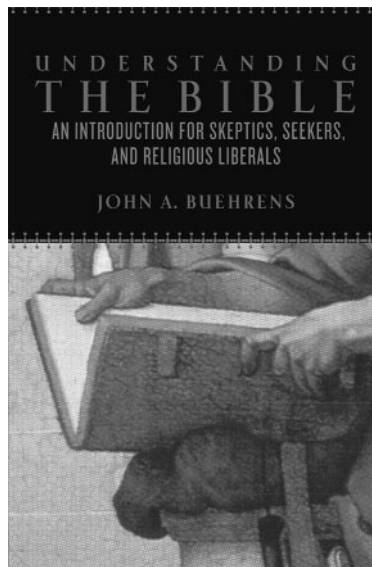


# Understanding the Bible

An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers,  
and Religious Liberals

by John A. Buehrens



Beacon Press Discussion Guide  
by Nancy Palmer Jones

*Understanding the Bible: An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers, and Religious Liberals*

by John A. Buehrens

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# Participant Evaluation Form

Name (optional):

Date:

Group Leader:

Book Title:

Please indicate your evaluation of the following:

meeting space: poor | fair | okay | good | great  
pacing: poor | fair | okay | good | great  
content: poor | fair | okay | good | great  
overall: poor | fair | okay | good | great

1. Do you think the sessions were: (Please check one)

\_\_\_ too long \_\_\_ about right \_\_\_ too short

How long would you like the sessions to be?

2. Do you think there were: (Please check one)

\_\_\_ too many sessions \_\_\_ the right number of sessions \_\_\_ too few sessions

If you thought there were too many sessions, which one(s) would you leave out?

3. If your large group broke into smaller groups for discussion, did this process work? Why or why not?

4. Is there anything that you would like to have talked about that was not included in the sessions? If so, what?

5. What activity(ies) did you especially like? Why?

6. If there was an activity that you feel did not work in this context, can you tell us which activity and why?

7. Question: *(Leaders add your own question here )*

8. Please rate your group leader's skills in leading the session(s): (Circle one)

Excellent | Good | Average | Fair | Poor

9. What suggestions would you offer to the group leader to improve the way the group is conducted?

Thank you very much for taking the time to give us your feedback! Please return your completed form to:

*(Session leaders fill in your contact information here.)*

# Leader Evaluation Form

Name:

Date:

UU Society:

District:

Book Title:

1. Do you and/or your participants think the sessions were: (Please check one)

\_\_\_ too long \_\_\_ about right \_\_\_ too short

How long would you like the sessions to be?

2. Do you think that there were: (Please check one)

\_\_\_ too many sessions \_\_\_ the right number of sessions \_\_\_ too few sessions

If you thought there were too many sessions, which one(s) would you leave out?

3. If your large group broke into smaller groups for discussion, did this process work? Why or why not?

4. Is there anything that you would like to have talked about that was not included in the sessions? If so, what?

5. What activity(ies) did you especially like and why?

6. If there was an activity that you feel did not work in this context, can you tell us which activity and why?

7. Do you think the discussion guides will help promote a stronger sense of community in your congregation? Why or why not?

8. Can you suggest other books or subjects that might work in this context?

9. If you changed the format, please describe the changes you made and your reasons for making them.

Thank you very much for taking the time to give us your feedback! Please return your completed form to:

Tom Hallock, Associate Publisher  
Beacon Press  
25 Beacon Street  
Boston, MA 02108



# Introduction

Oppressive interpretations of the Bible do kill, literally. You'll find no denial of that here. Massive injustice has been and continues to be done in the name of the Bible . . . . Meanwhile the Bible is also about the beauty and goodness of creation itself; about the ancient human struggle for freedom and liberation; about frustration with violence and injustice throughout the generations; and about experiences of exultation, expectation, and inspiration that can sustain the human quest for wisdom, justice, and peace.

—JOHN A. BUEHRENS, *Understanding the Bible: An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers, and Religious Liberals*

Skeptics, seekers, and religious liberals often need a “way in” to understanding the complex territory that is the Bible. John Buehrens’s *Understanding the Bible* offers just such an entry point. Through the activities suggested in this discussion guide, readers of Buehrens’s book will be able to “claim [their] own power to understand the Bible.”

You do not need to be a theologian or a biblical scholar in order to lead a program based on *Understanding the Bible*. A much better model is that of the “leader-learner,” one who is as curious and interested as any other participant in what this adventure will bring. Combined with the historical and scholarly information that Buehrens provides, the sessions in this guide offer more than enough material to allow you and your participants to engage with biblical texts in new ways. Encouraging the use of both critical thinking and “imaginative compassion” (as Buehrens puts it), the program aims at enabling participants to become responsible interpreters and theologians in their own right. All the while, they are invited to form a “community of seekers and learners,” supporting each other respectfully as they wrestle with the Bible—and having fun in the process.

## Structure and Key Elements of the Program

The discussion guide divides *Understanding the Bible* into nine two-hour sessions: Sessions One through Five cover the chapters on the Hebrew Bible; Sessions Six through Nine cover those on the books of the Christian Bible. (See “Adjusting the Format as Needed” below for suggestions about ways to translate this guide into a shorter or a longer program.) We suggest you offer Part One during one season of the church year, such as the fall, and Part Two in the next season (winter or spring).

Each session covers about two chapters in Buehrens’s book. The activities in each session give participants a chance to discuss and apply what they learn from their reading. In addition, participants create a series of lists—on uses of the Bible, biblical themes, and their own “open questions,” for example—which offer a sense of continuity as well as record their accumulating knowledge throughout the program. See Sessions One and Two for an introduction to these elements. Through these program elements, you and your participants are able to adapt the program to follow your own most “burning questions.”

Each session follows a similar format:

- ❖ **Materials, Goals, and Preparation:** These lists spell out what you will need for each session and what the session hopes to accomplish.
- ❖ **Musical Opening:** This element is optional and may depend on the style and the skills of your group, but it offers a good way for the community of participants to gather together. Suggested hymns come from *Singing the Living Tradition* (the Unitarian Universalists' gray hymnal), and they demonstrate how UU liturgy draws from a multitude of sources, including the Bible. They are also fun to sing!
- ❖ **Opening Words:** Often taken from the Bible, these readings help to get the sound of the text in participants' ears, and they suggest a thought-provoking focus for the session.
- ❖ **Chalice Lighting**
- ❖ **Welcome:** This is your chance to set a welcoming tone for the session and to offer a preview of what the session will cover.
- ❖ **Check-in (or Introductions for the first sessions Part One and Part Two):** Check-in gives participants the chance to share "where they are" as each session begins. Here they may lift up the aspects of the reading that interest them most, encounters with biblical references in various aspects of the culture, or answers to "open questions" that they have researched. Check-in may help you decide where the emphasis of the session should be placed.
- ❖ **The Activities:** The time listed for each activity is only a suggestion. Allow your group's interests and style (do they like to move slowly or quickly, or to change the pace from one activity to the next?) to determine how many of these activities you take up and how long you allow them to go.
- ❖ **Looking Back, Looking Ahead (or Wrapping Up, for the last sessions in each part):** Here you can cover the suggested homework for the next session and allow time for any last burning questions to arise.
- ❖ **Closing Words**

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *Look for the paragraphs throughout the program that begin with this heading for suggestions or clarifications that may be helpful for you.*

You are encouraged to bring a wide variety of resources to this program: books, works of art, and music all help to enliven the discussion of the Bible and demonstrate how widespread its influence is. See the description of the "library" under "Preparation" for Session One, along with the "Resources" listed on Handout 3. The four handouts for this program appear at the end of Sessions One and Two, where they are introduced.

Finding a way to share what has been experienced and learned with the larger community is an important element in this program. See Sessions Eight and Nine for suggestions. Celebrating the group's accomplishments at the end of Part One and Part Two is equally important! Finally, as the program ends, members of your community may want to continue the explorations they have begun here; we hope that *Understanding the Bible* may lead, for some of you, to ongoing study of the Bible, using the techniques and resources offered here.

# Getting Started

## PROMOTING THE PROGRAM

Many congregations have resources for publicizing new programs in the community. It is always a good idea to create flyers and to post notices on bulletin boards and in newsletters. Announcements during meetings and services help spread the word and generate enthusiasm. Some congregations promote new programs by organizing “Kick-off Sundays,” which include a sermon by a minister or lay leader on a related topic. A sermon might take up one of the more troubling biblical texts and open it to new interpretations, as Buehrens does throughout *Understanding the Bible* and these sessions suggest. A dramatic presentation of one of the stories may appeal to all ages and will reveal the common human themes that underlie the scriptures. Simple ideas for such dramatizations are included in this program (see Activity 3 in Session Five, for example).

You may want to reach out to specific groups to encourage them to join you on this journey. Young adults who may not have looked closely at the Hebrew and Christian Bibles will find much to inspire and empower them in this program; so will community members whose own childhood introductions to these texts were off-putting or even destructive. In addition to offering the course as an adult education program, you might suggest that small-group ministry (or “covenant”) groups use these sessions as a guide for some of their regularly scheduled meetings. Or you could use portions of *Understanding the Bible* and the related sections of this discussion guide for individual sessions of a religious education program on a given topic (such as on Genesis or the Prophets).

Whatever the format, be sure to encourage members from a wide variety of theological positions to participate.

*Understanding the Bible* may also provide an opportunity to expand your relationship with the wider community or with other congregations in your area. Consider announcing the program in local newspapers. Research the personal resources in your area: are there scholars, speakers, or religious leaders from other faith communities who might make a guest appearance at one or more of the sessions? Are there Unitarian Universalist lay leaders or ministers within or beyond your congregation who might bring a special perspective about the Bible to your group? In addition, you might think about inviting other liberal churches to cosponsor this program, using it to build bridges between your communities. Stay open to negotiating changes that might be necessary in order for another group to accept cosponsorship.

## ADJUSTING THE FORMAT AS NEEDED

Although this guide offers nine sessions, you can easily adapt the format for longer or shorter programs, or for a weekend retreat. Here are some suggestions:

### *Fifteen-Session Program:*

A longer program provides a slower pace and more in-depth study of each chapter in *Understanding the Bible*. Session One would cover the introductory chapters in “Before We

Begin”; Sessions Two through Fifteen would each take up one chapter, producing eight sessions on the Hebrew Bible, and six on the Christian Scriptures. A longer program might provide an excellent *follow-up* to this nine-session guide. We encourage you to use scriptural texts for the opening and closing words and to offer ample opportunity for engaging with biblical texts from a variety of points of view in each session.

#### *Five-Session Program or Weekend Retreat:*

For a shorter program or a weekend retreat, you might offer an introductory session (on the chapters in “Before We Begin”), then combine each of the following two sessions in this guide to produce a total of two sessions on the Hebrew Bible and two on the Christian Scriptures. John Buehrens suggests taking up the following biblical texts in this shorter format:

- ❖ **Session One: Genesis 1:1–2:3 or Genesis 3:1–24**—Either the Creation or the “Fall” stories will work for this introductory session, encouraging participants to recognize major biblical themes and to read these familiar texts in a new way.
- ❖ **Session Two: Deuteronomy 5:6–21**—The Ten Commandments offer the following one-sentence message: “Now that you’re free, you’ve got responsibilities.”
- ❖ **Session Three: Job 38:1–42:6**—The “voice in the whirlwind” lifts up a central theme of the Hebrew Bible: the tension between order and a chaos that never completely goes away.
- ❖ **Session Four: Matthew 5–7 and Luke 6:20–49**—The Sermon on the Mount (in Matthew) and the Sermon on the Plain (in Luke) reveal the gospel authors’ perspective that Jesus is the “new Moses”; now what matters to God is not just what humans *do* but also what their *intentions* are. The moral imperatives of the Ten Commandments have moved to the interior of a person’s soul.
- ❖ **Session Five: 1 Corinthians 13**—In his famous treatise on love, Paul, as the inheritor of the Jesus tradition, expresses his test for a religious community’s authenticity. Hint: It is *not* “every person for him- or herself.”

#### *Participants as Leaders in Designing Their Own Program:*

No matter which format you choose, be sure to invite participants throughout these sessions to help create their own program of learning and discussion by identifying the questions and concerns that arise from their reading. See the sessions in Part Two for ways to incorporate these questions into each session.

## **PROVIDING A COMFORTABLE SETTING**

Hold the program in a comfortable, well-lit setting, preferably with cushioned chairs arranged in a circle. Some discussions will take place in small groups of two to four people, so it is important to find a location that offers flexibility and space for small groups as well as for the larger group. You will need newsprint, markers, and adequate wall space or easels to display what has been written. Bring nametags for participants.

Your group will want to decide whether to schedule a break within each two-hour session. In any case, you might ask volunteers to provide refreshments or light snacks. If you offer this

program as a weekend workshop, be sure to consider how to handle breaks and mealtimes.

Do your best to hold the sessions in a room that is wheelchair-accessible. Make sure that the circle of chairs leaves enough space for those using mobility devices. When you promote the workshop, tell people that you will do your best to accommodate their accessibility needs (such as large-print materials) if they provide advance notice. However, if your space is not wheelchair-accessible, let people know. Offer to strategize solutions with them.

## **INVOLVING THE GROUP IN SETTING THE TONE**

The group should take responsibility for creating an environment that is welcoming and conducive to open dialogue. Remind the group of the importance of active listening, thoughtful responses, and mutual respect. Also note that occasional silences can be a good thing. Use people's own experiences as a way to ground the discussion when it threatens to become too abstract. Remind participants that newcomers may join the group at any time during the program; encourage them to take on the tasks of offering hospitality and bringing newcomers up to date with the program's focus and activities.

Some people have a tendency to be more vocal than others. If a few people clearly dominate the conversation, you might open a space for those who have not had a chance to speak to do so if they wish.

As a discussion leader, you will need to establish a balance between too much control and too little direction. It will be important to be responsive in your leadership and to draw people out, yet to keep the discussion on track. This program hopes to invite participants' positive affirmations of their own evolving understanding of the Bible, rather than just criticisms of those with whom they disagree.

## **PREPARING FOR THE FIRST SESSION**

For your own preparation, it is best if you can read all of *Understanding the Bible* before the program begins. If possible, read all of this discussion guide, too. At the very least, be sure to look ahead to the list of tasks under Preparation before each session.

Ask participants to read the first four chapters in Buehrens's *Understanding the Bible* before Session One: "Reasons," "Traditions," "Versions," and "Interpretations," in the section titled "Before We Begin." Encourage them to jot down any memories or reactions that come up in response to these readings. If a particular scriptural reference in these chapters interests them, invite them to look it up in the Bible, to read it in the context of surrounding verses, and to make a note of anything striking about the text or about their own reactions to it.

You might enlist help with each session's preparation from volunteers who promise to arrive early (as much as thirty to forty-five minutes early for the first session, less for subsequent sessions). Sharing the preparation tasks will foster a sense of community and joint ownership of the program.

Remind participants that they need to bring a Bible to each session (Buehrens offers some suggestions about translations in the chapter titled "Versions: Which Bible Should I Read?"), a copy of *Understanding the Bible*, a notebook or journal, and a pen or pencil.

## **EVALUATING THE PROGRAM**

Two evaluation forms are provided in the first pages of this guide. Participant Evaluation Forms should be distributed at the end of the final session so participants can give feedback to group leaders. (Note that Questions 7 and 8 on the form give leaders a chance to pose their own questions to participants.) Also, be sure to send Beacon Press your completed Leader Evaluation Form. We are striving to meet the program needs of UU congregations, and your continued feedback and suggestions will bring us a long way toward reaching our goal. We really want to hear from you!

