannot Call You Father*, by Linda Allen

MESSAGE

I was in my early teens when I tried to read the bible from cover to cover. I can't remember exactly what I was seeking. Knowledge, perhaps: I was wondering what I might be missing...and I did learn a fair amount about the content of the bible ...its structure, for example, and its bewildering mix of literary genre.

"Inspiration" is not quite what I was seeking either. At that time in my life I was more inspired than anyone around me could stand. It was probably something more like "grace" that I wanted. Not a material reward...nor an aura of holiness (which would have been very uncool with my friends) ...I'm guessing that what I wanted was to grasp a connection - between my world and the world out of which arose the legends, the parables, the rules, and the Jesus, all of which had been declared to me: holy. If this world contained such power to have been preserved through most of

recorded history, then I wanted to tie-in to that history. I was no skeptic. I wanted to know and understand the scriptures' relevance for my day.

I read hundreds of pages that year, but I have only vague recollections. I don't specifically remember the stories I'm going to tell today. Maybe I just blocked them out. Or the translation I was reading may have softened them. Slogging through night after night may have made my brain go numb. Or, since I was pretty naïve, I probably didn't even know what was going-on half the time.

I do remember feeling horror at the Israelites taking over the land of Canaan by slaughtering everyone who already lived there. I remember the carpentry instructions that went on and on and the laws that seemed nitpicky, irrelevant, and redundant. And I remember gradually losing interest, and a vague feeling of regret.

Since then I've taken academic courses in Hebrew scripture. I've learned about Bronze Age history, culture, language, and religion. And I've become a humanist: I now see the Gods of Hebrew and Christian Scripture to be akin to the Gods of Greek, Norse, Javanese, Zulu etc mythology.

So I did not expect to be shocked awake by a few ribald tales retold in a book called: The Harlot by the Side of The Road.

I was already aware that Yahweh had ordered the patriarchs to engage in heinous activities. I was already aware that they had each climbed to the top through treachery, and that their women were largely props and means of propagation. What I was not aware of was that at least a few biblical tales were SO outrageous, SO disgusting, and so full of plot twists...that they would make great material for contemporary Hollywood.

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One of the main themes in the Hebrew Scripture is immigration and purity. The Israelites are constantly on the move, constantly in search of a home, and constantly encountering other tribes. So many of their stories touch on the question of whether or not to intermingle and intermarry with the Others. And since this is not a simple issue, we don't get simple stories.

In Genesis, chapter 34, Jacob and his family are slowly pushing their way into the territory of Palestine, and they find themselves uneasy neighbors with other tribal groups. Jacob's daughter, Dinah, has been taken by Shechem, a young man from a bordering tribe. Shechem's father seeks to make peace with Jacob, telling him that Shechem is deeply smitten with and wishes to marry Dinah. In fact, he offers, why don't we exchange some more daughters...then you and your tribe can remain here and we can peacefully co-exist.

But Jacob has a covenant with Yahweh which demands circumcision...and his sons are deeply offended at the thought of giving their sisters to those who are uncircumcised. So they make a deal: if all the men of Shechem's tribe will be circumcised, we'll let you have Dinah, and we'll stay and intermarry.

Apparently all the men of Shechem's tribe agree to be circumcised! And a couple of days later, while they are still a little sore, two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, walk through Shechem's camp and have little trouble slaughtering the entire clan.

Is this a love story, a tragedy, or a tale of honor? On his deathbed, Jacob rebukes Simeon and Levi for doing this, and he denies them their portion of the Promised Land. But in the end the bible remains ambivalent about the moral of the story. Two entire traditions seem to be twisted together in this story by an ancient editor: one tradition promoting peace and assimilation... another promoting war and separatism. What we get is an ambivalent jumble which sounds very much like real life.

Some of the language embedded in the story suggests that the relationship between Shechem and Dinah was one of deep mutual affection. And yet this alternates with language that suggests that she has been defiled. "Defiled," however, may simply mean that she went off without permission, which seems a pretty similar attitude that our culture has toward women today.

