

Fourth/Fifth Grade Bible Curriculum

Prepared for the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington, Vermont

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Preface

I have taught 4th grade Bible stories at the FUUSB for over ten years now. I have had a number of excellent co-teachers, many of whom came up with ideas that are represented in this curriculum. I cannot now remember who did what for proper attribution, but I am in their debt. Each year I personally lead about 1/3 of the class sessions, and I often help plan many of the others. The following suggestions for class sessions have been tried and tested over a number of years. Starting in 2008, the plan is to have classes of 4th and 5th graders mixed. The curriculum has been designed for an optimal class size of 5 to 10, with at least two teachers always present.

General remarks

One thing I have learned in my years of teaching fourth and fifth grades is that one should never underestimate the intelligence or abilities of our UU kids. They often demonstrate more raw mental capacity than many of my college students, though of course they have not been exposed to as much data or experience. But their ability to comprehend difficult historical and theological concepts continues to amaze me. There is rarely a need to water down the stories or shy away from difficult topics. If everything is approached honestly and forthrightly, the kids will rise to the challenge. They also retain an extraordinary amount from week to week, especially when they engage in active learning (drawing, acting out stories, making models, etc.). Teaching this age is so rewarding because for the most part the students are extremely curious, intelligent enough for adult conversation, and they do not yet display the cynicism and melancholy of the early teenage years.

The great thing about teaching the bible in a UU context is that one need not be an apologist for the material under study. Some of the bible stories teach wonderful moral lessons, but some others are repugnant. We don't have to believe in or make excuses for what the bible says. We can study it in a neutral manner, examining the pros and cons of various biblical viewpoints. The fourth graders are excellent at this, and in this way we help to develop their moral reasoning. They are also good at grappling with cultural differences, like the fact that many biblical characters have multiple wives. Instructors need not shy away from these aspects of the stories. This curriculum is not geared toward understanding what God has done or what God is like, but rather, it's about how human beings in the biblical traditions have

understood God and their relationship to him over the centuries. Dates in this curriculum use the system “B.C.E.” (Before the Common Era) and “C.E.” (Common Era). These are the equivalent of the Christian designations B.C. (Before Christ) and A.D. (Anno Domini).

**Special note concerning the acting out of stories throughout the curriculum:

In my experience, the kids enjoy acting things out in the following manner. A teacher needs to come to class knowing the story very well. The teacher asks students to play various characters, and those roles can change during the course of the class. The teacher places the students in various situations and tells them what happens next, whereupon the students act that out. Take it in small scenes. Often it works well to ask the students what they *think* is going to happen next. What’s the next logical thing their character would do? Even if they guess wrong it’s a good springboard for discussion. By the end they’ll have plot resolution and you can discuss the meanings and messages in the story.

There are other possibilities for role playing as well. One would be to read aloud a summary of the story, or the whole text itself if it’s short enough, so the students themselves become familiar with it, and then ask the students to assume a role play of TV news reporters interviewing the various characters in the story about what happened. Or they could be guests on a mock TV talk show relating what happened to the host, who should probably be played by one of the teachers. Sock puppets are a fun substitute for simply acting out the stories. Or you could make a pretend (or real!) video to put on YouTube. There are all kinds of interactive ways to get the students to think about the stories, remember their content, and enable them to discuss the messages.

Each session is designed to last about one hour, including a snack.

**Special note on how to read biblical citations. If you see just a book title and a number, the number represents the *chapter* of that biblical book (Genesis 5). If more than one chapter is involved, a dash will be used to indicate all the material in the included chapters (Genesis 5-8 means Genesis chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8). If you see two numbers with a colon in between, the number(s) after the colon represent biblical *verses* (Genesis 5:8 means chapter 5, verse 8. Genesis 5:8-10 means Genesis chapter 5, verses 8, 9, and 10). If you see two colons with a dash, that will mean you start with one particular verse and end at another (Genesis 5:8-7:9 means start at chapter five, verse 8, and end at chapter seven, verse 9).

Session # 1. What is the Bible?

