

**UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE:  
An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers and Religious Liberals  
An Intensive Intersession Course  
Starr King School for the Ministry, Berkeley, CA  
Monday, January 16, 2013, through Friday, January 20,  
9 am to 5 pm  
John A. Buehrens, Instructor  
Three Units**

**About the Course**

The Bible has been said to provide the “DNA” of Western culture. No one can effectively attempt to change that culture without learning how to interpret the Bible in transformative ways. This course welcomes those who feel alienated from the Bible, or who know little of it, except as mediated through interpretations supporting oppression and the *status quo*. For those already familiar with progressive Biblical interpretation, it can serve as further preparation for intensive study of Hebrew and Christian texts. Advance reading will include not only the instructor’s brief (200 page) book of the same title, but also several texts introducing the development of the Biblical traditions, the Bible in relation to violence, feminist biblical interpretation and Jewish scholarship in relation to Christian origins. Course discussions will use the Beacon Press study guide to the instructor’s book prepared by the Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones. A final paper will be required on a theme or text selected by each student in consultation with the instructor.

**About the Instructor**

John Buehrens is a Unitarian Universalist minister who has served congregations in Tennessee, Texas, New York City, Massachusetts and California, and as President of the UUA, 1993-2001. An experienced theological educator, he has taught courses at Harvard Divinity School, Andover Newton Theological School, and Starr King. In addition to *Understanding the Bible*, Buehrens has written *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism* [with Forrest Church 1989,1997] , *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* [with Rebecca Ann Parker, 2010], and *Universalists and Unitarians in America: A People’s History* [2011].

### **Advance Reading:**

**Required:** *Understanding the Bible: An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers and Religious Liberals*, by John A. Buehrens [Beacon, 2003] pb; \$14. ISBN-13: 978-0807010532

**Recommended:** Beacon Press Study Guide to the above, by Nancy Palmer Jones; see [http://www.beacon.org/client/pdfs/1053\\_dg.pdf](http://www.beacon.org/client/pdfs/1053_dg.pdf) (This is generally the course outline.)

**Required:** A Bible of your own for reading key texts referenced above.

**Recommended:** A study edition of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) such as *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: NRSV (4<sup>th</sup> Edition)* – [http://www.amazon.com/New-Oxford-Annotated-Bible-Apocrypha/dp/0195289552/ref=dp\\_ob\\_title\\_bk](http://www.amazon.com/New-Oxford-Annotated-Bible-Apocrypha/dp/0195289552/ref=dp_ob_title_bk). (\$29.49).

**Required:** *The Bible: A Biography*, by Karen Armstrong [Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007] ISBN-13: 978-0-87113-969-6. **OR**

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem: The Ancient City That Ignited the Modern World*, by James Carroll [Houghton Mifflin, 2011]. See chs. 3,4, and 10 for a succinct, overall and progressive interpretation of the Biblical tradition in relation to issues of reducing human violence. ISBN-13: 978-0547747620. Pb. \$12.99; Kindle, \$9.99.

### **Further Reading:**

**Required:** *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza [Orbis, 2001] ISBN-13: 978-1570753831 (\$17.58, Amazon)

**Recommended Resource:** *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Newsome, Ringe, Lapsley [WJK, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 2012] ISBN-13: 978-0664237073. (Hardcover \$30.25; Kindle \$21.99)

**Required:** *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity*, by Jon D. Levenson [Yale, 1993, pb.,\$22] ISBN-13: 978-0300065114

**Recommended Resource:** *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Brettler [Oxford, 2011; hardcover \$29.71 from Amazon; ISBN-13: 978-0195297706

**Course Plan: Overnight reading/research and brief reports will also be assigned.**

**Monday am – Session I: Reasons, Traditions, Versions and Interpretations**

- Activity 1: Self-Introductions
- Activity 2: Uses of the Bible for Good and for Ill
- Activity 3: Covenant: Guidelines for Exploring Together
- Activity 4: Context: A Biblical Timeline
- Activity 5: Engaging with a Text: Genesis 3:1-24

**Monday pm – Session II: Creations and Generations**

- Activity 1: Engaging with the Text: Genesis 1 and 2
- Activity 2: Themes in the Hebrew Bible
- Activity 3: Engaging with Thematic Stories
- Activity 4: The Power of Language – Defining Our Terms

**Tuesday am – Session III: Liberations and Institutions – Exodus to 2 Kings**

- Activity 1: Engaging with the Text – The Exodus
- Activity 2: The Still Small Voice
- Activity 3: Prophetic and Liberal Religion – Accommodation or Liberation?

**Tuesday pm – Session IV: Exaltations and Frustrations – Psalms, Wisdom, and Job**

- Activity 1: Listening and Responding – The Psalms
- Activity 2: The Voice of Wisdom
- Activity 3: Engaging with the Text – Job, Ecclesiastes

**Wednesday am – Session V: Redemptions and Expectations: The Prophets**

- Activity 1: Prophetic Themes
- Activity 2: The Prophets in Context
- Activity 3: Engaging with the Text: The “Dramedy” of Jonah
- Activity 4: Engaging with the Text: Daniel; the Rise of Apocalyptic Literature

**Wednesday pm – Session VI: Midweek Process Evaluation**

- Activity 1: Hebrew Bible learning summary
- Activity 2: Teaching/learning evaluative pause; discussion of paper topics
- Activity 3: Reports on the “Further Reading”
- Activity 4: Brief Introduction to the Christian Canon

### **Thursday am – Session VII: Proclamations and Passions**

Activity 1: The Synoptic Gospels and the Sayings Source (Q)

Activity 2: Midrash and Prophecy *ex eventu* (after the fact)

Activity 3: Guiding Questions and Past Interpretations

Activity 4: Understanding Sources: Two Healing Stories

Activity 5: Engaging with the Text: Matthew 25:31-36

### **Thursday pm – Session VIII: Passions and Resurrections**

Activity 1: Imaginative Compassion: The Passion Stories

Activity 2: Engaging with the Text: The Resurrection Narratives

### **Friday am – Incarnations and Salvations – The Gospel of John and Letters of Paul**

Activity 1: Engaging with a Text: John 4:5-30, The Samaritan Woman at the Well

Activity 2: Engaging with a Text: Paul's Letter to the Galatians

### **Friday pm – Revelations – The Journey Continues**

Activity 1: Faith and/or Works (James 2)

Activity 2: The Gospel of Mary

Activity 3: Other Non-Canonical Literature

Activity 4: Revelation is Not Sealed

Activity 5: Course evaluation

### **Course expectations (basis of evaluation)**

Evidence of having done the required advance reading will be elicited early in the meetings.

Participation in exercises, including small research or reading projects assigned overnight.

A final paper (10-15 pages) is required, to be submitted within six weeks of the final meeting, based on a theme or text selected by the student after consultation with the instructor. The paper should help the student to meet the course goal:

### **Course goal**

To help students largely alienated from, or unfamiliar with, the Biblical tradition to discover alternative and progressive approaches and to prepare for further Biblical study and interpretation.