So Dinah fades into obscurity, while tradition honors Jacob, the one who sought a pragmatic solution to the affair. And yet it is the brutal sentiment of his sons—that the Israelites must not mix with strangers...and must use violent means to prevent it from happening—that sentiment is carried forward through the heroes of the following generations.

Moses later calls for the wholesale slaughter the Midianites. When warriors return from battle with captives, he says 'we must not intermix with foreigners, so kill the women and children too, except the virgins,' (all the while overlooking the fact that his own wife is a foreigner) [Numbers 31:15-18]

If these stories are part of a survival manual for a nation of outsiders, what does it teach to those struggling over Palestine today?

There is a time for all things. A time for war; a time for compromise. If we want to justify our position—whatever our position—we will have no trouble finding bible verses to support our claims. But if we're looking for understanding, we have to look at both sides.

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Next story, many years later: another son of Jacob, Judah, is trying to carry on the family lineage. Judah has three sons. The first son, Er, marries Tamar, a foreigner. But Er dies. The law says that when your brother dies without an heir, you must impregnate your brother's wife. So this task falls to the second son, Onan. Onan doesn't like it. He doesn't want to father a child who will split his inheritance. But his father insists. As Tamar's father-in-law, he has a contractual obligation to provide stud services. And Tamar insists, because unless she finds a husband or a son, she's going to be cast off into the desert.

So Onan reluctantly lies with Tamar. But he spills his seed on the ground. So that very night, Yahweh struck Onan down with a deadly fever. (And if that wasn't curse enough, thousands of years later the Victorians used his name in coining a new word for masturbation: Onanism).

But the fun has just begun. Judah now, is scared. Two of his three sons have died after consorting with this foreign woman. He has one son left to carry on his line, Shelah. So he tells Tamar, go off and live as a widow with your own father, I promise I'll send Shelah to you when he's old enough.

But time passes and Shelah is not sent. So Tamar takes destiny into her own hands. Knowing that Judah will be traveling along a certain road, she disguises herself as a harlot. It gets pretty graphic now:

Judah went to Tamar disguised at the road side, and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" He answered, "I will send you a kid from the flock." And she said, "Only if you give me a pledge, until you send it." He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord, and the staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him.

(Who needs OWL when you've got the old testament?)

...About three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the whore; moreover she is pregnant as a result of whoredom." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned." As she was being brought out, she sent word to Judah, "It was the owner of these who made me pregnant." And she said, "Take note, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff." Then Judah acknowledged them and said, "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not lie with her again.

Now I have a personal interest in this story because when I was a kid I had a dog named Tamar. I could never figure out why my older brother had named her Tamar. This certainly wasn't a biblical figure we learned about in Sunday school.

But tradition preserves Tamar as an indispensable character whose determined act of "whoredom" leads to the preservation of the line of Judah, from which shall arise Israel's greatest kings, the Christian's savior, and the very word "Jew"—meaning the descendants of Judah: this particular tribe that survived into the present age.

Ironically, the big problem here is not prostitution or Judah having sex with his daughter-in-law. The sticky issue through the whole story is that Tamar was a Canaanite.

So the law condemns intermarriage outside of the 12 tribes of Israel, and yet the stories are filled with intermarriage—successful intermarriages between the patriarchs and foreign women who perform numerous heroic deeds. Perhaps this means that the law was only meant for ordinary people, and not for the patriarchs. Or perhaps these striking contradictions can teach us something else.

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The temptation to which religious liberals often fall is to simply write the whole thing off as a crock... not just difficult literature but a heap of moldering hypocrisy that stinks worse with each

passing misinterpreting generation. Yes we can write it off, thinking that all we're going to lose is a little cultural literacy. But maybe we're missing some significant spiritual lessons. Such as the lessons of divine mystery and divine comedy. I think Jewish culture gets this much better than Christian culture. The Jews have a more argumentative/bantering relationship with God rather than one of obedience and piety.