After introducing ourselves, we introduce the students to the bible. It helps if you can secure a Hebrew Bible in Hebrew and a New Testament in Greek to pass around to the class. Remember, a Hebrew Bible opens from the back! Explain how the Bible is not a book, but rather is a library of texts written over the course of hundreds of years. The Hebrew Bible (referred to generally as the “Old Testament” by Christians) portion was written roughly from 1000 B.C.E. to 150 B.C.E., and the New Testament

portion was written roughly from 50 C.E. to 150 C.E. The Hebrew Bible is the national literature of the Jews; the New Testament is the in-group literature of a particular Jewish sect, namely, the early Christians. Explain how there are no surviving “originals” of any biblical book anywhere in the world—you can’t go to a museum and see the “original” Genesis, for example. All we have are copies of copies of copies, mostly from the middle ages. Even the Dead Sea Scrolls, which contain manuscripts of Hebrew bible books as old as 200 B.C.E., are copies made hundreds of years after the originals, in most cases. Our English translations are based on no single manuscript, but rather on scholarly reconstructions of the text based on the comparison of hundreds of surviving manuscripts.

Another topic to address is why we study the Bible in the UU Religious Education curriculum. Why is it worth spending a year of our time? There are many possible answers to this question, but two main ones stand out: 1) We live in a western culture and, like it or not, the Bible has played a tremendous role in shaping that culture. Ignorance of the bible can be a major handicap in American society. 2) The religious roots of Unitarian Universalism rest firmly in the Christian tradition. While the denomination has in many ways evolved away from that original focus, one cannot understand the history of the UU movement without some understanding of the Bible and Christianity.

Activities: 1) Ask the kids what they already know about the bible. Many will know a surprising amount for a number of reasons. 2) Teach the students how to find things in the bible using the Table of Contents 3) Use maps or a globe to identify where in the world the action of the bible takes place 4) Have the students make scrolls, using dowels and paper and Elmer’s glue. Explain that the “book” format was not invented until around 200 C.E., and before that texts were preserved on hand-written on scrolls made of leather or papyrus. Even the first books were hand-written, since the printing press was not invented until 1453. If you know any, have the students write some Hebrew or Greek letters on the scrolls. Explain how mistakes might occur in the process of handing down the text from generation to generation. 5) You might try reading the same passage from different English translations to show the students how translations can differ. The King James Version from 1611 makes a nice contrast to the New Revised Standard Version (20th century) found in the classroom.

Session #2. Creation. Genesis 1:1-2:25

The 1990 “Bible Stories” curriculum developed by Pat McDonald and Lisa Savio (later Rubin) has excellent ideas for this day. The main aim is to study Genesis 1-2 and compare them with a more scientific understanding of creation and the span of time. Genesis 1 can also be compared with the originally separate story in Genesis 2—the order of creation is different in each chapter! The final editor of the Torah (first five books of the bible) allowed these two accounts to stand without harmonizing them together. Key themes include the Jews’ insistence on the goodness of creation—God created a very good world. Another key theme is humanity’s role to dominate, yes, but perhaps also to care for and preserve the creation (Genesis 1:26-

31). In Genesis 1 there appears to be an equality between the sexes (Genesis 1:27), but this is not true of the story in Genesis 2. Remember, almost all cultures throughout the world have had stories about creation and the first human beings; these are just the ancient Hebrew ones. Other stories are easily available on the internet, so the instructors might print out a couple of short ones to read to the students for comparison.

Activities: Have the students make three timelines to tape onto the wall. One can follow the account in Genesis 1, with each student assigned to draw a particular stage of the creation. The second can follow the creation account as given in Genesis 2:4-25, again with different students assigned the drawing of a different portion. The third can follow a scientific view, using the analogy of one year to represent the 14 billion years since the big bang, when time itself first came into existence. On this reckoning, the earth was formed some time in August (i.e., about 4 billion years ago), dinosaurs appeared in mid-December, and human beings only on December 31. The bible was written just a few minutes before midnight, which represents our present day.

Session #3. Adam & Eve; Cain & Abel. Genesis 2:4 - 4:25.