# Part One: The Hebrew Bible

# Session One:

## As We Begin—Reasons, Traditions, Versions, and Interpretations

### MATERIALS

Newsprint, markers, masking tape; chalice, candle, matches; paper, pens, and pencils; nametags; 4 x 6 cards for Introduction activity; copies of Handouts 1, 2, and 3; roll of paper (or multiple newsprint sheets) for the “Biblical Timeline” activity; table on which to spread out resource materials, with sign-out sheet; (optional) portable CD or audiotape player and music (see suggestion under Musical Opening)

### GOALS FOR THIS SESSION

- ❖ To begin to build a sense of community among participants
- ❖ To create a visual aid, as a group, for understanding the historical context of the Bible
- ❖ To engage with a text from the Hebrew Bible

### PREPARATION

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *This list is long, but fear not! You are setting up lists and resources here that will stay with your group throughout the program, so only this first session requires extensive preparation time. If you have volunteers who promise to arrive forty-five minutes early to help, you should be able to fly through these tasks.*

- ❖ Review the first four chapters in *Understanding the Bible*, and read through the activities for this session. Adapt the session to fit the needs and desires of your group, as you understand them, and to fit your own interests and skills.
- ❖ Arrange chairs in a circle. Place the chalice where everyone can see it.
- ❖ Make copies of “Handout 1: Guiding Questions for Engaging with Biblical Texts,” “Handout 2: Program Outline and Suggested Homework,” and “Handout 3: Resources.”
- ❖ Set up a contact sheet on which participants can list their contact information.
- ❖ Prepare an introductory newsprint sheet that provides the name of the program and the dates and times of the sessions. On this sheet, draw an enlarged model of the 4 x 6 card that participants will fill out for the Introductions activity (see Activity 1). It should contain the following information:
  - ◆ Have participants write their full name in the middle of the card.
  - ◆ In the upper left corner, write “where you are now”—name one atti



tude or feeling about the Bible that they bring with them into the program.

- ◆ In the upper right corner, write “why you are here”—in a word or two, describe their motivation for joining this program (you might include on the example: “see *Understanding the Bible*, p. 8, for more ideas on motivations”).
  - ◆ In the lower left corner, write “where you come from”—write the names of the religious communities (denomination, faith) into which they were born.
  - ◆ In the lower right corner, write “what would surprise you”—imagine one outcome of the program (in attitude or information) that would particularly surprise them.
- 
- ❖ Prepare a newsprint sheet titled “Uses of the Bible for Good and for Ill.” Divide the sheet into two columns. Participants will generate items for this list in Activity 2 of this session, and they will add to it throughout the program.
  - ❖ Prepare a newsprint sheet titled “Open Questions” to record questions that require further research or thought. Post this sheet where everyone can see it. Such questions may come up at any time during the program. Participants can volunteer to research a question and then bring what they discover to the next session.
  - ❖ Using a series of newsprint sheets or a long roll of paper, create the beginnings of a “Biblical Timeline” by marking off centuries from 2000 B.C.E. to the present year (see Activity 4). Leave plenty of room for recording multiple events and names both above and below the line. Post the timeline around the room where it will be accessible for all participants.
  - ❖ Prepare a newsprint sheet titled “Guiding Questions” and list the following (see Activity 5):
    - ◆ Where did this story come from, and what did it mean to those who told it?
    - ◆ What words and phrases in this story change in different translations?
    - ◆ What metaphors are at work in this story?
    - ◆ For what purposes have interpreters used this story throughout history, and how can I read this story “against the grain”?
    - ◆ What does this story mean for me, for us, who are living today?
- A longer version of this list appears in Handout 1, but it is good to have the main questions up where everyone can see them.
- 
- ❖ Create a “library” for the program by collecting resource books and spreading them out on a table in the room where the sessions will be held. See “Handout 3: Resources” for a wide range of ideas. Your minister or congregation may have a library from which you can draw resources; be sure to find out which books may be checked out and which should be labeled “on reserve.” If you

have prints or books of art based on biblical themes, as well as tapes or CDs of music, add these to the table, too. Create a sign-out sheet so that participants may check out a resource, listing their name, telephone number, and e-mail address. Note that *resources are due back at the next session*. Place copies of the “Resources” handout on this table, along with a blank sheet titled “Additional Resources: Contributions from the Group.” Here participants can record the names of books, articles, websites, and works of art or music related to the Hebrew and Christian Bibles that they discover throughout the program.

**AS PARTICIPANTS ARRIVE:** *Ask for a volunteer to be the chalice lighter. Ask participants to sign in on the contact sheet and to fill out a nametag. Also pass out 4 x 6 index cards and point participants to the example on the first flipchart sheet.*

### **MUSICAL OPENING (OPTIONAL)**

**2 MINUTES**

Invite participants to enter into a time of quiet preparation for the beginning of your journey together. Play about two minutes of the following song of welcome (or other music of your choice): “Shalom Aleichem,” sung by the Brazilian performer Fortuna on the CD *A Jewish Odyssey* from Putumayo World Music.

### **CHALICE LIGHTING**

#### **OPENING WORDS: GENESIS 1:1–5 (JPS)**

**1 MINUTE**

When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness [God] called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day.

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *Please provide a moment of silence after the opening words in each session.*

### **WELCOME**

**5 MINUTES**

This is the time for welcoming participants and providing a brief introduction to the program. You might include the following:

- ❖ Thank folks for coming, with special thanks to any volunteers who helped you set up for the session. Let folks know that volunteers for future sessions will be appreciated. Introduce yourself and let the group know that you will be a “leader/learner” among them. Be sure to offer participants a way to reach you between sessions.

- ❖ Provide a brief “tour” of the room and the facilities: Point out the library of resources and the “Resources” handout, and invite participants to contribute to the library or to the “Additional Resources” list. Encourage them to think of art and music resources as well as books, articles, and Internet items. Point out the “Open Questions” newsprint sheet and explain its purpose. Make sure everyone knows where to find restrooms, water, a telephone, and other necessities.
- ❖ Circulate the contact sheet for those who have not yet signed in. Because each session is very full, ask participants to arrive *before* the starting time, if possible, so that the sessions can begin and end on time. This is one way to offer each other respect.
- ❖ *Program design:* The program follows the structure of *Understanding the Bible*, with each session covering about two chapters from the book. Participants will need a copy of the book, a Bible, a notebook or journal, and a pen or pencil for each session. Invite them to share these resources with those who don’t have them at this first session. Buehrens makes suggestions about translations of the Bible and annotated study Bibles in his chapter titled “Versions.” Each session allows participants to lift up the background and thematic information that Buehrens provides and to use this information to engage with texts from the Bible. At the end of this first session, participants will receive a handout showing the course outline and suggested homework. Emphasize that the program design is flexible; as the program goes on, the group will help determine how it wants to spend its time together.
- ❖ *Overall philosophy of the program:* In *Understanding the Bible*, John Buehrens invites us to bring not only our critical thinking but also our “imaginative compassion” both to the biblical texts themselves and to whatever prejudices or “baggage” that we bring to these texts. Throughout these sessions, we’ll be asking ourselves how we can both “think critically” *and* engage in “imaginative compassion” as we approach the biblical texts for fresh insights and new understandings.
- ❖ *Preview of this session:* We start with introductions, to help build a “community of seekers and learners.” Then we’ll do a quick exercise to get some of the “baggage” we bring with us about the Bible out on the table. We’ll create a “visual aid” to help us imagine the historical context of the Bible and to see how layered it is. And we’ll dive into one of the first and most famous “texts of terror” in Genesis to try our hand at understanding it anew.
- ❖ Ask if there are any burning questions before launching into the introductions.

## ACTIVITY 1: INTRODUCTIONS

**30–45 MINUTES**

*Purpose:* To build community; to illustrate how many different reasons there are for studying the Bible

Make sure that everyone has a 4 x 6 card, and go over the instructions for filling it out (see “Preparation” above). Look together at the paragraph on p. 8 in *Understanding the Bible* that

describes different motivations for embarking on this journey; invite volunteers to share reading the paragraph aloud. Participants might add to their own motivations from this information. Give them five minutes to complete their cards.

Now ask participants to pair up with someone they don't know or don't know well. Each person has five minutes to talk about him- or herself using the information on the card. The other person will listen intently to his or her partner for those five minutes without asking questions. Be sure to remind partners to switch speakers at the end of the first five minutes. Bring everyone back into the big group at the end of ten minutes. Then give each person one minute to introduce his or her partner to the group. Gently suggest that people be mindful of the time so that everyone will have a chance to be introduced. The size of your group will determine how long this activity will take.

At the end, honor the diversity in the room, invite everyone to keep in mind the range of goals and attitudes present, and thank everyone for such a good beginning.

## ACTIVITY 2: USES OF THE BIBLE FOR GOOD AND FOR ILL

10 MINUTES

*Purpose:* To illustrate how pervasive references to the Bible are in the wider culture; to name some of the “baggage” participants associate with the Bible

This quick activity marks just the beginning of a process that participants will continue throughout the program. Ask them to brainstorm ways in which they have seen or experienced the use of the Bible for “good” and for “ill.” Their introduction cards may already include some examples. In addition, politicians, members of the media, artists, religious people of all types, and many others frequently use language borrowed from the Bible, refer to biblical stories or laws, cite the Bible as an authority, or turn to it as a resource for spiritual growth. Name some specific examples of these uses. On which side of the line do these examples fall?

Questions such as these may arise:

- ❖ “What do we mean by ‘good uses?’” (Possibilities include: for justice seeking, community building, spiritual growth, intuitions of the holy, understanding of human nature, and more.)
- ❖ “What do we mean by ‘used for ill’ or ‘bad uses?’” (Examples include: for oppression, discrimination, misinformation, and more.)
- ❖ “Good or ill for whom?”
- ❖ “Who decides whether something is ‘for good’ or ‘for ill?’”

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *If these questions don't come up from participants, mention them yourself.*

These are all excellent questions; they underscore just how complex the study of the Bible can be, especially for “skeptics, seekers, and religious liberals.” Such overarching questions will be with us throughout the program. For this brief activity, encourage participants to take a stand from their own point of view, recognizing that their point of view may change. Explain that this list will remain posted throughout the program, and they can change or add to it at any time. It provides a visual reminder of how present the Bible is in the wider culture.

### ACTIVITY 3: COVENANT—GUIDELINES FOR EXPLORING TOGETHER

5 MINUTES

*Purpose:* To agree as a group to guidelines around communication and mutual respect

Because engaging with the Bible brings up a wide range of emotions and experiences, the group needs to create a set of ground rules for its time together. Ask a volunteer to record the group's suggested guidelines on newsprint. If certain rules that you find important are not mentioned, suggest them yourself. Common ground rules include:

- ❖ Maintain confidentiality—don't repeat personal stories outside of the group.
- ❖ Make personal ("I") statements—don't generalize or speak for others.
- ❖ Use inclusive language.
- ❖ Give full attention to the person who is speaking—avoid "side conversations" with your neighbors.
- ❖ Share the "air space"—keep your contributions short in order to allow everyone the chance to speak.
- ❖ Turn off pagers and cell phones during the program.

Once all suggestions have been recorded, check with the group to make sure that everyone is comfortable with the ground rules. Ask if everyone can "sign on." Post the "Covenant" where it can be easily seen, and be sure to post it for each session.

### ACTIVITY 4: CONTEXT—A BIBLICAL TIMELINE

20 MINUTES

*Purpose:* To create a visual representation of the multilayered historical context of the Bible

John Buehrens suggests (pp. 13–14) that we need to understand some of the larger context of the biblical stories if we want to understand the stories themselves. This means that to understand the Bible, we need to ask not just "What does this story mean to *me*?"—and not just "What does this story mean to *people I disagree with*?"—but also "Where did this story come from, and what did it mean to *those who first told it*?" Buehrens calls this approach looking at the stories "from the outside in." It can "help us appreciate that even those who first set down the stories in writing, [after] having heard or inherited them [from earlier storytellers], could not avoid adding something of themselves." In other words, they told the stories "in relation to their own contemporary set of concerns and meanings." To understand the Bible, we need to familiarize ourselves at least a little with those earlier contexts. But all those dates—both the dates for the events in the stories themselves and the dates for the composition of the different parts of the Bible—can easily become confusing. One way to keep them straight is to create a visual timeline. This activity helps participants begin to create such a timeline, to which they will add throughout the program.

Participants should work in teams of two, three, or four to fill in the timeline. Assign teams to specific time periods (say, a 200-year period from 799–600 B.C.E.). With one color of marker, the team should fill in, *below the line*, the *timing of the events covered by the biblical stories*. Using a different color, they should fill in, *above the line*, the *timing of the writing or composing of the parts of the Bible*, including information about the various authors or edi-

tors (J, P, E, D, and so on). Participants will find the information they need on pp. 15–22 and pp. 41–42 in *Understanding the Bible*. (A more complete chronology for the Christian Scriptures will be filled in later.)

Make sure that everyone has a chance to contribute. For example, one member of each team might act as “scribe” while others brainstorm the entries to be recorded. Assure participants that this activity is a little chaotic by intention, because the early history of the Hebrew Bible is itself more than a little chaotic. Remind them that the timeline is just a sketch; it doesn’t need to be “perfect.”

If questions come up that need further research, add them to the “Open Questions” list.

When the teams have completed their entries, invite participants to “tour the timeline.” Are there any changes or additions that need to be made? What do they notice about the relationships between the events themselves and when the actual writing or composing of the Bible took place?

*NOTE TO LEADERS: Here is an example of how this activity works:*

*The team that is covering the 700s and 600s B.C.E. would fill in the following:*

*Below the line:*

- ❖ 760–690—Amos and Hosea prophesying in Israel; Isaiah and Micah in Judah
- ❖ 722—Fall of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) to Assyria
- ❖ 622—King Josiah reigns in south (Judah); scrolls for “Book of the Law” found

*Above the line:*

- ❖ 700s until 722—E (Elohim) tradition continues in north; J (Yahwist) tradition continues in south
- ❖ 722—J and E traditions come together
- ❖ after 622—a D editor puts together the book of Deuteronomy

*Make sure you are familiar with the dates and events listed in “Traditions” before this session begins; then you can circulate among the teams and assist anyone who gets stuck. Ensure that the teams include all members’ input, especially if some members have limited mobility.*

## **ACTIVITY 5: ENGAGING WITH THE TEXT—GENESIS 3:1–24**

**30 MINUTES**

*Purpose: To give participants a chance to dive into the Hebrew Bible and engage with a familiar story in a new way*

Read through the “Guiding Questions” newsprint sheet prepared ahead of time. (You can pass out “Handout 1: Guiding Questions for Engaging with Biblical Texts” now or wait until the end of the session.) As participants engage with a biblical text, they can use this list of questions, along with the timeline, the list of “Uses of the Bible for Good and for Ill,” and their own imagination, experience, and analysis to understand the story anew. For this activity, encourage participants to pick and choose among these questions and lists according to what “tempts” them most!

Ask for volunteers to read aloud Genesis 3:1–24. Then invite participants to form groups of three or four, ensuring that there are at least two Bibles available in each group. Ask each group to choose one member who will report back to the larger group. They will have fifteen minutes to discuss the passage in light of the guiding questions, their own history with the passage, their current responses to it, and the other resources. Encourage them to read “against the grain” and to look for surprises.

At the end of fifteen minutes, reassemble the large group and ask for each group’s reporter to share highlights of their discussion. When all have spoken, open up the discussion to the large group. You might add one or more of these questions (or others of your own) to the discussion, if participants do not bring them up:

- ❖ Some folks have called this a “text of terror.” Why do you think this is so? Do you agree?
- ❖ This text has been called the story of “the Fall” by later Christian theologians. How might the story also be considered a “rise”? What is gained and what is lost by each of the characters in this story? Do the losses or the gains weigh more heavily with you?
- ❖ Who, if anyone or anything, is “to blame” in this story? Who has the power to choose how he, she, or it acts?
- ❖ The fourth-century Christian theologian Augustine and others used this story to create the concept of “original sin.” Where does the word *sin* appear in this story? (It doesn’t. Its first appearance in the Bible is in Genesis 4:7.) Do you think Adam’s and Eve’s actions constitute a “sin”?
- ❖ What is the *theology* of this story? In other words, what is God’s character or persona in this story? What images of God does the story create for you? What kind of God, for example, needs to ask, “Where are you?” of human beings? What kind of God inflicts the punishments of Genesis 3:14–19? What kind of God sews clothes for humans? What might the authors be trying to explain to their contemporaries with these images of God?

Invite participants to add to the “Guiding Questions” list, based on these conversations.

## LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

10 MINUTES

Ask the group to take a moment to think back over all they have accomplished in this session. Then pass out the handouts. Point out the “suggested homework” for the next session:

- ❖ Read “Creations” and “Generations” in *Understanding the Bible*. Notice any additions that need to be made to the “Biblical Timeline.” If you have time, look up any biblical passages that intrigue you.
- ❖ Notice references to the Bible in what you read, hear, or see (TV, movies, newspapers, novels, and more) between now and the next session. Bring these in to add to the list of “Uses of the Bible.”

Explain that the list of resources is just “for their own information and enjoyment”; there is no “required reading” on this list.

Ask for volunteers to research any “Open Questions” and bring what they find to the next

session.

Leave some time for any burning questions that can't wait until the next session.

Finally, remind folks to arrive early for the next session, and thank them for their contributions. Then offer the Closing Words and extinguish the chalice.

## **CLOSING WORDS**

**1 MINUTE**

From *Singing the Living Tradition*, #421, an adaptation of Psalm 98:

O sing a new song to the Eternal.  
Shout praise, all earth, break into music and song!  
Praise the Eternal with the lyre, with lyre and song.  
Let the sea and all within it thunder praise,  
the world and its inhabitants,  
let rivers clap their hands,  
let mountains sing in chorus.  
O sing a new song to the Eternal!



# Handout 1: Guiding Questions for Engaging with Biblical Texts

(Drawn from *Understanding the Bible*, by John Buehrens)

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT:**

1. Where did this story come from, and what did it mean to those who told it?
  - ♦ What historical, social, political, or personal situation might have given rise to this story?
  - ♦ What do the historical notes in the Bible tell us about understanding the background of this passage?
  - ♦ What is the “life question” that the author or editor of this story is trying to answer?

## **LANGUAGE AND FORM:**

2. How does the text of this story change in different translations?
  - ♦ What do differences in translations tell us about the possible meanings of this passage?
3. What kind of story is this?
  - ♦ Is it a tragedy? A farce? A divine or human comedy? Or something more complex?
4. What metaphors are at work in this story?

## **INTERPRETATION:**

5. For what purposes has this story been used by interpreters throughout history?
6. How can I read this story “against the grain”—with a strategy of suspicion, of imagination, and of reconstruction? In other words, how can I take into account who or what might have been left out or distorted—by the original writers and by later interpreters?

## **PERSONAL APPLICATION:**

7. What does this story mean for me, for us, who are living today? What challenging questions does it pose for the living of my life?

## Handout 2: Program Outline and Suggested Homework for *Understanding the Bible*, by John Buehrens

*Please bring to each session: a copy of Understanding the Bible, a Bible, a notebook or journal, and a pen or pencil.*

### Part One: The Hebrew Bible

*Before Session One:* Read “Reasons,” “Traditions,” “Versions,” and “Interpretations” in *Understanding the Bible*.

#### **SESSION I: AS WE BEGIN—REASONS, TRADITIONS, VERSIONS, AND INTERPRETATIONS**

*Suggested Homework for Session Two:*

- ❖ Read “Creations” and “Generations” in *Understanding the Bible*. Notice any additions that need to be made to the “Biblical Timeline.” If you have time, look up any biblical passages that intrigue you.
- ❖ Notice references to the Bible in what you read, hear, or see (TV, movies, newspapers, novels, and more) between now and the next session. Bring these in to add to the list of “Uses of the Bible.”

#### **SESSION II: CREATIONS AND GENERATIONS—GENESIS**

*Suggested Homework for Session Three:*

- ❖ Read “Liberations” and “Institutions” in *Understanding the Bible*. Notice any additions that need to be made to the “Biblical Timeline.” If you have time, look up any biblical passages that intrigue you.
- ❖ If you like, continue your “Creation project” and bring the results to a later session.
- ❖ Notice references to the Bible in what you read, hear, or see (TV, movies, newspapers, novels, and more) between now and the next session. Bring these in to add to the list of “Uses of the Bible.”

#### **SESSION III: LIBERATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS—EXODUS TO 2 KINGS**

*Suggested Homework for Session Four:*

- ❖ Read “Exaltations” and “Frustrations” in *Understanding the Bible*. Notice any additions that need to be made to the “Biblical Timeline.”
- ❖ Choose one psalm that you might share with the group. You can choose a whole psalm or select only the verses that most appeal to you.
- ❖ If you like, experiment with the meditation practice introduced in Activity 2 of Session Three and make a note of how it feels and of what it offers.
- ❖ Notice references to the Bible in what you read, hear, or see (TV, movies, news-

papers, novels, and more) between now and the next session. Bring these in to add to the list of “Uses of the Bible.”

#### **SESSION IV: EXALTATIONS AND FRUSTRATIONS—PSALMS, THE WISDOM LITERATURE, AND JOB**

*Suggested Homework for Session Five:*

- ❖ Read “Redemptions” and “Expectations” in *Understanding the Bible*. Notice any additions that need to be made to the “Biblical Timeline.” If you have time, look up any biblical passages that intrigue you.
- ❖ Notice references to the Bible in what you read, hear, or see (TV, movies, newspapers, novels, and more) between now and the next session. Bring these in to add to the list of “Uses of the Bible.”

#### **SESSION V: REDEMPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS—THE PROPHETS**

### Part Two: The Christian Scriptures

*Before Session Six:*

- ❖ Read “Proclamations” and “Passions” in *Understanding the Bible*. Notice any additions that need to be made to the “Biblical Timeline.” If you have time, look up any biblical passages that intrigue you.

#### **SESSION VI: PROCLAMATIONS AND PASSIONS (PART ONE)—THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS**

*Suggested Homework for Session Seven:*

- ❖ Review pp. 156–59 in “Passions” and read “Resurrections” in *Understanding the Bible*. Notice any additions that need to be made to the “Biblical Timeline.” If you have time, look up the Easter stories in the synoptic Gospels.
- ❖ Notice references to the Bible in what you read, hear, or see (TV, movies, newspapers, novels, and more) between now and the next session. Bring these in to add to the list of “Uses of the Bible.”

#### **SESSION VII: PASSIONS (PART TWO) AND RESURRECTIONS—THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS**

*Suggested Homework for Session Eight:*

- ❖ Read “Incarnations” and “Salvations” in *Understanding the Bible*. Notice any additions that need to be made to the “Biblical Timeline.”
- ❖ If you have time, read the entire letter to the Galatians (it is short).
- ❖ Notice references to the Bible in what you read, hear, or see (TV, movies, newspapers, novels, and more) between now and the next session. Bring these in to

add to the list of “Uses of the Bible.”

### **SESSION VIII: INCARNATIONS AND SALVATIONS—THE GOSPEL OF JOHN AND THE LETTERS OF PAUL**

*Suggested Homework for Session Nine:*

- ❖ Read “Revelations” in *Understanding the Bible*. Notice any additions that need to be made to the “Biblical Timeline.” If you have time, look up any biblical passages that intrigue you.
- ❖ Notice references to the Bible in what you read, hear, or see (TV, movies, newspapers, novels, and more) between now and the next session. Bring these in to add to the list of “Uses of the Bible.”

### **SESSION IX: REVELATIONS—THE JOURNEY CONTINUES . . .**

## Handout 3: Resources

### STUDY BIBLES

*New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha* (NRSV)  
*Jewish Study Bible* (JPS)  
*Oxford Study Bible* (REB)  
*Catholic Study Bible* (NAB)

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## WEBSITES

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com>

<http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com>

<http://www.gnosis.org>

Contains the Nag Hammadi Library and other Gnostic documents; for example: at <http://www.gnosis.org/library/marygosp.htm>, you will find the Gospel of Mary.

<http://itanakh.org/index.htm>

<http://www.textweek.com>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion>

Offers a rich resource of information related to the PBS television series *From Jesus to Christ*.



# Session Two: Creations and Generations—Genesis

## MATERIALS

Newsprint, markers, masking tape; chalice, candle, matches; crayons, colored pencils or pens, newsprint sheets cut into fourths on which to write or draw (for Activity 1); paper, pens, and pencils; nametags; 4 x 6 cards (for newcomers); newsprint lists and “Biblical Timeline” from Session One; table on which to spread out resource materials, with sign-out sheet; (optional) *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnbooks

## GOALS FOR THIS SESSION:

- ❖ To welcome newcomers into the community of participants
- ❖ To engage creatively with the Creation story
- ❖ To identify themes that run throughout the biblical stories and wrestle with related texts
- ❖ To consider issues of terminology and the power of language

## PREPARATION:

- ❖ Review “Creations” and Generations” in *Understanding the Bible*, and read through the activities for this session. Adapt the session to fit the needs and desires of your group and to fit your own interests and skills. Review the “Welcome” section in Session One and decide which parts of it you may want to repeat.
- ❖ Make additional copies of the handouts for any newcomers to the program.
- ❖ Make copies of the unison Opening Words, or have enough *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnbooks on hand.
- ❖ Put out the participant contact sheet and 4 x 6 cards for newcomers.
- ❖ Arrange chairs in a circle. Place the chalice where everyone can see it.
- ❖ Post the “Biblical Timeline,” the group’s “Covenant,” and the newsprint sheets titled “Uses of the Bible for Good and for Ill,” “Guiding Questions,” and “Open Questions.”
- ❖ Prepare a newsprint sheet titled “Themes in the Bible” (see Activity 2).
- ❖ Write down each of the following chapter-and-verse citations on a separate slip of paper (see Activity 3):
  - ◆ Genesis 4:1–16 (Cain and Abel)
  - ◆ Genesis 9:20–27 (The Curse of Ham)
  - ◆ Genesis 16:6–14 (Hagar)
  - ◆ Genesis 21:9–20 (Hagar and Ishmael)
  - ◆ Genesis 22:1–14 (Abraham and Isaac, the Akedah)

- ♦ Genesis 32:24–32 (Jacob Wrestling)

If your group is very large, make two copies of each citation, or add other Genesis stories of your own choosing. Fold up these slips and place them in a bowl. In addition, *set aside* several slips that read: “Genesis 34 (Dinah).”

- ❖ Set up the “library” of resource books, art, and music, along with the sign-out sheet. Note that *resources that are checked out are due back at the next session*. Label as “on reserve” those resources that are not available to be checked out. Place copies of “Handout 3: Resources” and the sheet titled “Additional Resources: Contributions from the Group” on this table.

**AS PARTICIPANTS ARRIVE:** *Ask for a volunteer to be the chalice lighter. Ask all participants to fill out a nametag. Ask newcomers to the group to sign in on the contact sheet, and give them 4 x 6 index cards. Show them the example on the first flipchart sheet and walk them through filling out the card. Give them copies of the handouts from the previous session.*

### MUSICAL OPENING (OPTIONAL)

**3 MINUTES**

Invite participants to gather in the circle, standing as they are willing and able, and sing hymn #203, “All Creatures of the Earth and Sky” from *Singing the Living Tradition* (the Unitarian Universalist gray hymnal).

### CHALICE LIGHTING

### OPENING WORDS

**1 MINUTE**

Invite participants to read together #417, “For the Beauty of the Earth,” by Barbara J. Pescan, in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

For the beauty of the earth,  
 this spinning blue green ball, yes!  
 Gaia, mother of everything  
 we walk gently across your back  
 to come together again  
 in this place  
 to remember how we can live  
 to remember who we are  
 to create how we will be.  
 Gaia, our home,  
 the lap in which we live—  
 welcome us.

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *Please provide a moment of silence after the opening words in each session.*

## WELCOME

2 MINUTES

This is the time for welcoming participants and for providing a brief introduction to this session. If there are newcomers, you will want to include some of the information from the Welcome in Session One.

*Preview of this session:* We will look at the two Creation stories in Genesis and try our hand at a little creativity of our own. Then we will identify some of the themes that run throughout the biblical stories, and look at several biblical passages to see how these themes help us understand them. Finally, we will consider briefly some issues about terminology and think about the power of the language we use.

Remind participants of the “Covenant” that they formed in the last session, and point out the other ongoing lists for the newcomers. Let folks know that they can make additions to these lists at any time.

## CHECK-IN

20 MINUTES

Invite participants to check in by allowing each person in the circle to speak for about one minute. Ask returning participants to share what they have witnessed or discovered since the last session regarding the uses of the Bible in contemporary life (this is part of the “suggested homework” for each session). Those who volunteered to research an “open question” may provide their answers or discoveries at this time. Invite newcomers to summarize the information they have recorded on their 4 x 6 cards. Gently suggest that people be mindful of the time so that everyone may have a chance to speak. The size of your group will determine how long check-in will take.

## ACTIVITY 1: ENGAGING WITH THE TEXT—CREATION

40 MINUTES

*Purpose:* To become familiar with the Creation stories and to empathize (creatively) with their authors

Understanding the Bible involves looking closely at the many layers and contradictions embedded in the texts. The editors of Genesis placed side by side two very different and conflicting stories of Creation. Each story adapts elements from previous ancient Near Eastern literature and oral traditions that the authors must have known well. The first story (Genesis 1:1–2:3)—the great calm hymn compiled by the Priestly (P) source—draws on *Enuma elish*, a dramatic Babylonian myth in which the storm god Marduk conquers the goddess of the sea Tiamat and from her body creates the heavens and earth. Both versions of this story speak to the themes of order and chaos that John Buehrens highlights in *Understanding the Bible*. The Adam and Eve story (Genesis 2:4–25), compiled by the Yahwist (J) source, borrows from another Babylonian epic, *Gilgamesh*, part of which strives to explain why we humans must die. But the ways in which the P and J authors have adapted these stories reveal a good deal about the practical and theological concerns of their times.

Spend about ten minutes as a group reviewing the two Creation stories: Genesis 1:1–2:3, “Creation in seven days” (as the *Jewish Study Bible* puts it), and Genesis 2:4–25, “The creation of Adam and Eve.” Ask participants to point out the differences between the two versions.

Notice the order of events in each story. Look for conflicting information. Ask those who have study Bibles to read aloud any notes that particularly interest them. (These notes may mention the different translations and meanings of the very first line, for example.) What life questions are the authors trying to answer with these stories? What aspects of creation are the authors trying to explain? Scholars have spent a lifetime studying these issues; in the ten minutes allotted here, participants are just looking for what jumps out at them.

Next, make available the drawing and writing supplies, and ask participants to begin to create their own creation myth. What would they want to include? What puzzling, mysterious, joyful, or frustrating things about life would they want to try to explain? Encourage them to have fun with this activity: make a list, draw a picture, write a story; be silly, be serious, or both! They are not striving to produce a “finished product”! They have fifteen minutes to make a start on their “rough sketch” for Creation.

Reconvene the large group and invite participants to share their work or their ideas for the remaining fifteen minutes of the activity. What has this activity shown them about the possible motivations and choices of the authors of the Genesis Creation stories? At the end, encourage participants to continue their “play” (or their “work”) with this project and bring it back to a later session.

## ACTIVITY 2: THEMES IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

5 MINUTES

*Purpose:* To highlight biblical themes so that they can be used in engaging with the texts

Buehrens identifies many biblical themes throughout *Understanding the Bible*; the chapters on “Creations” and “Generations” are particularly rich in pointing out these themes. Ask for a volunteer to serve as “speed-scribe” while participants call out as many themes as they can find in these chapters or as they can recall from the book of Genesis. This is an ongoing list, so again participants are just making a beginning as they identify these themes.

NOTE TO LEADERS: *Some of these themes include:*

- ❖ *Goodness of the earth vs. the harm we humans can cause*
- ❖ *Order and chaos*
- ❖ *Order and freedom*
- ❖ *History as a developing story, not as a cycle of inevitability*
- ❖ *God learns and changes*
- ❖ *God as both a judge and a protector*
- ❖ *God is encountered anew in every generation*
- ❖ *Substitutions*
- ❖ *Infertility, then birth when parents are old*
- ❖ *First-born children*
- ❖ *Dreams*

### ACTIVITY 3: ENGAGING WITH THE TEXT—THEMATIC STORIES

40 MINUTES

*Purpose:* To apply the work that participants did in the previous activity to passages from the rest of Genesis

Begin by asking if any participants have read Anita Diamant’s novel *The Red Tent*. Ask these participants to form a small group. If there are six or more people who have read the novel, create several small groups of three or four each. These groups will take up the story of Dinah, Genesis 34; give them the slip you set aside during “Preparation.”

Ask the rest of the participants to form groups of three or four. Ask each group to pull one slip of paper from the bowl of citations.