Take King Solomon; please. Lionized for his wisdom and power. The man who had 700 wives and 300 concubines, including many foreign wives who worshipped foreign gods. The man builds a temple that some still wish to rebuild...but his kingdom is destroyed and never, never returns. Are the Hebrew scriptures just a big sardonic joke about life?

One theory suggests that the Book of Judges which is so outrageously misogynistic ... and yet not without its female heroes as well... that this book must have been written by a woman as a parody.

Because I love parody, irony, and ambiguity, I could love the Bible. I simply need to get over the abuse done to it in the 20th century by those who have attempted to reduce the meaning of these complex stories to a few fundamental absolute propositions.

I would like to reclaim the Bible as a storyteller's treasury, recounting the lives of characters "who are thoroughly human, which is to say that they were as confused, conflicted, twisted, tortured, and vulnerable to the weaknesses of the flesh and failure of the spirit as any..." preacher, politician, or pundit in our own times. [Kirsch]

Think of it like this: when my wife, Jane, was reading the Harry Potter books with our kids, Jane once said, "A lot of the trouble these kids are having could have been avoided if they had only talked with an adult that they trusted." Rick, age 7, replied, "Oh Mom, then the books would be way too short!"

I think the Bible is like that. The troubles of the ancient Hebrews reflect the general confusion of life in any era. In these stories and in life, things don't go as we'd like, or even as well as we'd expect. But we try, and we fail. We try again, and we succeed... and then there are unintended consequences—sometimes worse than if we had failed. And we find again and again that the world is not what it appears to be.

The world is like the God of Hebrew scripture, demanding one moment that his followers make sacrifices...and going into great detail about how sacrifices should be made...then later saying, "I don't want your sacrifices..."

AND THIS IS WHAT IT FEELS LIKE to be a human being trying to understand life and its savagery, trying to understand people and their deceit, trying to understand love and our own ineptitude... THIS IS WHAT IT FEELS LIKE trying to understand the world, trying to understand God. When we try to understand, we often feel like we get absurdity and contradiction in response to our quest.

This is the richness of the Bible and of all great literature, along with music and visual arts: the richness is in its ambiguity, its blatant self-contradiction, its stark demand that we pay attention, think hard, and use every ounce of our intellect and our imagination to fathom its depths.

The terrible risk is that this same ambiguity can lead us to react with desperate zealotry, deliberate evasion, and monolithic morality.

Jonathan Kirsch [author of *Harlot by the Side of the Road*, available at the public library] concludes: "The fundamental truth about the bible is that there is no fundamental truth. Instead, we are invited to join the rest of humanity in a restless, ceaseless search to discern some moral order in a chaotic universe. We are challenged by the Bible itself to figure out who God is and what God wants ...and that is the most disturbing revelation of all. ...The Bible offers many visions of God, many explanations of God's will, many prophecies of humankind's' destiny, and the real challenge is to discern the ones that make sense and ring true, the ones that hold out the promise of peace in a troubled and dangerous world."

So let us read, and let us tell stories from the Hebrew Scriptures. And let us avoid tacking simplistic little morals on at the end. Let us have the courage to take them as they are, as they leave us hanging...as invitations to dialogue and constant re-interpretation.

Let us listen to the truth of the bible, which tells us that human beings are capable of both cruelty and compassion...that people can change for better and for worse...and that there are consequences for our actions: some which are predictable...and some which will only be known by those who will come many many generations after we are gone.

SHARING OUR GIFTS *It Ain't Necessarily So* from Porgy and Bess
by George & Ira Gershwin

SENDING SONG *Bring Many Names* #23

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Some "Scandalous" Biblical Texts

- Lot and His Daughters Flee Sodom: Genesis 19
- Dinah and the Mass Circumcisions: Genesis 34
- The Origins of Onanism, and The Mistake that Preserved the Line of Judah: Genesis 38
- Jephthah Sacrifices his Daughter: Judges 11: 30-39
- Blame the Concubine: Judges 19-21