There is a lot in these famous stories: disobedience and its consequences, sibling rivalry, explanations for why things are the way they are (for example, why do women have pain in childbirth? Why do serpents slither on the ground? Why is agriculture difficult?). You may find some valuable moral lessons here (we all can't just do whatever we want; jealousy can have disastrous consequences), but you also may find real moral ambiguity (is Cain truly punished for his crime? Why doesn't God want Adam and Eve to have knowledge? Why is God so vindictive? Why does God capriciously favor Abel over Cain, sparking the murder?) Allow the students to speculate about these and other themes. It's important to know that the name "Adam" means "humanity" (both male and female) in Hebrew, and is also related to the word "Adamah," meaning "dust." When the story was originally written, the Jews had no concept of the Devil, but in later generations the serpent was associated with this figure. The name of God in this story is "Yahweh;" since about 300 B.C.E., this name has been considered too sacred to utter by observant Jews. When you see the words "the LORD" in all caps in an English bible, it means they are translating the Hebrew word "Yahweh," or YHWH, since all Hebrew was originally written without vowels. Orthodox Jews do not pronounce this name because it is considered too holy to utter. When you see the word "God," they are translating the more generic term Elohim.

Activity: This is a great day for acting out stories. You'll need Yahweh, Adam, Eve, a serpent, Cain, Abel, Cain's wife, etc. Also note that Cain's wife is not named/does not have a name. What does that say about the importance of her in the story according to the original storytellers? Where did Cain's wife come from?!? Obviously the storytellers didn't care about illogical details like that.

Session #4. Noah and the Flood. Genesis 5-11.

Note the fantastic ages of people in Genesis 5. This is a storytelling technique, letting the reader or hearer know that this is a “once upon a time” type story—things then were very different from the way they are now! Also note the mating of divine beings (“sons of God”) with human women in Genesis 6:1-4. In later times these were interpreted as “fallen angels.” The flood story was definitely borrowed from nearby cultures, since Mesopotamian versions older than the bible have been found by archaeologists in the last 150 years. In other versions the Noah character is named Atrahasis or Utnapishti, and gods other than Yahweh cause the flood in those stories. There could be some dim historical memory of a large regional flood either in Mesopotamia or on the shores of the Black Sea, but the biblical story as we have it now is certainly not a historical account. The Tower of Babel story is another myth that explains something, namely, why we all speak different languages. We get our word “babble” from this story.

Activity: A great activity for this day is to build an ark, using something as simple as a couple of boxes. The students can mold clay animals (2 by 2!) and people to go into the ark while an adult reads the story to them. Feel free to edit out the long stretches of “so-and-so begat so-and-so,” though you could read a few of those just to show the students how important genealogy and family lineage was to the biblical authors. One fun activity might be to have the students see how far back they can trace and name their direct ancestors. Do they know the names of all of their grandparents? What about their great-grandparents? Can they go further back than that? They might try reciting their own line of “begats” ending in themselves and their siblings! Allow students to raise their hands and ask questions about the story while it’s being read, as long as it doesn’t get too disruptive. Another building project could be the tower of Babel, shaped like a Mesopotamian ziggurat (look on “Google images” for a depiction).

Session #5. Abraham. Genesis 11:27 – 25:18.

Abraham is a pivotal figure in the biblical narrative. The first eleven chapters of Genesis deal with all of humanity, but starting with chapter 12, and for the rest of the bible, the texts focus on one particular branch of humanity: the descendants of Abraham. Arabs trace their lineage to him through his first son Ishmael; Jews trace their lineage to him through his second son Isaac, and Muslims claim that Abraham was the first monotheist and hence, the first Muslim! Christians claim to be spiritual descendants of Abraham (See John 8:31-59), meaning anyone of any ethnicity can become a “child” of Abraham if they have the same faith Abraham had. There’s no historical reference to Abraham outside the Bible, but unlike the first 11 chapters of Genesis, his story is set in recognizable historical time, roughly 1800 B.C.E.