Each group should appoint a “reporter,” then read its biblical passage together and make a note of the themes that appear in the story. How do these themes influence the way participants read the story? *Why* do these themes appear here? Encourage participants to imagine or guess. What other biblical themes appear in their story, and why? Then ask the groups to pick at least one of the “Guiding Questions” from the list that is posted or from Handout 1, and apply this question to the story, too. What difference does this make in the way they read the story? They have twenty minutes to work together.

Reconvene the large group and ask the reporters to summarize their passage and to share one or two highlights from the discussion in their small group. Make additions to the list of “Themes in the Bible.” Ask participants what else they would have considered about the text if they had had more time. What emerged in their understanding of the text as they engaged with it “thematically”? What surprised them, what intrigued them? How might this activity influence their reading of other biblical passages?

### ACTIVITY 4: THE POWER OF LANGUAGE—DEFINING OUR TERMS

20 MINUTES

*Purpose:* To highlight terms and definitions from Understanding the Bible; to think about the social and political import of certain phrases and terminology

Pass out copies of “Handout 4: Terminology and Definitions.” Explain that just as the Bible and its stories can be (and have been) used for good or for ill, so too can the words and language we use *about* the Bible either cause harm or help build bridges and encourage understanding. The words we use matter; they can convey inclusion or exclusion, respect for others or disregard. Invite discussion of the items on the list, especially those that involve a choice about language.

Then ask participants to take responsibility for keeping this list up to date. When they glean information about terminology from the reading or other sources, they should add it to their handout and share it with the group. Again, you are a “community of seekers and learners.” This is a good time for folks to make additions to other ongoing lists, if they have not yet had a chance to do so.

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *Issues of terminology often spark passionate discussion among skeptics, seekers, and religious liberals. Allow participants to express their thoughts and feelings during this activity—including a discussion of the relative value of “politically correct” lan-*

guage (if this comes up)—but keep the conversation moving and ensure that no one voice dominates the discussion. Because of time constraints, you may want to invite participants to place additional questions on the “Open Questions” list.

## **LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD**

**5 MINUTES**

Ask the group to take a moment to think back over all they have accomplished in this session. Point out the “suggested homework” for the next session:

- ❖ Read “Liberations” and “Institutions” in *Understanding the Bible*. Notice any additions that need to be made to the “Biblical Timeline.” If you have time, look up any biblical passages that intrigue you.
- ❖ If you like, continue your “Creation project” and bring the results to a later session.
- ❖ Notice references to the Bible in what you read, hear, or see (TV, movies, newspapers, novels, and more) between now and the next session. Bring these in to add to the list of “Uses of the Bible.”

Ask for volunteers to research any “Open Questions” and bring what they find to the next session.

Leave some time for any burning questions that can’t wait until the next session.

Finally, remind folks to arrive early for the next session, and thank them for their contributions. Then offer the Closing Words and extinguish the chalice.

## **CLOSING WORDS**

**1 MINUTE**

From *Singing the Living Tradition*, #422, Genesis 28:16–17, in which Jacob awakes from a dream and says:

Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it.  
How awesome is this place!  
This is none other than the house of God,  
And this is the gate of heaven.

## Handout 4: Terminology and Definitions

- ❖ ta Biblia: the books—The Bible is not just “one book” but more like a library of books from many authors and editors working in different eras.
- ❖ Hebrew Bible or Tanakh—These terms are now greatly preferred among liberal religious people and scholars of many faiths over the term “Old Testament.” The “Old Testament” implies that the “New Testament” (that is, the books added to create the Christian Bible) supersedes and is superior to the Old.
  - ◆ Tanakh is the Hebrew acronym for the three sections of the Hebrew Bible:
    - ◆ T for Torah (“teachings, instruction”), also called the Pentateuch or the Five Books of Moses
    - ◆ N for Nevi’im (the “prophets”)
    - ◆ K for Ketuvim (the “writings”)
- ❖ Christian Bible or Christian Scriptures—These terms are now greatly preferred among liberal religious people and scholars of many faiths over the term “New Testament.” The Christian Bible includes the books of the Tanakh, though they are placed in a different order, and it sometimes includes the books called the Apocrypha.
- ❖ Apocrypha: the “hidden” books—Jewish sacred writings that appeared originally in Greek, these books are included as part of the “Hebrew Bible” by Catholic and Orthodox Christians. The rabbis assembling the Tanakh, as well as the early Protestant reformers, set these books aside.
- ❖ B.C.E.: before the Common Era, and C.E.: Common Era—These terms are now greatly preferred over “B.C.” (before Christ) and “A.D.” (*anno Domini*, “the Year of the Lord”) because the latter two terms assume a Christian perspective.
- ❖ Names for God: YHWH, God, Adonai, Lord, and so on—YHWH is frequently spelled out and pronounced by non-Jewish authors and speakers, but many scholars appeal to the Jewish tradition in which this “name” is *not* pronounced. In *Listen to Her Voice: Women of the Hebrew Bible* (see the “Resources” handout), Miki Raver sums up this history:

Known as the Tetragrammaton, YHVH [an alternative transliteration] is a word without gender. It isn’t a noun. It is the dynamic form of the verb “to be.” . . . Traditional Judaism forbids the articulation of YHVH; in ancient times, YHVH was only pronounced by the High Priest, alone in the Holy of Holies . . . on Yom Kippur. Today, the actual pronunciation has been lost.

In the Hebrew Bible, YHWH is usually translated “Lord”; in many Jewish synagogues, the Greek word *Adonai* is substituted whenever the Tetragrammaton appears. Invite participants to decide which names for God

they feel comfortable using.

- ❖ idolatry: confusing the part for the whole
- ❖ adam: man, humankind; adamah: from the dust
- ❖ midrash, midrashim (pl.): “interpretations or investigations of one biblical text in relation to another text or story. Sometimes imaginative stories are created in *midrashim* to reinterpret or make sense of a tradition in light of new understandings or realities” (from *Understanding the Bible*, p. 35).



# Session Three:

## Liberations and Institutions—Exodus to 2 Kings

### MATERIALS:

Newsprint, markers, masking tape; chalice, candle, matches; paper, pens, and pencils; nametags; newsprint lists from Session One; “Biblical Timeline”; table on which to spread out resource materials with sign-out sheet; (optional) *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnbooks

### GOALS FOR THIS SESSION:

- ❖ To look closely at the defining story of the Exodus
- ❖ To provide a moment of quiet in the midst of this gallop through the historical books of the Hebrew Bible
- ❖ To apply a “prophetic” perspective to religious institutions today

### PREPARATION:

- ❖ Review “Liberations” and “Institutions” in *Understanding the Bible*, and read through the activities for this session. Adapt to fit the needs and desires of your group and to fit your own interests and skills. Review the Welcome section in Session One and decide which parts of it you may want to repeat for newcomers.
- ❖ Make copies of the Opening and Closing Words so that they may be read responsively by participants.
- ❖ Put out the participant contact sheet.
- ❖ Arrange chairs in a circle. Place the chalice where everyone can see it.
- ❖ Post the following items: the “Biblical Timeline”; the group’s “Covenant”; the newsprint sheets labeled “Uses of the Bible for Good and for Ill,” “Guiding Questions,” “Themes in the Bible,” and “Open Questions.”
- ❖ Set up the “library” of resource books, art, and music, along with the sign-out sheet. Note that *resources that are checked out are due back at the next session*. Label as “on reserve” those resources that are not available to be checked out. Place copies of “Handout 3: Resources” and the sheet titled “Additional Resources: Contributions from the Group” on this table.

**AS PARTICIPANTS ARRIVE:** Ask for a volunteer to be the *chalice lighter*. Ask all participants to fill out a *nametag*. Ask *newcomers to the group* to sign in on the *contact sheet*. Give them copies of the handouts.

**MUSICAL OPENING (OPTIONAL)****3 MINUTES**

Invite participants to gather in the circle, standing as they are willing and able, and sing hymn #104, “When Israel Was in Egypt Land,” from *Singing the Living Tradition* (the Unitarian Universalist gray hymnal).

**OPENING WORDS: PSALM 24 (JPS)****2 MINUTES**

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *The Jewish Publication Society’s translation of Psalm 24 does not use inclusive language, but I have chosen it over the NRSV for certain words and rhythms. If it comes up, a good answer to the question “What does Selah mean?” can be found in the Jewish Study Bible in the notes to Psalm 3.*

Divide participants into Group 1 and Group 2. Ask the two groups to stand (as they are willing and able) and face each other. Invite participants to listen for the echoes of the stories of Creation, the Exodus, and King David as they recite this psalm.

**Leader:** Psalm 24. Of David. A liturgy for pilgrims entering the Temple.

**All:** The earth is the Lord’s and all that it holds  
the world and its inhabitants.  
For He founded it upon the ocean,  
set it on the nether-streams.

**Group 1:** Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord?  
Who may stand in His holy place?

**Group 2:** He who has clean hands and a pure heart,  
who has not taken a false oath by My life  
or sworn deceitfully.  
He shall carry away a blessing from the Lord,  
a just reward from God, his deliverer.  
Such is the circle of those who turn to Him,  
Jacob, who seek Your presence.

**Leader:** *Selah.* The Ark of God enters the Temple!

**All:** O gates, lift up your heads!  
Up high, you everlasting doors,  
so the King of glory may come in!

**Group 2:** Who is the King of glory?

**Group 1:** The Lord, mighty and valiant,  
the Lord, valiant in battle.

**All:** O gates, lift up your heads!  
Lift them up, you everlasting doors,  
so the King of glory may come in!

**Group 1:** Who is the King of glory?

**All:** The Lord of hosts,  
He is the King of glory!

**Leader:** *Selah!*

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *Please provide a moment of silence after the opening words in each session.*

## **WELCOME**

**2 MINUTES**

This is the time for welcoming participants and for providing a brief introduction to this session. If there are newcomers, you will want to include some of the information from the Welcome in Session One.

*Preview of this session:* In the two chapters we have read for this session, author John Buehrens gallops over a lot of biblical ground, covering great swaths of Hebrew history. In this session’s activities, we will take a closer look first at the Exodus story and then at the tensions between the institutions of the monarchy—the “establishment”—in Israel and Judah, on the one hand, and the early prophets, on the other. In all these stories, there is a pull between order, stability, the status quo, accommodation . . . and chaos, change, upheaval, liberation. How do we understand these themes today? In the midst of these big topics, we will take a moment to pay attention to our own “still small voice.”

Remind participants of their “Covenant,” and point out the ongoing lists for the newcomers. Let folks know that they can make additions to these lists at any time.

## **CHECK-IN**

**20 MINUTES**

Invite participants to check in by allowing each person in the circle to speak for about one minute. Ask newcomers to introduce themselves and speak for a moment about what brings them to this program. Returning participants might share what they have witnessed or discovered since the last session regarding the uses of the Bible in contemporary life (this is part of the “suggested homework” for each session). If anyone thought further—or wrote, or drew—about their Creation stories (see Activity 1 in Session Two), he or she may want to offer these stories to the community now. Those who volunteered to research an “open question” may provide their answers or discoveries at this time. Gently suggest that people be mindful of the time so that everyone may have a chance to speak. The size of your group will determine how long check-in will take.

## ACTIVITY 1: ENGAGING WITH THE TEXT—THE EXODUS

45 MINUTES

*Purpose:* To become more familiar with the story of the Exodus; to experience the ways in which the Exodus has served and may still serve as a metaphor for individuals and for groups

Begin this activity by asking participants to make additions to the “Biblical Timeline” that they have picked up from “Liberations” in *Understanding the Bible* (see pp. 64, 66, and 67, for example). Remind them to notice what goes *above* the line (the timing of the composition of parts of the Bible, along with any information about authors or editors) and what goes *below* the line (the timing of the events that biblical stories describe). Be sure to highlight the “era of the Exodus” on the timeline, and then point to where the J, E, and P editors are working, for they are the recorders of this story.

Reading aloud the following passages will allow participants to get the sound of one key moment of the Exodus in their ears. Before they read each section, you might offer the brief description included here, adapted from the *Jewish Study Bible* (see “Handout 3: Resources”). Ask for volunteers to read, and invite participants to listen to these passages as a *story*. Imagine the earliest hearers of the story, especially those who were living in exile.

### *The Liberation:*

- ❖ *Exodus 14:10–31:* The first “murmuring” of the Israelites and the parting of the Red Sea. Note that this passage is composed of pieces from the J, E, and P sources, and that the pattern here of the Israelites’ grumbling, followed by a miracle in answer to their need, is repeated often in the story of their wanderings in the wilderness.
- ❖ *Exodus 15:1–3, 13–18:* The Israelites’ song. This is one of the oldest pieces of verse in the Bible.
- ❖ *Exodus 15:20–21:* Miriam’s song. Miriam, who was responsible for saving Moses in his infancy (*Exodus 2:1–9*), is shown here as a prophet and leader among the Israelites.

Buehrens points out (p. 63) that the Exodus, “like all stories, . . . has a beginning (Egypt), a middle (wilderness), and an end (entry into the Promised Land).” Political scientist Michael Walzer sums up “the enduring lessons of Exodus” in this way:

- ❖ wherever you live, it is probably Egypt
- ❖ there is a better place, a world more fair, full of promise and hope
- ❖ the way to it is through the wilderness. There is no other way to get from here to there except by the hard way, being tested as we go (p. 71)

Ask participants to form groups of three or four and to appoint a reporter for their group. Invite them to take up one of the following questions for the next fifteen minutes. Individual members of the group can choose different questions to answer, if they like.

- ❖ What did these metaphors (Egypt, Wilderness, Promised Land) mean for the early hearers of the Exodus story? What do they mean to you today? Do you have an Exodus story in your life?
- ❖ What events in United States history echo with the Exodus story? (Examples

might include the immigrant experience, the slave era, and more.) In what ways (if any) might the metaphors of the Exodus apply to life in this country today?

- ❖ How might the metaphor of the Exodus apply to your church, congregation, or community group?

Reconvene the large group and ask the reporters to summarize their group's discussion. Ask participants: Has this activity made the Exodus story more vivid or powerful for you, and if so, how?

## ACTIVITY 2: THE STILL SMALL VOICE

10 MINUTES

*Purpose:* To experience a moment of peace and quiet in the midst of many words; to share (perhaps) an experience with one of the biblical prophets, as participants practice listening for the “still small voice”

This activity offers an experience of the spiritual practice of *lectio divina* (holy reading) in which the meditator allows a word, phrase, or passage to open a space for deep inner listening.

Invite participants into a brief time of meditation. Ask them to relax and sit comfortably, closing their eyes if they like.

Remind participants that in the passage you are about to read, the prophet Elijah has had to flee for his life, traveling into the wilderness, walking for forty days and forty nights up to the “mountain of God at Horeb,” and hiding there in a cave. Then Elijah hears this:

“Come out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.”

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire” an almost inaudible sound . . . a soft murmuring . . . a sound of sheer silence . . . (1 Kings 19:11–12, adapted from the NRSV and JPS translations).

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *As you read this passage aloud, be sure to honor whatever decision your group made in Activity 4 of Session Two about the name for God (that is, “Lord,” “Adonai,” “God” . . . ). When you have finished the reading, pause for a moment. Then:*

Ask participants, “What do you hear when you sit quietly, open to receiving some new insight or gift? What do you hear?”

*Pause for about a minute. Then:*

Remind participants: “There is one thing that every prophet ultimately is sure of, and that is the *hesed*, the steadfast love, of God. What is the source of *hesed* for you? What is the source of steadfast love?”

*Pause for about two minutes. Then:*

Ask participants to rejoin the group at their own pace. Give them a minute or two to write in their journals. Invite them to continue to experiment with such forms of meditation or *lectio divina* as the program continues.

**ACTIVITY 3: PROPHECY AND LIBERAL RELIGION  
—ACCOMMODATION OR LIBERATION?**

**30 MINUTES**

*Purpose:* To lift up the tensions between the institution of a church, on the one hand, and its call to prophecy, on the other

Begin this activity by asking participants to make additions to the “Biblical Timeline” that they have picked up from “Institutions” in *Understanding the Bible* (see p. 81, for example). Highlight the part of the timeline related to the era of the prophets and kings of Israel and Judah.