There’s so much in Abraham’s story, the instructor will inevitably have to choose what to emphasize. Certain parts are essential, however, and should be covered if

possible. These include 1) his “call” by God and his move from Ur (present day southern Iraq) to Canaan (present day Israel-Palestine); 2) his two sons by the two different women Hagar and Sarah. It’s best explained to fourth graders by saying that Abraham “married” the slave-girl Hagar in addition to Sarah—this sort of surrogate parentage described in this story was very common in the ancient Near East, as were multiple wives; 3) the near-sacrifice of Isaac story, since most of the students will have heard of it from somewhere, and it’s a very disturbing story that needs to be aired. One point in the near-sacrifice story is that at several junctures, it looks like the promises of God to Abraham are not going to come true, but at the last minute things always turn out OK. God demands absolute obedience (as we saw back in the Garden of Eden story), and Abraham thus passes the test. It’s a good occasion to discuss the notion of sacrifice in general, be it of animals or humans, practiced by many cultures throughout the world. Why do we do this? We usually sense some sacred power in the blood; we often think that God or the gods need to be appeased with blood so that they’ll shower blessings on us human beings.

Activities: This is a good day for drawing scenes from Abraham’s life. Acting out these stories leads to various qualms about one boy “marrying” two girls and about a father trying to kill his son, so acting out today is not recommended. The drawing can be on one big unified mural, or it can be individual pictures that the students draw and that then you hang in a series. Today would also be a good day to discuss the kids’ impressions, so far, of this Biblical God. How does this God compare to other understandings of God or gods they’ve heard about? How does this compare to their personal beliefs about God? Or, this might be a good day simply to read the stories aloud (either by an adult, a student, or a combination) and discuss them as you go along.

*Special note concerning the Sodom and Gomorrah story: This is one of the few biblical stories that I think is not appropriate for fourth graders—there’s just too much to explain that requires a more adult awareness. The “sin” of the Sodomites appears to be threefold: by ravishing the male angels, they would be violating three ancient taboos—1) failure to provide hospitality, 2) divine/human intercourse, and 3) homosexual intercourse. Lot’s offering his daughters to them avoids all three! Also, Moabites and Ammonites were Israelite enemies, so this story of their incestuous origins would have been understood as an insult. No doubt the Moabites and Ammonites themselves had very different stories of their origins.

Session # 6. Jacob and Esau. Genesis 25:19 – 33:20

These stories are great fun. They seem to promote trickery and deceit, and it’s good to be up-front with students about that. Rebekah, Jacob, and Laban are not necessarily role models to emulate. But everyone seems to get his just deserts: Jacob tricks Esau, but then Laban tricks Jacob, and then Jacob gets even with Laban! The story ends with a great scene of forgiveness and reconciliation between the two brothers Jacob and Esau. And there’s a tinge of feminist sensibility in this story, because through it all, the only one who knows what’s going on, and the only one to whom God directly reveals his plan, is Rebekah. She works behind the scenes to

engineer her will, which is also God's will. When the ancient Israelites told the story, they understood Jacob to be their ancestor, and Esau to be ancestor of the Edomites, a neighboring people. In the story, Jacob is renamed "Israel" (meaning "God fights") and he fathers 12 sons and one daughter by four different women. The 12 sons become the ancestors of the 12 tribes of Israel. One of those tribes is Judah, where the name "Jew" comes from.

Activity: This is an excellent day for acting out the stories. God, Rebekah, Isaac, Jacob, Esau, Rachel, Leah, Laban, and many others populate the huge cast of characters. Select just enough scenes from the stories to fill the time, but be sure to end with the reconciliation. Snack can be served at the point where Esau sells his birthright for a pot of stew, or where Jacob prepares his father's favorite food, or where the first big wedding feast takes place! Another great activity for today is to start developing a Biblical "family tree" with all the characters and how they're related to one another. This will grow as the year progresses; you'll need to add extra pieces of paper, but it will be a handy reference and help the class keep track of who's who.

Session # 7. Joseph. Genesis 37 and 39-50.

Joseph is one of Jacob's 12 sons, his favorite, and this story is one of the classics of world literature. Many students and teachers will have heard of the musical "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," by Andrew Lloyd Weber. Once again, the themes of sibling rivalry, parents' favoritism, reconciliation and forgiveness come to the fore. There's a lot of dramatic tension in the story as Joseph conceals his identity in order to teach his brothers a lesson. Notice how the brothers have matured to the point where they're willing to sacrifice themselves rather than give up Benjamin. This shows that they now realize what they had done to Joseph had been wrong.