Buehrens describes prophecy in the Bible “as a kind of counterinstitution” (p. 80). The prophets’ role is to criticize the behavior of the kings and priests, the powers-that-be, and to point out the shortcomings of the people. In his essay “Reclaiming Our Prophetic Voice” (in Bowens-Wheatley and Jones, eds., *Soul Work*, listed on the “Resources” handout), Unitarian Universalist minister Paul Rasor describes what he calls a “prophetic crisis” in liberal religion today:

On the one hand, liberal religion has always accepted the social, scientific, and other cultural realities of its own time, and has consciously tried to adapt itself to them. In this way, liberals have sought to remain credible and relevant to contemporary society . . . . On the other hand, liberal religion has always understood itself in prophetic terms, as offering a critique of culture. Liberals have long sought to call society to account for injustice, to challenge the cultural status quo, and to work for reform.

These two perspectives are often in conflict with each other.

Ask participants to form groups of three or four. Invite them to consider these questions for the next fifteen minutes:

- ❖ How does your denomination or your church accommodate or support the status quo? Can you think of specific historical or contemporary examples? What are the benefits and what are the costs of this accommodation?
- ❖ How does your denomination or your church fulfill a prophetic role? Can you think of specific historical or contemporary examples? What are the benefits and what are the costs of this prophecy?
- ❖ Where do you hear prophetic voices today? What might the prophets Samuel or Deborah, Elijah or Hosea have to say to our leaders and “high priests”

now? You might refer to pp. 80–83 in *Understanding the Bible* for some inspiration.

Reconvene the large group and invite participants to share some of their thoughts from this discussion. Do these categories of “accommodation” and “liberation” apply to participants’ own experiences of their church?

## LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

5 MINUTES

Ask the group to take a moment to think back over all they have accomplished in this session. Point out the “suggested homework” for the next session:

- ❖ Read “Exaltations” and “Frustrations” in *Understanding the Bible*. Notice any additions that need to be made to the “Biblical Timeline.”
- ❖ Choose one psalm that you might share with the group. You can choose a whole psalm or select only the verses that most appeal to you.
- ❖ If you like, experiment with the meditation practice introduced in Activity 2 and make a note of how it feels and of what it offers.
- ❖ Notice references to the Bible in what you read, hear, or see (TV, movies, newspapers, novels, and more) between now and the next session. Bring these in to add to the list of “Uses of the Bible.”

Ask for volunteers to research any “Open Questions” and bring what they find to the next session. Remind folks to arrive early for the next session, and thank them for their contributions. Then offer the Closing Words and extinguish the chalice.

## CLOSING WORDS

1 MINUTE

From *Singing the Living Tradition*, #593, “Liberation Is Costly,” by Desmond Tutu.

Ask participants to read responsively, the two groups facing each other. Ask the whole group to read the last line together.

Liberation is costly.

Even after the Lord had delivered the Israelites from Egypt, they had to travel through the desert.

*They had to bear the responsibilities and difficulties of freedom.*

There was starvation and thirst and they kept complaining.

*They complained that their diet was monotonous.*

Many of them preferred the days of bondage and the fleshpots of Egypt.

*We must remember that liberation is costly. It needs unity.*

We must hold hands and refuse to be divided. We must be ready.

*Some of us will not see the day of our liberation physically.*

But those people will have contributed to the struggle.

**All:** *Let us be united, let us be filled with hope,  
let us be those who respect one another.*

# Session Four:

## Exaltations and Frustrations— Psalms, Wisdom Literature, and Job

### MATERIALS

Newsprint, markers, masking tape; chalice, candle, matches; paper, pens, and pencils; nametags; ongoing newsprint lists; “Biblical Timeline”; table on which to spread out resource materials, with sign-out sheet; (optional) *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnbooks

### GOALS FOR THIS SESSION:

- ❖ To become familiar with the structure, themes, and intentions of the psalms
- ❖ To lift up the voice of Wisdom
- ❖ To engage with two intriguing texts from the wisdom literature

### PREPARATION:

- ❖ Review “Exaltations” and “Frustrations” in *Understanding the Bible*, and read through the activities for this session. Adapt them to fit the needs and desires of your group and to fit your own interests and skills. Review the Welcome section in Session One and decide which parts of it you may want to repeat for newcomers.
- ❖ Put out the participant contact sheet.
- ❖ Arrange chairs in a circle. Place the chalice where everyone can see it.
- ❖ Post the following items: the “Biblical Timeline”; the group’s “Covenant”; the newsprint sheets labeled “Uses of the Bible for Good and for Ill,” “Guiding Questions,” “Themes in the Bible,” and “Open Questions.”
- ❖ Set aside two “straws” (or similar objects) of different lengths for Activity 3.
- ❖ Set up the “library” of resource books, art, and music, along with the sign-out sheet. Note that *resources that are checked out are due back at the next session*. Label as “on reserve” those resources that are not available to be checked out. Place copies of “Handout 3: Resources” and the sheet titled “Additional Resources: Contributions from the Group” on this table.

**AS PARTICIPANTS ARRIVE:** Ask for a volunteer to be the *chalice lighter*. Ask all participants to fill out a *nametag*. Ask *newcomers to the group* to sign in on the *contact sheet*. Give them copies of the handouts.

### MUSICAL OPENING (OPTIONAL)

**3 MINUTES**

Invite participants to gather in the circle, standing as they are willing and able, and sing



hymn #282, “Let the Whole Creation Cry,” from *Singing the Living Tradition* (the Unitarian Universalist gray hymnal). This hymn, set to a familiar tune, is based on Psalm 148.

### **OPENING WORDS: A PSALM**

**1 MINUTE**

Invite a participant to read a psalm (or a portion of a psalm) of her or his choosing as the opening words for this session.

*NOTE TO LEADERS: Please provide a moment of silence after the opening words in each session.*

### **WELCOME**

**2 MINUTES**

This is the time for welcoming participants and for providing a brief introduction to this session. If there are newcomers, you will want to include some of the information from the Welcome in Session One.

*Preview of this session:* This is a session of great contrasts! We will spend some time listening to psalms—the psalms you have chosen—and talk a bit about their common themes and structure and about what they mean to you. Then we will listen to the most powerful female voice in the Hebrew Bible, the voice of Wisdom. Finally, we will wrestle with the texts of Job and Ecclesiastes to see what messages—or blessings—they may have to offer.

Remind participants of their “Covenant” and of the ongoing lists. Let folks know that they can make additions to these lists at any time.

### **CHECK-IN**

**20 MINUTES**

Invite participants to check in by allowing each person in the circle to speak for about one minute. Ask any newcomers to introduce themselves and speak for a moment about what brings them to this program. Returning participants might share what they have witnessed or discovered since the last session regarding the uses of the Bible in contemporary life (this is part of the “suggested homework” for each session). If anyone experimented with the “Still Small Voice” meditation (see Activity 2 in Session Three), he or she may want to share this experience with the community now. Those who volunteered to research an “open question” may provide their answers or discoveries at this time. Gently suggest that people be mindful of the time so that everyone may have a chance to speak. The size of your group will determine how long check-in will take.

### **ACTIVITY 1: LISTENING AND RESPONDING—THE PSALMS**

**35 MINUTES**

*Purpose:* To become familiar with the psalms; to gain an understanding of their common themes and intentions

Ask five to eight volunteers to read the psalm (or the portion of a psalm) that they have chosen as part of their “homework” for this session. Invite participants to listen “generously.”

Ask participants to identify the patterns or themes that run through the psalms (the move-

ment from despair to praise, for example, or the desire for revenge). Note the images of God and of human relationships that appear. Record these themes on the “Themes from the Bible” list. Take up these questions, too:

- ❖ What historical issues might the psalmists have been addressing? Admittedly, scholars have trouble dating the psalms precisely, but participants may gain clues from the “Biblical Timeline,” the information in *Understanding the Bible*, and any notes or essays that appear in their Bibles. For example, the author of the essay on the Book of Psalms in the *Oxford Study Bible* (see the “Resources” handout) begins by saying, “In the psalms there are many voices, from various times and places, from Joshua to Ezra, and from Jerusalem to Babylon.”
- ❖ What universal life experiences do the psalms record?
- ❖ What can participants conclude about *why* each of these psalms was written?
- ❖ Is it possible to guess (just for fun) the gender of the psalmist?
- ❖ What are participants’ own responses to these psalms? What speaks to them in the words of these hymns and prayers?

Ask another set of volunteers to read their chosen psalms. Invite participants to listen for the themes, life experiences, and historical issues identified in the discussion. Have their responses changed?

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *Assess the mood and energy of your group throughout this activity in order to determine how many psalms should be read. Every participant may want to share her or his chosen psalm (remember that volunteers may read their psalm for the opening and closing words of this session); on the other hand, the old theatrical adage that says “Always leave them wanting more” is probably a good rule here.*

## ACTIVITY 2: THE VOICE OF WISDOM

20 MINUTES

*Purpose:* To acquaint participants with the feminine aspect of the divine as she appears in the Hebrew Bible

In *Understanding the Bible*, John Buehrens describes the “feminine Wisdom (in Hebrew, *hokhmah*; and in Greek, *sophia*) . . . [as] often understood as eternal, as having been with God from the very beginning” (p. 97). In *Wisdom Ways* (see the “Resources” handout), feminist biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza explains:

In the bible, “Spirit (Ruach)”—“Presence (Shekhinah)”—“Wisdom (Chokmah)” are all grammatically feminine terms. They refer to very similar female figurations in the Hebrew Bible who express G\*d’s saving presence in the world. They signify that aspect of the Divine which is involved in the affairs of humanity and creation.

Invite volunteers to read aloud the following passages (two of the volunteers will need a Bible that includes the Apocrypha):

- ❖ Proverbs 8:22–31
- ❖ Ecclesiasticus (also called Sirach) 24:1–21
- ❖ Proverbs 8:1–11, 14–17
- ❖ Proverbs 9:1–6
- ❖ Wisdom of Solomon 7:22–30

Ask participants to summarize this image of the divine. Then invite them to describe their responses to these passages. How familiar is this image to them? Have they been taught about Sophia or the Shekhinah before, and if so, what have they been taught? Why is this image not more prevalent in the biblical writings? Are there ways to find it elsewhere in the Bible?

Ask participants to return to the psalms. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 23, changing the name of God to one of the feminine names and replacing the masculine pronoun with the feminine pronoun. What happens when these changes are made? Try this with other psalms that they read in the previous activity, and invite participants to share their responses. Encourage participants to use this technique as one way to open up the images of God in the biblical texts they explore, and invite them to listen for the voice of Wisdom as they continue this journey through the Bible.

### **ACTIVITY 3: ENGAGING WITH THE TEXT: JOB AND ECCLESIASTES**

**30 MINUTES**

*Purpose:* To allow participants to wrestle with these famous texts

Separate participants into two groups. Have one person from each group serve as the group’s representative and draw straws. The group that gets the short straw will work with the Book of Job (of course); the other group will wrestle with Ecclesiastes.

Have each of the two groups break into subgroups of three or four people, and suggest that each subgroup appoint a reporter. They have fifteen minutes to work together, which will seem short (this is, after all, the “Frustrations” portion of the session). Invite participants to use the list of “Themes in the Bible” and one or two of the “Guiding Questions” from the posted sheet or from Handout 1 as they work with the text. What fresh insights into these passages can they gain?

For those studying Job, invite them to choose a few of the following passages and to focus on the character of Job himself. Note what he has to say about “wisdom.”

- ❖ 2:1–13
- ❖ 27:1–6
- ❖ 28: 12–15, 20–28
- ❖ 29:1–9
- ❖ 30:9–11, 20–23
- ❖ 31:35–40
- ❖ 42:1–6

For those studying Ecclesiastes, invite them to choose a few of the following passages and to focus on the character of the Qoholeth. Note what the writer has to say about “wisdom” and about the cyclical nature of time or history.

- ❖ 1:1–18

- ❖ 3:1–16
- ❖ 9:10
- ❖ 11:7
- ❖ 12:12–13 (the editors’ epilogue)
- ❖ and Psalm 39:1–12

Reconvene the large group and ask the reporters to summarize their group’s discussion. Invite participants to speculate on why these books, so different in tone from most of the others, were included by the editors and assemblers of the Hebrew Bible. How does Wisdom appear in these books?

### **LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD**

**5 MINUTES**

Ask the group to take a moment to think back over all they have accomplished in this session. Point out the “suggested homework” for the next session:

- ❖ Read “Redemptions” and “Expectations” in *Understanding the Bible*. Notice any additions that need to be made to the “Biblical Timeline.” If you have time, look up any biblical passages that intrigue you.
- ❖ Notice references to the Bible in what you read, hear, or see (TV, movies, newspapers, novels, and more) between now and the next session. Bring these in to add to the list of “Uses of the Bible.”

Ask for volunteers to research any “Open Questions” and bring what they find to the next session.

Invite volunteers to take on the task of typing up the lists that have been created during Part One so that they can be shared with the group. Arrange for copies of these lists to be made (either by the volunteers, or by getting them to you).

If your group would like to have a party to celebrate the end of Part One of this program, this is the time to plan it. Let folks know that this will mean staying a little longer than usual. Then remind folks to arrive early for the next session, and thank them for their contributions. Offer the Closing Words and extinguish the chalice.

### **CLOSING WORDS**

**1 MINUTE**

Invite a volunteer to read her or his psalm as the closing words for this session, or offer one of your own choosing.

# Session Five:

## Redemptions and Expectations—The Prophets

### MATERIALS

Newsprint, markers, masking tape; chalice, candle, matches; paper, pens, and pencils; nametags; ongoing newsprint lists; “Biblical Timeline”; table on which to spread out resource materials, with sign-out sheet; (optional) *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnbooks

### GOALS FOR THIS SESSION:

- ❖ To identify the common themes that occupy the Hebrew prophets
- ❖ To understand the prophets in their historical context
- ❖ To play with the story of Jonah
- ❖ To reflect on and celebrate participants’ accomplishments in Part One of this program

### PREPARATION:

- ❖ Review “Redemptions” and “Expectations” in *Understanding the Bible*, and read through the activities for this session. Adapt them to fit the needs and desires of your group and to fit your own interests and skills. Review the Welcome section in Session One and decide which parts of it you may want to repeat for newcomers.
- ❖ Put out the participant contact sheet.
- ❖ Arrange chairs in a circle. Place the chalice where everyone can see it.
- ❖ Post the following items: the “Biblical Timeline”; the group’s “Covenant”; the newsprint sheets labeled “Uses of the Bible for Good and for Ill,” “Guiding Questions,” “Themes in the Bible,” and “Open Questions.”
- ❖ Set up the “library” of resource books, art, and music, along with the sign-out sheet. Note that *resources that are checked out are due back at the next session*. Label as “on reserve” those resources that are not available to be checked out. Place copies of “Handout 3: Resources” and the sheet titled “Additional Resources: Contributions from the Group” on this table.
- ❖ If you were responsible for making copies of the lists that volunteers have typed up, place these copies on the library table.
- ❖ If you are taking a break between this session and the sessions that cover the Christian Scriptures, plan a small celebration for all the good work that participants have accomplished in their journey through the Hebrew Bible.

**AS PARTICIPANTS ARRIVE:** Ask for a volunteer to be the *chalice lighter*. Ask all participants to fill out a *nametag*. Ask *newcomers to the group* to sign in on the *contact sheet*. Give

*them copies of the handouts.*

### **MUSICAL OPENING (OPTIONAL)**

**3 MINUTES**

Invite participants to gather in the circle, standing as they are willing and able, and sing verses 1, 3, 4, and 5 of hymn #272, “O Prophet Souls of All the Years,” from *Singing the Living Tradition* (the Unitarian Universalist gray hymnal).

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *This hymn is perhaps less familiar than those suggested for earlier sessions, so you will need some volunteers willing to run through it ahead of time as well as some strong singers to help everyone along. It’s worth a try: the words are perfect for this session!*

### **OPENING WORDS: JEREMIAH 31:15–17 (JPS)**

**1 MINUTE**

Thus said the Lord:  
A cry is heard in Ramah—  
Wailing, bitter weeping—  
Rachel weeping for her children.  
She refuses to be comforted  
For her children, who are gone.  
Thus said the Lord:  
Restrain your voice from weeping,  
Your eyes from shedding tears;  
For there is a reward for your labor  
—declares the Lord:  
They shall return from the enemy’s land.  
And there is hope for your future  
—declares the Lord:  
Your children shall return to their country.