Activities: The students can work on a multi-colored coat while the story is read aloud (just a large white sheet and watercolors or fabric paint will do). One disadvantage to acting out is that there are very few female characters, and the Potiphar's wife story is a bit racy for fourth-grade role playing.

Session # 8. Moses and the Exodus from Egypt. Exodus 1-18

At the end of the Joseph story in Genesis, the large extended family of Jacob comes down from Canaan into Egypt in order to survive the famine. As the book of Exodus opens, it's now 400 years later (i.e., around 1300 B.C.E.), and Jacob's family has grown into a numerous nation within Egypt -- so numerous that the Egyptians have enslaved them. They cry out to Yahweh, the god of their ancestors, to save them from this unjust situation. Yahweh responds by calling Moses to lead his people out of bondage and back to Canaan where Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had lived. The storytellers heighten the cruelty of the Egyptians in order to justify the horror of the

punishments that come upon them. Just as the Egyptian Pharaoh ordered all the male Israelite babies killed, so later in the story, the 10th plague has Yahweh's "Angel of Death" smite all the firstborn sons of the Egyptians. Historically there is no account of the Exodus outside of the Bible, and we have numerous Egyptian texts from this period. It's hard to imagine a mass exodus of 600,000 Semitic people out of Egypt all at one time as described here, but it's certainly possible that a small group of escaped slaves made their way from Egypt to Canaan, bringing with them tales of miraculous vengeance from their god that later were embellished, producing the narrative we now have. The storytellers are trying to promote a Yahweh-alone point of view: even if other gods exist, only Yahweh should be worshipped by the Israelites. Yahweh is more powerful than any of them.

Activities: This is a good day for acting out, though there's a lot of violence in the story, and rambunctious fourth-grade boys sometimes get carried away acting out violence. This is OK as long as it's controlled and the larger goals are kept in mind. Another option is to secure a Passover Haggadah (script for the Seder meal) and go through key parts, incorporating snack into it. Many versions are available on the web. This will teach the students the essence of the story (slavery, injustice, plagues, Passover, liberation) in a more sedate manner. The Passover Haggadah doesn't include the story of the baby Moses' escape, so you might want to start with that, move to his call at the burning bush, then go into the haggadah. Notice the important roles that women play in saving the day: Moses' mother acts wisely to save her son; Moses' sister Miriam observes what happens and knows that the baby is safe; Pharaoh's daughter rescues the baby, and Moses' wife Zipporah protects Moses from God's wrath in 4:24-26. You might want to see if you can download or otherwise find and a recording of the classic spiritual, "Go down, Moses." If any teachers of this class have access to good collections of African American Spirituals, it would be great if we could build an audio collection of relevant songs to accompany this curriculum!

**Special note on Exodus 4:24-26, one of the strangest passages in the bible: just after Yahweh calls Moses, it appears he wants to kill him! Zipporah acts quickly to save the day. Scholarly speculation on the meaning and significance of this passage runs wild.

Session # 9. The Ten Commandments and the Golden Calf. Exodus 19-20 and 32.

This session takes a break from narrative to explore that classic of biblical law: the Ten Commandments. According to Jewish rabbis, there are over 600 laws in the Torah, but these first ten occupy a special place of importance. There's another version in Deuteronomy 5, very similar, but with a few more rationales given for some of the laws. The setting is important: the laws are given amidst signs of God's power, and with the people as a whole agreeing to abide by the laws. The first three are specifically about religion: 1) worship no gods other than Yahweh, and 2) make

no images of any god, including Yahweh. This is not strictly monotheism, since the assumption is that the other gods exist, but Israelites should not worship them or make images of them. 3) There should be no wrongful use of the name of Yahweh. The rest have to do with relationships among human beings: 4) One day per week is set aside for rest; Deuteronomy adds that the reason for this is social justice: so that slaves can rest along with their masters! 5) Honor father and mother. 6) No murder; this one cannot mean a blanket prohibition of all killing, because the rest of the Torah commands capital punishment in many cases, and allows for killing in warfare. 7) No adultery, best explained to fourth-graders as being “faithful” to wife or husband without further elaboration. Remember, what Abraham did with Hagar was not adultery, because he was her master and she was not otherwise married. The ancient definition of adultery for a man was sex with a woman married to someone else, and that’s it. Sex with a slave, prostitute, or multiple wives did not count as adultery. A married woman could only have sex with her one husband, of course, an ancient version of the double standard. 8) No stealing. 9) No lying in court; this one uses the language of the court case; it’s not about lying in general. 10) No coveting (desiring what someone else has); this last one is the only one about an interior attitude, not an outward action.