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *Please provide a moment of silence after the opening words in each session.*

### **WELCOME**

**2 MINUTES**

This is the time for welcoming participants and for providing a brief introduction to this session. If there are newcomers, you will want to include some of the information from the Welcome in Session One.

*Preview of this session:* The prophets offer us a chance to pull together many of the themes, images, and interpretive strategies that have occupied us in studying the Hebrew Bible. In this session, we will take a broad look at three of the literary prophets and a close look at Jonah. We will give ourselves time to look back at our journey through the Hebrew Bible and to reflect on how far we have traveled. It is time to celebrate our accomplishments!

Remind participants of their “Covenant” and of the ongoing lists. Let folks know that

they can continue to make additions to these lists during this session. If volunteers have typed and made copies of the lists, ask that they place them on the “library” table.

## CHECK-IN

20 MINUTES

Invite participants to check in by allowing each person in the circle to speak for about one minute. Ask any newcomers to introduce themselves and speak for a moment about what brings them to this program. Returning participants might share what they have witnessed or discovered since the last session regarding the uses of the Bible in contemporary life (this is part of the “suggested homework” for each session). Those who volunteered to research an “open question” may provide their answers or discoveries at this time. Gently suggest that people be mindful of the time so that everyone may have a chance to speak. The size of your group will determine how long check-in will take.

## ACTIVITY 1: PROPHETIC THEMES

5 MINUTES

*Purpose:* To update the “Themes in the Bible” list with information from the prophets

In the two chapters in *Understanding the Bible* that participants read for this session, John Buehrens highlights quite a few of the themes that occupy the prophets. Ask a volunteer to serve as “speed-scribe” and invite participants to call out as quickly as they can the themes that they have noticed or that they recall from their reading. Such themes include:

- ❖ original blessing
- ❖ oppression
- ❖ self-delusion
- ❖ addiction
- ❖ repression
- ❖ alienation
- ❖ history is open-ended not fated
- ❖ the steadfast love of the Creator
- ❖ the prophet’s call
- ❖ exile and return
- ❖ the coming “day of the Lord”
- ❖ hope
- ❖ a return to the covenant (that is, to faithfulness, to God)
- ❖ “I will be your God, and you will be my people” as the covenant

## ACTIVITY 2: THE PROPHETS IN CONTEXT

35 MINUTES

*Purpose:* To read the prophets with an understanding of their historical context; to look closely at the metaphor of “exile and return”

In his essay on Judaism in *Our Religions* (listed on the “Resources” handout), Jacob Neusner suggests that the metaphor of “exile and return” is perhaps even more basic than is the metaphor of the Exodus to all branches of Judaism. This activity helps participants focus

on this metaphor.

Invite participants to fill in the “Biblical Timeline” with information from the two chapters assigned for this session (see, for example, pp. 109, 112–13, 117, 119, 121, 124–27, and 129–31 in *Understanding the Bible*). Highlight those portions of the timeline that relate to the era of the prophets.

Participants will take up three prophets who wrote at different times and under differing circumstances. The Jeremiah passages come from a prophet writing from a distance to the exiled community in Babylon. The Isaiah passage is written by an exile, just after Babylon has fallen to the Persians but before King Cyrus allows the exiles to return home. The Joel passage dates from the Persian era, after the exiles’ return. Ask participants to note the changes in tone among the passages.

Ask for volunteers to read the following passages to the group:

- ❖ Jeremiah 29:1, 4–9
- ❖ Jeremiah 30: 1–3, 8–11, 17–18, 22
- ❖ Isaiah 40:1–8
- ❖ Joel 2:18–19, 25–27, 3:1–2

Ask participants to form groups of three or four people and appoint a reporter for their group. They will have ten minutes to discuss the passages among themselves. Encourage them to use the list of biblical themes and the following “Guiding Questions” as they try to understand these texts from the point of view of their earliest hearers:

#### Historical Context:

1. Where did this story come from, and what did it mean to those who told it?
  - ♦ What historical, social, political, or personal situation might have given rise to this story?
  - ♦ What do the historical notes in the Bible tell us about understanding the background of this passage?
  - ♦ What is the “life question” that the author or editor of this story is trying to answer?

Reconvene the large group and ask the reporters to summarize their group’s discussion. How would participants compare and contrast the metaphors of the Exodus, on the one hand, and the exile and return, on the other? Which metaphor speaks more deeply to them?

### ACTIVITY 3: ENGAGING WITH THE TEXT—THE “DRAMEDY” OF JONAH 35 MINUTES

*Purpose:* To invite participants to engage with a text both troublesome and humorous as a way to sum up their work with the Hebrew Bible

Ask for volunteers to play the following roles in a dramatic reading of the entire Book of Jonah (it is short!):

- ❖ Narrator
- ❖ Captain
- ❖ The crew



- ❖ Jonah
- ❖ God
- ❖ The herald for the king of Nineveh

Remind participants to follow closely in their texts so that they will be ready when their cue comes. Invite them to have fun and to dive into their parts with gusto.

After the reading, ask the group to apply the “Guiding Questions” to this passage. Remind them to use the notes and essays in their Bibles for resource material, if necessary. What do they discover? Are there ways in which this book sums up the experience, message, and methodology of the Hebrew Bible? If so, how would participants capture this experience or message in twenty-five words or less?

## WRAPPING UP

**15 MINUTES**

Thank the group for all their hard work and contributions throughout these five sessions on the Hebrew Bible. Let them know when the sessions on the Christian Scriptures will begin and encourage them to continue the journey. Let them know what they need to read or prepare before Session Six:

- ❖ Read “Proclamations” and “Passions” in *Understanding the Bible*. Notice any additions that need to be made to the “Biblical Timeline.” If you have time, look up any biblical passages that intrigue you.
- ❖ Notice references to the Bible in what you read, hear, or see (TV, movies, newspapers, novels, and more) between now and the next session. Bring these in to add to the list of “Uses of the Bible.”

If there are other “housekeeping” announcements, this is the time to make them.

Then invite the group to take a moment to think back over all they have accomplished in this session. Allow a moment of silence. Next, ask that they think back to the very beginning of this journey through the Hebrew Bible: to their wrestling with texts from Genesis . . . from Exodus . . . and from the prophets . . . to their reciting of the psalms . . . and listening to Wisdom . . . and acting out the story of Jonah. Invite them to sit in silence for a moment, absorbing a sense of accomplishment. Then, as they feel so moved, invite them to offer into the circle just one word or phrase that sums up how they feel about this experience of “understanding the Bible.” Let these words form the group’s closing prayer. Then offer the Closing Words and extinguish the chalice.

## CLOSING WORDS

**1 MINUTE**

From *Understanding the Bible*, p. 11

James Luther Adams said to Erich Fromm:

“Erich, . . . you say you are a ‘humanist.’ But tell me: what really makes you tick?” After a long silence, Fromm replied, “You are right. It’s the spirit of the Hebrew prophets in me that gives me my sense of direction. Their cry for jus-

tice, their abhorrence of idols, their fidelity to a God who is beyond all image, yet who works and calls us in human history to real equality, community, and personhood. That's what makes me tick."

**\*\*Party\*\***

## Part Two: The Christian Scriptures

# Session Six: Proclamations and Passions— The Teachings of Jesus

## MATERIALS

Newsprint, markers, masking tape; chalice, candle, matches; paper, pens, and pencils; nametags; newsprint lists (“Uses of the Bible,” “Guiding Questions,” and “Themes in the Bible”), the group’s “Covenant,” and the “Biblical Timeline” from Sessions One through Five; table on which to spread out resource materials, with sign-out sheet; (optional) *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnbooks

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *If you have not run Sessions One through Five before beginning this part, check to see which of the newsprint lists from the first five sessions would be helpful for your program. Adapt the activities in which they are created to suit your group’s needs and interests. Make sure you let participants know what they need to have read and what they need to bring to Session Six. If you have offered Part One, adapt the activities in this session to accommodate the length of time since participants last gathered together.*

## GOALS FOR THIS SESSION:

- ❖ To build community
- ❖ To understand the historical context of the writers of the books of the Christian Scriptures
- ❖ To look at examples of how Matthew and Luke used their sources
- ❖ To engage with a pivotal text from the Gospel of Mathew

## PREPARATION:

- ❖ Review “Proclamations” and “Passions” in *Understanding the Bible*, and read through the activities for this session. Adapt them to fit the needs and desires of your group and to fit your own interests and skills. Review the Welcome section in Session One and decide which parts of it you want to repeat for newcomers.
- ❖ Put out the participant contact sheet.
- ❖ Arrange chairs in a circle. Place the chalice where everyone can see it.
- ❖ Post the following items: the “Biblical Timeline”; the group’s “Covenant”; the newsprint sheets labeled “Uses of the Bible for Good and for Ill,” “Guiding Questions,” “Open Questions,” and “Themes in the Bible.”
- ❖ Set up the “library” of resource books, art, and music, along with the sign-out sheet. (See the Preparation list for Session One for more information on this

library.) Note that *resources that are checked out are due back at the next session*. Label as “on reserve” those resources that are not available to be checked out. Place copies of “Handout 3: Resources” and the sheet titled “Additional Resources: Contributions from the Group” on this table.

**AS PARTICIPANTS ARRIVE:** *Ask for a volunteer to be the chalice lighter. Ask all participants to fill out a nametag. Ask newcomers to the group to sign in on the contact sheet. Give them copies of the handouts.*

### **MUSICAL OPENING (OPTIONAL)**

**3 MINUTES**

Invite participants to gather in the circle, standing as they are willing and able, and sing hymn #407, “We’re Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table,” from *Singing the Living Tradition* (the Unitarian Universalist gray hymnal).

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *This hymn may not be familiar to all participants, so you will need to ask some volunteers to run through it ahead of time. The tune is easy, though, and the sense of the song offers a great welcome to the session.*

### **OPENING WORDS: LUKE 4:16–21(A) (NRSV)**

**2 MINUTES**

When [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“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,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to [speak] to them . . .

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *Please provide a moment of silence after the opening words in each session.*

### **WELCOME**

**5 MINUTES**

This is the time for welcoming participants and for providing a brief introduction to Part Two of this program, as well as to this session. Since there are likely to be newcomers, you will want to include some of the information from the Welcome in Session One.

*Preview of Part Two and of this session:* John Buehrens’s *Understanding the Bible* invites us to bring not only our critical thinking but also our “imaginative compassion” both to the biblical texts themselves and to our *prejudices* about the texts (p. 195). How can we think criti-

cally and be compassionate about both? In Part Two of this program, we take up Buehrens's chapters on the Christian Scriptures. In this session we look at the teachings of Jesus; then, in Session Seven, we focus on the stories of his death and resurrection. Session Eight takes up the Gospel of John and the letters of Paul, and the concluding session looks at the books that didn't make it into the canon of the Bible, and gives us a chance to wrap up our journey. So, in this session, we will spend some time getting acquainted, helping to build (or rebuild, from Part One) a "community of seekers and learners." We will fill in the "Biblical Timeline" with the information we gleaned from the two chapters we are covering, and imagine what it was like to write about Jesus decades after he was alive. We will take up the questions that arose for you from the readings for this session, and then, if there is time, we will look at some examples from the gospels that help explain how the authors or editors of these texts used their sources. Finally, we will wrestle with a text from the Gospel of Matthew.

Briefly explain the newsprint lists to newcomers, and point out the reference library and handouts. Let folks know that they can make additions to the lists at any time.

### ACTIVITY 1: INTRODUCTIONS

20–30 MINUTES

*Purpose:* To build community; to name some of the "baggage" participants associate with the Bible, as well as to suggest some of the benefits for "skeptics, seekers, and religious liberals" of engaging with the Bible

Invite participants to introduce themselves by allowing each person in the circle to speak for about one minute. Ask them to share their name and a word or two about what motivates them to participate in this program. Newcomers might describe what their current attitudes are toward the Christian Scriptures: What do they bring with them to this exploration, and where do their impressions about the Christian Scriptures come from? Returning participants might offer similar information, or they might share their thoughts on the impact that exploring the Hebrew Bible has had on them. Gently suggest that people be mindful of the time so that everyone may have a chance to speak. The size of your group will determine how long these introductions will take.

### ACTIVITY 2: CONTEXT AND INTERPRETATION —WRITING "AFTER THE FACT"

20 MINUTES

*Purpose:* To place the events and the writing of the books of the Christian Scriptures in historical context; to empathize with the writers of these books

Begin this activity by asking participants, working in pairs, to make additions to the "Biblical Timeline" that they have picked up from "Proclamations" and "Passions" in *Understanding the Bible* (see pp. 137–38, 141–43, 145, 151, 155, and so on). Remind them to notice what goes *above* the line (the timing of the composition of parts of the Bible, along with any information about authors or editors) and what goes *below* the line (the timing of the events that biblical stories describe). Allow no more than ten minutes for this part of the activity.

Highlight the difference in dates between when Jesus is believed to have lived and died, and

when the authors of the texts in the Christian Scriptures wrote their accounts of his life and death. Now invite participants to engage in a meditation that will help them empathize with the writers of these books. Ask them to sit comfortably, with their eyes closed, if they like, and to use their “imaginative compassion” as they listen to your voice. You might use the following text for this meditation, or adapt it to fit your own context and style:

It is the beginning of the twenty-first century—say, the year 2004. You are sitting down to write about a teacher who has been very dear to you for twenty years, though this teacher died a few years before you had even heard of him or her. Can you think of a teacher like that in your own life? This would have been someone who was living and teaching in the 1970s. You remember clearly the moment you first heard about this teacher from a friend; you remember the moment that this teacher’s teachings struck home to you, all those years ago. How much has changed since then—in your own life, in your thinking, and in the world! Some parts of the teachings mean more to you now, after trying to live by them for twenty years; other parts are less important, and you’ve probably even forgotten some altogether. What other people seem eager to hear, or need to hear, has changed, too. Their needs are urgent, though; there are folks out there trying to change the teachings or to distract the faithful from the way of life to which they have committed themselves. What is most important now? What will you choose to say to them? How do you decide?

*(Pause)*

What you have just imagined must be a little bit like what the apostle Paul faced in writing his letters. What about the author of the gospel of Mark? Imagine that you want to write about a great teacher who died forty years ago—perhaps someone like Martin Luther King Jr. But you have no books or movies or television shows to draw on, just many many stories that have been told and retold for years and years. Perhaps you also have a few falling-apart sheets of paper on which people have recorded what they remember about what he said. But these “sayings sources” contradict each other. Besides, you have your own interpretations of these stories. What’s more, you are writing to your people who are in crisis. They expected great things to come out of the life and teachings of this prophet from forty years ago, but not much has changed. In fact, in many ways things have gotten much worse, what with persecution from the powers-that-be, the destruction of a national sacred site, and the division among families whose members are choosing different teachings to follow. How do you tell the story of this great man’s life, of his teachings and of his death? What is most important now? What will you choose to say to your community? How do you decide?

*(Pause)*

Invite participants to reflect together on this meditation. Point out that the authors of the gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John were writing about events that happened at least fifty to sixty years before and that the authors of other letters in the Christian Scriptures, as well as of the books that didn't make it into the canon, were often writing later than that. What happens as time goes by? What is the impact of interpretation on how the stories are told and how the teachings are passed on? How do the needs of the particular audiences and the interests or perspectives of the particular authors change the way that these teachings are communicated?

Remind participants that interpretation of the Bible is as old as the Bible itself; even the authors of the biblical texts were *interpreters* of the stories that they had heard. As Buehrens points out (p. 144), the issues and events of every era change the way people look at the Bible; it took the Holocaust and World War II to motivate Christian scholars to take a deeper look at biblical passages that had been used to promote anti-Semitism, for example. The list of “Uses of the Bible for Good and for Ill” alone should inspire “skeptics, seekers, and religious liberals” to participate in the ongoing process of interpretation.