I’ve included Exodus 32 because it’s the famous story of how the people quickly turned their backs on the commandments and how God punished them. In this case they were violating the second commandment against graven images; it’s highly likely the calf represented Yahweh himself. The story was told in later times because there’s good evidence that many Israelites did worship calf images. This was put into the book of Exodus as a cautionary tale by authors who wanted to wipe out calf worship.

Activities: Start with a list on the wall numbered 1-10, but with blanks after each number. Ask the students to call out any of the commandments they know, and when they get one right, write it in its proper place. At the end fill in any they couldn’t get. Discussing them will take the whole class. Ask the students if there are any occasions where it would be OK to violate one of the commandments (for instance, should one always “honor” an abusive father or mother? Perhaps the best way to “honor” them is to tell another adult so they can get help). Might it be OK to kill or steal in some circumstances? What if, by killing an intruder, you’re able to save your sister’s life? Discuss self-defense. Why shouldn’t we be able to kill or steal whenever we want? Are the first two commandments ones that are followed by all UU’s? Why not? What’s wrong with coveting what someone else has, as long as you don’t act on it by stealing? This discussion can be followed by a reading of the Golden Calf incident during snack.

NOTE TO TEACHERS: You will get a new version of this curriculum later in the fall, which will include minor edits to sessions 10-30. Martha didn’t have time to give Jeff comments past lesson 9 in time for RE Orientation!

Session #10. Joshua and the Conquest of Canaan. Joshua 1, 3, 6, 10.

After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness for disobeying Yahweh (in incidents similar to the Golden Calf one), the Israelites finally reach the eastern shore of the Jordan River, poised to enter the promised land. Moses is an old man now (the bible says 120!) and he passes the torch of leadership to a younger man named Joshua. Moses dies and is buried after delivering his last will and testament (namely, the Book of Deuteronomy). There's one major problem for Joshua : the Holy Land is already occupied by Canaanites who have lived there for generations. The biblical authors here want to portray a miraculous conquest of the whole land all in one fell swoop, with Yahweh fighting alongside his people in order to fulfill his ancient promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The historical reality was no doubt much more complex; archaeology does show some limited destruction from this time period (around 1200 B.C.E.), but not a massive displacement of one people by another. Jericho, for instance, was not inhabited in this period, so the story of its destruction is an embellishment imagined at a later time period when the city was inhabited. The years 1200 B.C.E. to 1000 B.C.E. did see the emergence of a new ethnic group in the hill country of Palestine, known by the name "Israel," and based on a tribal organization. That much is certain. Their exact origins, however, are shrouded in mystery. The story of the conquest is highly problematic from a moral perspective. Many later peoples have used this conquest narrative to justify taking over land from native inhabitants as ordained by God (think South African whites or European settlers in New England!). Conquest and slaughter is said to be God's will. Notice that Joshua 10:40-43 describes a complete conquest where the Israelites take over the whole land and all the Canaanites are slaughtered. But the very next book of the bible, Judges 3:1-5, lists all the peoples, including Canaanites, who were remaining in the land after the Israelites moved in! Yahweh left them there to "test" Israel. There's no doubt that the book of Judges gives the more accurate picture historically than the book of Joshua.

Activities: A couple of dramatic stories will serve to give the flavor of the whole book of Joshua. Chapter 6 is the famous "battle of Jericho." Chapter 10 has the famous episodes of Yahweh himself throwing down stones from heaven, and making the sun stand still so that Joshua and his army may have more time to defeat the enemy. This is a combination of human and divine warfare. Remember, it's not objective history, but rather an idealized legendary history told to inspire patriotism. If you can control the rambunctious boys, there's a lot of good material to act out here. You can have several students stand in a circle as the "wall" of Jericho, then have the rest march around seven times blowing trumpets, after which the "wall" falls down. If you fear classroom mayhem, drawing these dramatic scenes while they are being read is a good activity. Or try some of the alternative role-playing techniques outlined at the beginning of this curriculum.