### **ACTIVITY 3: RESPONSES TO THE READING —OUR OWN “GUIDING QUESTIONS”**

**15 MINUTES (OR MORE)**

*Purpose:* To allow participants to raise their own questions in response to the reading in *Understanding the Bible*, and to invite them to determine the focus of the rest of the session(s)

In the two chapters assigned for this session, Buehrens offers a rich general introduction to the Christian Scriptures and current biblical scholarship. There is much to chew on here, and participants are likely to have brought their own burning questions to this time together. Invite them to list these questions on a newsprint sheet. You might prompt them by asking:

- ❖ What is one new thing you learned from reading these chapters?
- ❖ What startled you? What is strange or confusing to you about what you read in these chapters?
- ❖ What other questions arose? For example, “what *is* it about John the Baptist’s message that attracted Jesus and so many others” (p. 144)? Have you ever wondered why a new religion sprang up about Jesus but not about John the Baptist? What do you know or think about the concept of the “End Time” or the concept of “grace” (both are mentioned on p. 154)?

Some of these questions may belong on the “Open Questions” list, to be researched by volunteers. Others may spark a discussion that participants would like to continue, in this or future sessions. Try to ensure that these discussions use *Understanding the Bible* as a resource and guide; participants can use the index to find information beyond the current two chapters. Without such a guide, these conversations can become too general or abstract—or too focused (negatively) on the opinions of more conservative folks who may not be in the room. Encourage participants to find ways to express and support their own opinions in a positive way. Whenever possible, invite participants to engage with the biblical texts to which Buehrens refers.

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *This activity allows participants to guide the structure of the session.*



*You might invite participants to form small groups in order to discuss in depth a question that interests them. Reconvene the large group to share highlights of these discussions. You may weave aspects of the remaining activities into the discussion, or you may find that these activities respond to the participants' own interests. All of the sessions in Part Two encourage this kind of flexibility and choice.*

#### **ACTIVITY 4: UNDERSTANDING SOURCES—TWO HEALING STORIES**

**20 MINUTES**

*Purpose: To illustrate the use of the Gospel of Mark and of the “sayings source” Q by the authors of the gospels of Matthew and Luke; to give participants a chance to compare and contrast these passages*

*From Mark: The Healing on the Sabbath*

Ask for volunteers to read aloud each of the following passages:

- ❖ Mark 3:1–6
- ❖ Matthew 12:9–14
- ❖ Luke 6:1–5

Explain that since this story is found in all three of the synoptic gospels, most biblical scholars believe that the authors of Matthew and Luke picked up the story from the version of the Gospel of Mark that was available to them. Ask participants to compare these passages: How do they differ? What do we know about the authors of each of the gospels and about the communities for whom they were writing (refer to pp. 151–52 in *Understanding the Bible*)? Invite suggestions about why each author told the story the way he (or she) did.

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *For example, the Gospel of Mark includes a description of Jesus' anger and grief in response to the passivity of his questioners. Could this be related to whether the Markan author feels that people are “keeping the faith”—are staying clear about what is most important—during Mark's time of crisis and persecution?*

*From Q: The Healing of the Centurion's Servant*

Ask for volunteers to read aloud each of these passages:

- ❖ Matthew 8:5–13
- ❖ Luke 7:1–10; 13:29–30

This story does not appear in the Gospel of Mark, which has led most scholars to believe that the authors of Matthew and Luke picked it up from another source available to them both. This source has never been found, but the similarities between Matthew and Luke (when not explained by Mark) have convinced scholars that the “Q” source existed. Ask participants to compare these passages: how do they differ? What do they say about the “slave” or “servant”; how is this person described? How might this fit into the overall message of each author? How might other differences be explained by what we know about the communities for whom the authors were writing?

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *For example, the Gospel of Luke includes an argument in favor of the Roman centurion’s “worthiness” of Jesus’ attention. Could this have anything to do with contemporary relationships between Romans and Jews, and with the Lukan author’s desire to spread the gospel to Gentiles?*

**ACTIVITY 5: ENGAGING WITH THE TEXT—MATTHEW 25:31–36**

**25 MINUTES**

*Purpose: To invite participants to look closely at this important biblical text*

Invite volunteers to share the reading aloud of these passages:

- ❖ Matthew 25:31–46
- ❖ Psalms 107:1–22

Then ask participants to form groups of three or four people. Invite them to use the “Guiding Questions for Engaging with Biblical Texts” (on the newsprint sheet and on Handout 1) to delve deeper into the passage from Matthew. This passage does not appear in the other gospels. Why do they think Matthew included it? What can they say (or imagine) about the relationship between the gospel passage and the psalm? Let them know that this passage has helped inspire a variety of movements in “liberation theology.” How and why do they think this occurred? What does this passage say to them today?

At the end of ten minutes, ask participants to reconvene and share the insights of their discussion. Were they familiar with this text before? If so, has their reading of it changed as a result of the discussions in this session?

**LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD**

**5 MINUTES**

Ask the group to take a moment to think back over all they have accomplished in this session. Point out the “suggested homework” for the next session:

- ❖ Review pp. 156–59 in “Passions” and read “Resurrections” in *Understanding the Bible*. Notice any additions that need to be made to the “Biblical Timeline.” If you have time, look up the Easter stories in the synoptic Gospels.
- ❖ Notice references to the Bible in what you read, hear, or see (TV, movies, newspapers, novels, and more) between now and the next session. Bring these in to add to the list of “Uses of the Bible.”

Ask for volunteers to research any “Open Questions” and bring what they find to the next session.

Leave some time for any burning questions that can’t wait until the next session.

Finally, remind folks to arrive early for the next session, and thank them for their contributions. Then offer the Closing Words and extinguish the chalice.

**CLOSING WORDS****1 MINUTE**

Matthew 25:34–40 (REB)

Then the king will say to those on his right, “You have my Father’s blessing; come, take possession of the kingdom that has been ready for you since the world was made. For when I was hungry, you gave me food; when thirsty, you gave me drink; when I was a stranger, you took me into your home; when naked, you clothed me; when I was ill, you came to my help; when in prison, you visited me.” Then the righteous will reply, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and fed you, or thirsty and gave you drink, a stranger and took you home, or naked and clothed you? When did we see you ill and in prison, and come to visit you?” And the king will answer, “Truly I tell you, anything you did for one of my [sisters or] brothers here, however insignificant, you did for me.”

# Session Seven: Resurrections—The Death and Resurrection of Jesus

## MATERIALS:

Newsprint, markers, masking tape; chalice, candle, matches; paper, pens, and pencils; nametags; newsprint lists (“Uses of the Bible,” “Guiding Questions,” and “Themes in the Bible”), the group’s “Covenant,” and the “Biblical Timeline”; table on which to spread out resource materials, with sign-out sheet; (optional) *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnbooks

## GOALS OF THIS SESSION:

To examine anew the stories of Jesus’ death and resurrection

## PREPARATION:

- ❖ Review pp. 156–59 of “Passions” and the chapter “Resurrections” in *Understanding the Bible*, and read through the activities for this session. Adapt them to fit the needs and desires of your group and to fit your own interests and skills. Review the Welcome section in Session One and decide which parts of it you want to repeat for newcomers.
- ❖ Put out the participant contact sheet.
- ❖ Arrange chairs in a circle. Place the chalice where everyone can see it.
- ❖ Post the following items: the “Biblical Timeline”; the group’s “Covenant”; the newsprint sheets labeled “Uses of the Bible for Good and for Ill,” “Guiding Questions,” “Open Questions,” and “Themes in the Bible.”
- ❖ Set up the “library” of resource books, art, and music, along with the sign-out sheet. Note that resources that are checked out are due back at the next session. Label as “on reserve” those resources that are not available to be checked out. Place copies of “Handout 3: Resources” and the sheet titled “Additional Resources: Contributions from the Group” on this table.

**AS PARTICIPANTS ARRIVE:** *Ask for a volunteer to be the chalice lighter. Ask all participants to fill out a nametag. Ask newcomers to the group to sign in on the contact sheet. Give them copies of the handouts.*

## MUSICAL OPENING (OPTIONAL)

**3 MINUTES**

Invite participants to gather in the circle, standing as they are willing and able, and sing hymn #262, “Hosanna in the Highest,” from *Singing the Living Tradition* (the Unitarian Universalist gray hymnal).

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *Alternatively, you could choose to play a portion of one of the choral Passions, like those by Osvaldo Golijov or J. S. Bach, mentioned in Understanding the Bible (p. 150) or other music for Palm Sunday, Good Friday, or Easter.*

**OPENING WORDS: PSALMS 22:1–11 (NRSV)**

**2 MINUTES**

The accounts of Jesus’ death echo the words and the feelings of this psalm; invite participants to use their “imaginative compassion” as they listen:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from helping, from the words of my groaning?  
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;  
and by night but find no rest.

Yet you are holy,  
enthroned on the praises of Israel.  
In you our ancestors trusted;  
they trusted, and you delivered them.  
To you they cried, and were saved;  
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

But I am a worm, and not human;  
scorned by others, and despised by the people.  
All who see me mock at me;  
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;  
“Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—  
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!”

Yet it was you who took me from the womb;  
you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.  
On you I was cast from my birth,  
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.  
Do not be far from me,  
for trouble is near  
and there is no one to help.

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *Please provide a moment of silence after the opening words in each session.*

**WELCOME**

**2 MINUTES**

This is the time for welcoming participants and for providing a brief introduction to this session. If there are newcomers, you may want to include some of the information from the Welcome in Session One.

*Preview of this session:* In this session, we take a look at the stories of Jesus' death and resurrection, lifting up the themes and delving into the messages that these stories contain. We also look at how these stories have been used and interpreted, and at what they might mean for us today.

Briefly remind participants about the newsprint lists, and point out the reference library and handouts. Let folks know that they can make additions to the lists at any time.

## CHECK-IN

20 MINUTES

Invite participants to check in by allowing each person in the circle to speak for about one minute. Ask any newcomers to introduce themselves and speak for a moment about what brings them to this program. Returning participants might share what they have witnessed or discovered since the last session regarding the uses of the Bible in contemporary life (this is part of the "suggested homework" for each session). Those who volunteered to research an "open question" may provide their answers or discoveries at this time. Gently suggest that people be mindful of the time so that everyone may have a chance to speak. The size of your group will determine how long check-in will take.

Take a moment to ask participants what questions arose for them as they read the chapters for this session. These questions may guide the structure of the rest of the session.

## ACTIVITY 1: IMAGINATIVE COMPASSION—THE PASSION STORIES

35 MINUTES

*Purpose:* To engage imaginatively with the Passion stories in order to discover and personalize participants' interpretations

Ask participants to form groups of three or four and to appoint a reporter for their group. Invite them to use the lists titled "Themes in the Bible" and "Uses of the Bible for Good and for Ill" to spark ideas about what the stories of Jesus' last days and his death are trying to say and about how these stories have been interpreted and used in history. In a few minutes they will have a chance to add to these lists based on their discussions. Remind them that Buehrens summarizes this story on pp. 156–59, and they can use their Bibles to look at specific passages. Ask them to stop at the point at which Jesus dies; you will look at the resurrection stories in the next activity. They have ten minutes for this part of their discussion.

After they have lifted up the themes found in these stories, and discussed the interpretations laid on them, ask them to spend some time *imagining* what Jesus' death was like for all those whom it affected. What was it like for his family? What was it like for the Roman rulers? For the Temple priests? For Jesus' followers? For the disciples who fled or deserted him? For the African man who carried the cross? For the women who showed up at the crucifixion? They have ten minutes for this act of "imaginative compassion."

Reconvene the large group and ask the reporters to summarize highlights of their group's discussion. When all reporters have had a chance to speak, open the conversation to the whole group. Ask participants what they found surprising or disturbing as they engaged with these stories. What did they learn that was new?

Give the groups time to update the lists based on what they have learned.

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *Issues of “who killed Jesus?” and of the uses of the stories that have helped to promote anti-Semitism may (and should) come up. As Paula Fredrickson points out in From Jesus to Christ (see the list of “Resources”), crucifixion in Jesus’ time was a “form of capital punishment used by Rome particularly for political offenders” (emphasis added). The blaming of the Jews for Jesus’ death was a later addition by the gospel writers.*

## **ACTIVITY 2: ENGAGING WITH THE TEXT—THE RESURRECTION**

**45 MINUTES**

*Purpose:* To look anew at the stories of the resurrection

Invite participants to listen to the stories of the resurrection as told in the synoptic gospels. Ask for volunteers to read aloud the following passages, leaving a moment’s silence between each reading:

- ❖ Mark 16:1–8(a)—the original ending of Mark
- ❖ Mark 16:8(b)—the “shorter ending of Mark”
- ❖ Mark 16:9–19—the “longer ending of Mark”
- ❖ Matthew 28:1–20
- ❖ Luke 24:1–53

Buehrens points out “two perspectives” on the resurrection: “first, in [Jesus’] resurrection a just God vindicates the death of a righteous, innocent man and sets right the injustice and tragedy of his crucifixion. Second, the resurrection proves that Jesus was not merely himself, but a figure with a larger world-historical role—the harbinger of the End Time and the first of those to be raised to eternal life” (pp. 162–63). Buehrens also offers another set of questions in the last paragraph in this chapter. Ask a volunteer to read that paragraph (p. 168).

Ask participants to form groups of three or four and to appoint a reporter for their group. Ask them to share the understandings of the resurrection stories that they have held until now: What were they taught, what did they believe, where did these ideas come from? Ask them to think again about these passages, using the “Guiding Questions” and Buehrens’s own summary of interpretations (p. 168). What do they think? Be sure to honor the full range of theologies, beliefs, and backgrounds present in the room.

Reconvene the large group and, before the reporters offer their summaries, congratulate them on tackling such a huge project. After the reporters provide highlights of their group’s discussion, open the conversation to the whole group. What do participants make of these stories and the questions they raise?

## **LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD**

**5 MINUTES**

Ask the group to take a moment to think back over all they have accomplished in this session. Point out the “suggested homework” for the next session:

- ❖ Read “Incarnations” and “Salvations” in *Understanding the Bible*. Notice any additions that need to be made to the “Biblical Timeline.”
- ❖ If you have time, read the entire letter to the Galatians (it is short).

- ❖ Notice references to the Bible in what you read, hear, or see (TV, movies, newspapers, novels, and more) between now and the next session. Bring these in to add to the list of “Uses of the Bible.”

Ask for volunteers to research any “Open Questions” and bring what they find to the next session.

Leave some time for any burning questions that can’t wait until the next session.

Finally, remind folks to arrive early for the next session, and thank them for their contributions. Then offer the Closing Words and extinguish the chalice.

## **CLOSING WORDS**

**1 MINUTE**

From *Understanding the Bible* (p. 168):

The crucifixion became a symbol for human beings always trying to nail God down, to define, control, or kill God. Sometimes it is a wonder that God survives the church and its theologians. But the resurrection symbolizes the truth that God will not stay dead, no matter what. Through the centuries, it has helped those saints who have understood its meaning most profoundly to see Christ in other people, eyeball to eyeball. It is not necessary to take the resurrection literally to take it seriously or to hold a form of resurrection faith, Con Browne would say; or to see Christ alive now, in others.



# Session Eight: Incarnations and Salvations— The Gospel of John and the Letters of Paul

## MATERIALS

Newsprint, markers, masking tape; chalice, candle, matches; paper, pens, and pencils; nametags; newsprint lists (“Uses of the Bible,” “Guiding Questions,” and “Themes in the Bible”), the group’s “Covenant,” and the “Biblical Timeline”; table on which to spread out resource materials, with sign-out sheet; (optional) *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnbooks

## GOALS OF THIS SESSION:

- ❖ To look closely at the use of metaphor in the Gospel of John
- ❖ To become familiar with Paul and his historical context

## PREPARATION:

- ❖ Review “Incarnations” and “Salvations” in *Understanding the Bible*, and read through the activities for this session. Adapt them to fit the needs and desires of your group and to fit your own interests and skills. Review the Welcome section in Session One and decide which parts of it you want to repeat for newcomers.
- ❖ Put out the participant contact sheet.
- ❖ Arrange chairs in a circle. Place the chalice where everyone can see it.
- ❖ Post the following items: the “Biblical Timeline”; the group’s “Covenant”; the newsprint sheets labeled “Uses of the Bible for Good and for Ill,” “Guiding Questions,” “Open Questions,” and “Themes in the Bible.”
- ❖ Ensure that the group has at least one study Bible for Activity 2.
- ❖ Set up the “library” of resource books, art, and music, along with the sign-out sheet. Note that *resources that are checked out are due back at the next session*. Label as “on reserve” those resources that are not available to be checked out. Place copies of “Handout 3: Resources” and the sheet titled “Additional Resources: Contributions from the Group” on this table.

**AS PARTICIPANTS ARRIVE:** Ask for a volunteer to be the *chalice lighter*. Ask all participants to fill out a *nametag*. Ask newcomers to the group to sign in on the *contact sheet*. Give them copies of the handouts.

## MUSICAL OPENING (OPTIONAL)

**3 MINUTES**

Invite participants to gather in the circle, standing as they are willing and able, and sing

hymn #170, “We Are a Gently Angry People,” from *Singing the Living Tradition* (the Unitarian Universalist gray hymnal).

**OPENING WORDS: JOHN 1:1–5 (NRSV)**

**1 MINUTE**

Invite participants to listen for echoes, in these first verses from the Gospel of John, of the verses that begin the Hebrew Bible.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

*NOTE TO LEADERS: Please provide a moment of silence after the opening words in each session.*

**WELCOME**

**5 MINUTES**

This is the time for welcoming participants and for providing a brief introduction to this session. If there are newcomers, you may want to include some of the information from the Welcome in Session One.

*Preview of this session:* In this session, we take up a story from the Gospel of John in order to see how this writer’s use of metaphor and symbolism may open up the message of the passage. Then we spend some time with the troublesome apostle Paul to see how our “imaginative compassion” may help us to understand him.

Briefly remind participants about the newsprint lists, and point out the reference library and handouts. Let folks know that they can make additions to the lists at any time.

**CHECK-IN**

**20 MINUTES**

Invite participants to check in by allowing each person in the circle to speak for about one minute. Ask any newcomers to introduce themselves and speak for a moment about what brings them to this program. Returning participants might share what they have witnessed or discovered since the last session regarding the uses of the Bible in contemporary life (this is part of the “suggested homework” for each session). Those who volunteered to research an “open question” may provide their answers or discoveries at this time. Gently suggest that people be mindful of the time so that everyone may have a chance to speak. The size of your group will determine how long check-in will take.

Take a moment to ask participants what questions arose for them as they read the chapters for this session. These questions may guide the structure of the rest of the session.

**ACTIVITY 1: THE METAPHOR OF THIRST  
—JESUS AND THE SAMARITAN WOMAN**

**30 MINUTES**

*Purpose:* To look closely at the use of metaphor in the Gospel of John

Ask volunteers to share in reading aloud the following passage:

❖ John 4:5–30

Buehrens reminds us that to take a metaphor literally is to engage in idolatry: to confuse the “part” for the “whole.” Invite participants to identify the metaphors and the symbolism in this passage. Propose a number of questions in order to open up this story further. For example:

- ❖ Note the references to Jacob and the ancestors; why does the author of this gospel include them?
- ❖ Who is this woman with whom Jesus speaks? What might have been the conditions of her life? How would she tell this story from her point of view? Why is she not named?
- ❖ What is the tone of their conversation? Is Jesus preaching a sermon? Are they flirting? What is the author of this gospel hoping his readers will feel about their interaction? Humor? Judgment? Awe? Confusion?
- ❖ What does this passage say about “knowledge”? About “worship”? About “God”?
- ❖ How important is it—to the story, to the woman, to us—that Jesus is “clairvoyant” and can tell the woman about her life? What is the symbolism here?
- ❖ For the first time in the Gospel of John, Jesus declares who he is in this passage (4:26). Is there any significance to the fact that he does so to a woman—in fact, to a woman of another ethnicity and faith, a woman of questionable reputation (by the standards of the times)? Why would the author of John choose this recipient and this setting for Jesus’ declaration? What is the message here?
- ❖ How would you translate the metaphor of the “living water”? What does the woman in the story thirst for? What does Jesus thirst for? What do you thirst for?

Invite participants to share how their approach to the story changes when these questions are asked.

**ACTIVITY 2: ENGAGING WITH THE TEXT—PAUL AND THE GALATIANS 45 MINUTES**

*Purpose:* To look with “imaginative compassion” at Paul’s “biography” in Galatians

Ask participants to brainstorm a quick list of the themes (intended or unintended) that come up in Paul’s writings. Buehrens offers a rich selection of these themes in the chapter titled “Salvations”; in fact, “salvation” and the way to achieve it are among the themes he identifies.

Now ask participants to turn to Paul's letter to the Galatians. Ask volunteers with study Bibles to read aloud the brief essay that precedes this letter. Then invite participants to form groups of three or four and to appoint a reporter for their group. Give them the following passages and issues; invite them to choose which ones they would like to wrestle with for the next twenty minutes. Ask them to pay attention to the themes that come up in each passage.

- ❖ Galatians 1:6–10: What is Paul's tone in the beginning of the letter? What does this tone tell us about the circumstances under which he is writing? What does it tell us about Paul's own character?
- ❖ Galatians 1:15–2:10: What is the history of Paul's relationship to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem? Is there a hierarchy in the leadership? Where does Paul see himself in relationship to them? On whose authority does Paul preach? From these verses, what can we say about the most important aspects of Jesus' teachings for the Jerusalem leadership? For Paul?
- ❖ Galatians 2:11–14: This passage describes a "showdown" in Antioch between Paul, on the one hand, and Peter (Cephas) and James, the leaders of the Jerusalem church. What happens in this showdown? What is at stake? Who "wins"? (Scholars believe that James wins, at least for the moment, because Paul has to leave to take his inclusive message elsewhere. In fact, some see Galatians 2:15–21 as Paul's "second thoughts" after the argument—what he *wishes* he had said to Peter's face.)
- ❖ Galatians 3:23–29: This passage includes Paul's great "universalist" statement. Does reading it in the context of the longer passage change its meaning at all?
- ❖ Galatians 4:21–26: This passage refers to Hagar and Ishmael, as well as to Sarah and Isaac. What does it say about the relative status of these two families of Abraham? How might this passage be misused? What groups today consider themselves the descendants of Ishmael?
- ❖ Galatians 5:1–6: What themes appear here? Is Paul urging a "clean break" between Christians and Jews? How, then, would he perceive the leadership in Jerusalem, with their Jewish background and affinities?
- ❖ Galatians 6:1–7: What is Paul saying here about the nature of "right relationship"? What is he saying about the relationship between "faith" and "works"?

Reconvene the large group and ask the reporters to share highlights from their group's discussion. Have them describe the passages that their group considered and mention what themes and questions arose. Then open the discussion to the whole group. How does Paul see himself in relationship to the Galatians? What kind of "authority" does he claim for himself? What kind of authority has the Christian church given him? How have participants' views of Paul changed through engaging with these texts and with the related chapter in *Understanding the Bible*?

## LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

5 MINUTES

Ask the group to take a moment to think back over all they have accomplished in this session. Point out the "suggested homework" for the next session:

- ❖ Read “Revelations” in *Understanding the Bible*. Notice any additions that need to be made to the “Biblical Timeline.” If you have time, look up any biblical passages that intrigue you.
- ❖ Notice references to the Bible in what you read, hear, or see (TV, movies, newspapers, novels, and more) between now and the next session. Bring these in to add to the list of “Uses of the Bible.”

Ask for volunteers to research any “Open Questions” and bring what they find to the next session.

Invite volunteers to take on the task of typing up the lists that have been created during Part Two so that they can be shared with the group. Arrange for copies of these lists to be made (either by the volunteers, or by getting them to you).

Remind them that the next session is the last one in the program. Encourage them to invite guests to join them for this session. Ask participants to brainstorm ways to share their experience with the larger community: Through a worship service? A newsletter article? A brief forum? Ask them to bring ideas and resources to the next session.

Encourage your group to plan a party to celebrate the conclusion of this journey. You might want to invite guests to sit in on the last session and share in the celebration. Ask them to plan to stay later than usual.

Finally, remind folks to arrive early for the next session, and thank them for their contributions. Then offer the Closing Words and extinguish the chalice.

## CLOSING WORDS

**1 MINUTE**

In *Understanding the Bible* (p. 184), John Buehrens writes:

One of the most sincere Christian souls I have ever known, my friend Con Browne, in joining the interracial Koinonia community, made a special request. Instead of the usual affirmation of Jesus as “Lord and Savior,” Con wanted simply to say, “I find Jesus to be instructive.”

“I find Jesus to be instructive.” How does this resonate for you?

# Session Nine: Revelations—The Journey Continues . . .

## MATERIALS

Newsprint, markers, masking tape; chalice, candle, matches; paper, pens, and pencils; nametags; newsprint lists (“Uses of the Bible,” “Guiding Questions,” and “Themes in the Bible”), the group’s “Covenant,” and the “Biblical Timeline”; table on which to spread out resource materials, with sign-out sheet; (optional) *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnbooks

## GOALS OF THIS SESSION:

- ❖ To engage the question of the relationship between “faith” and works”
- ❖ To look at one of the extracanonical Gnostic gospels
- ❖ To review and relish a sense of accomplishment in completing this journey through the Bible
- ❖ To plan a means of sharing what has been accomplished and learned with the larger community

## PREPARATION:

- ❖ Review “Revelations” in *Understanding the Bible*, and read through the activities for this session. Adapt them to fit the needs and desires of your group and to fit your own interests and skills.
- ❖ Arrange chairs in a circle. Place the chalice where everyone can see it.
- ❖ Post the following items: the “Biblical Timeline”; the group’s “Covenant”; the newsprint sheets labeled “Uses of the Bible for Good and for Ill,” “Guiding Questions,” “Open Questions,” and “Themes in the Bible.”
- ❖ Make copies of the Gospel of Mary, available in a number of the “Resources” on Handout 3, as well as online at <http://www.gnosis.org/library/marygosp.htm>.
- ❖ Bring additional resources for the planning of a worship service (or other means of sharing what participants have learned with the larger community).
- ❖ Prepare the space for the party!
- ❖ Set up the “library” of resource books, art, and music, along with the sign-out sheet. Place copies of “Handout 3: Resources” and the sheet titled “Additional Resources: Contributions from the Group” on this table.

**AS PARTICIPANTS ARRIVE:** *Ask for a volunteer to be the **chalice lighter**. Ask all participants to fill out a **nametag**. Offer newcomers a copy of the handouts.*

**MUSICAL OPENING (OPTIONAL)****3 MINUTES**

Invite participants to gather in the circle, standing as they are willing and able, and sing hymn #187, “It Sounds Along the Ages,” from *Singing the Living Tradition* (the Unitarian Universalist gray hymnal).

**OPENING WORDS****1 MINUTE**

Never put a period where God has placed a comma. —Gracie Allen

[borrowed from the United Church of Christ’s T-shirts, which also read: “God is still speaking”]

**NOTE TO LEADERS:** *Please provide a moment of silence after the opening words in each session.*

**WELCOME****5 MINUTES**

This is the time for welcoming participants to the last session of this program (and their guests, as appropriate). You will want to provide a brief description of the program for visitors, and you may want to include some of the information from the Welcome in Session One in order for them to feel comfortable.

*Preview of this session:* We made it! In this session, we will revisit a discussion we began last time about the relationship between “faith” and “works” for the early Christian interpreters like Paul and the writer of the letter of James. Then we will indulge in some more dramatics, as we take a look at the Gospel of Mary. Finally, we will spend some time reviewing what we have accomplished and produced on this journey through the Bible, and we will talk about how we want to share what we have learned with our larger community.

Briefly remind participants about the newsprint lists, and point out the reference library and handouts to visitors. Let folks know that they can make continue to make additions to the lists during this session; we will take a last “tour” of them in Activity 3. Volunteers who have typed up these lists should place the copies on the resources table.

**CHECK-IN****20 MINUTES**

Invite participants to check in by allowing each person in the circle to speak for about one minute. Ask any visitors to introduce themselves. Returning participants might share what they have witnessed or discovered since the last session regarding the uses of the Bible in contemporary life (this allows visitors a glimpse of the “rituals” for each session). Those who volunteered to research an “open question” may provide their answers or discoveries at this time. Gently suggest that people be mindful of the time so that everyone may have a chance to speak. The size of your group will determine how long check-in will take.

**ACTIVITY 1: CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION:  
FAITH “AND/OR” WORKS?**

**15 MINUTES**

*Purpose:* To engage with one of the later letters in the Christian Scriptures; to follow up on an important theme for the early Christian church

Ask for volunteers to read aloud the following passages:

- ❖ James 2:1–7
- ❖ James 2:14–18
- ❖ James 2:26

What echoes do participants hear in these verses? (Examples might include Micah 6:8; Matthew 25:31–36; and verses from Paul, including those from Galatians that the group considered in the last session.) What is at stake for the early Christians in deciding whether “faith” or “works” are most important for “salvation”? What do these ideas imply about God, about God’s relationship to human beings? With which “side” would participants choose to align themselves? Which is most important for them—“faith” or “works” . . . or both?

**ACTIVITY 2: ENGAGING WITH THE TEXT: THE GOSPEL OF MARY**

**20 MINUTES**

*Purpose:* To give participants a taste of a Gnostic gospel; to consider the role of women in the early church; to touch on issues of how the canon was formed

Ask for volunteers to play the following roles in a dramatic reading of the entire Gospel of Mary (it is short!):

- ❖ Narrator
- ❖ An unknown disciple (who begins the text)
- ❖ The Savior
- ❖ Peter
- ❖ Mary (who begins at 5:7 and continues through all of Chapter 8)
- ❖ Andrew
- ❖ Levi (also called Mathew)

Remind participants to follow closely in their texts so that they will be ready when their cue comes. There are no quotation marks here, so the narrator needs to be ready to jump in at any moment. Invite them to have fun and to dive into their parts with gusto.

After a round of applause, prompt discussion of this text with some of the following questions (or others of your choosing):

- ❖ What makes this text difficult?
- ❖ What is the Savior saying in his speeches in Chapter 4? What themes come up here? (Buehrens offers hints as to Gnostic themes in “Revelations.”)
- ❖ What are the disciples’ feelings after the Savior leaves? What are Mary’s? Is Mary a “disciple”?
- ❖ Are any of these verses familiar? Do they (or something similar) appear in passages that made it into the canon?



- ❖ What are Peter’s and Andrew’s concerns about what Mary says?
- ❖ What in the world does the “perfect Man” mean?
- ❖ Why would the formers of the canon for the Christian Bible leave this book out?
- ❖ What other themes arise from the reading of this text?
- ❖ Does reading this text change the way you read the rest of the Christian Scriptures? If so, how?

### **ACTIVITY 3: TOURING OUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

**20 MINUTES**

*Purpose: To give participants a chance to revel in how much ground they have covered and how much depth they have explored through this program*

Offer participants one last chance to update the timeline and the lists that they have been creating throughout the program. Invite volunteers to explain each of the lists or the “Biblical Timeline” to visitors or to the rest of the group.

Now ask everyone to take a long look at what they have recorded . . . what they have covered . . . what they have accomplished. Ask participants to share their thoughts and feelings as they look at this evidence of their journey together. How would they sum up what they have done?

### **ACTIVITY 4: SHARING WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED**

**30 MINUTES**

*Purpose: To encourage participants to translate their experience into a form that may be shared with their community*

Return to the brainstorming that the group began at the end of the previous session. How would they like to share this experience with the larger community? Through a worship service? A newsletter article? A brief forum? Spend some time planning this event or publication. What would they most like to communicate? How will they share the presentation? What would they hope to bring to the community?

### **WRAPPING UP**

**5 MINUTES**

Thank the group for all their hard work and contributions throughout this program on *Understanding the Bible*. Let them know what leading this program has meant to you.

If there are other “housekeeping” announcements, this is the time to make them.

Then invite participants to enter into a time of silence together, relishing the sense of accomplishment from coming this far in the journey, knowing that the journey continues . . . . Then, as they feel so moved, invite them to offer into the circle just one word or phrase that sums up how they feel about this experience of “understanding the Bible.” Let these words form the group’s communal benediction. Then offer the Closing Words and extinguish the chalice.

**CLOSING WORDS**

**1 MINUTE**

Micah 6:8 (NRSV)

[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good:  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

**Celebrate!**