Session # 11 Judges. Judges 3, 4, and 13-16.

The period from 1200 B.C.E. down to about 1000 B.C.E. is known as the period of the “Judges.” The Israelite tribes are settled in the land, but they are not completely unified (different tribes often have different agendas), and there is no king or central government. Charismatic leaders known as “Judges” periodically arise to lead the people in battle and arbitrate their disputes. There are 12 judges in this book: 11 men and one woman, living at different times and facing different situations, always concerned with Canaanites and other enemies. None of these judges established a dynasty. Chapter three briefly describes Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar, and then chapter four tells the story of Deborah, the most powerful female leader in the bible. She’s also called a “prophet.” Chapters 13-16 tell the stories of the most famous Judge of all, Samson. The book of Judges always follows the stereotyped pattern: when the Israelites worship Yahweh correctly and follow his laws, things go well for them. But when they neglect Yahweh, he sends enemies against them and they cry out for deliverance. Yahweh sends a judge who saves them, and things go well for a time, but then they backslide and forget Yahweh again, repeating the cycle. This stylized version of history was meant to teach a lesson to later generations.

Activities: The Deborah story is good to act out since it has such a strong female character in a leadership role—that doesn’t come along too often in the bible. And of course, the Samson and Delilah stories are classic, if a little bizarre. Prepare by reading them in advance and choosing what you want to present to the class. Samson was a Nazirite, a person specially dedicated to Yahweh who never drinks wine and never cuts his hair. This was seen by the storytellers as a source of his strength. You could ask the students to draw what they think Samson would look like as a strong man, aged 30 or so, who had never had a haircut. Here’s a question for the adults to think about: given the way the Samson story ends: would it be fair to characterize Samson as a suicide terrorist, perhaps the world’s first?

Session # 12. King David. 1 Samuel 16 and 17; 2 Samuel 5 and 7.

This is an extremely important session, since it is a linchpin for understanding the New Testament as well as the Old. Why this is so will become apparent below. Around 1000 B.C.E., the Israelite nation was unified enough that one man managed to become king: the first king was named Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin. David, from the tribe of Judah, was a lieutenant in Saul’s army, a courtier at his court, and Saul’s son-in-law from his marriage to Saul’s daughter Michal. Saul’s son Jonathan was David’s best friend. Through a series of shrewd moves and a brief civil war, David managed to take the throne away from Saul’s family after Saul and Jonathan were killed in battle by the Philistines (a new ethnic group recently arrived by ship along the coast). David managed to put together the first (and only) Israelite empire during his long reign, and pass it along to his son Solomon after his death.

One very important detail to know: Israelite custom was to anoint the head of the king with oil upon coronation (see 1 Samuel 10:1 and 2 Samuel 5:3). The Hebrew word for “anoint with oil” is *Mashiach* (messiah in English). So the Israelite king was called the “messiah,” or “anointed one.” When the Hebrew scriptures were translated

into Greek around 200 B.C.E., the Greek translators needed an equivalent word, and they chose “Christos,” meaning anointed with oil in Greek. So the Greek term for the Israelite king is the “Christ.” All this becomes very important in later times, and it’s important to explain it to the students at this stage. They often get it right away, understanding that in later times certain Jews claimed that Jesus of Nazareth was the true king, bestowing on him the title “Messiah” or “Christ.”

Activities: Start by acting out the selection of David by the prophet Samuel, found in 1 Samuel 16. Then act out the classic story of how little David slew Goliath the giant Philistine, from 1 Samuel 17. It is likely that these stories of David’s boyhood are not historical, but rather were invented after David was already king, as an attempt to show how he was destined for greatness all along (one piece of evidence for this is a throwaway line in 2 Samuel 21:19, which states that someone else actually killed Goliath). Over the centuries, Goliath grew in stature: in the Dead Sea Scrolls he’s only 6’9”’, but in the later copy on which our translations are based, he’s 9’6”’! Much of this part of the bible in 1 and 2 Samuel is Davidic propaganda, written by David’s family to show how David was the legitimate ruler, even though he had usurped the throne from Saul’s family. The most important text of this type of propaganda is 2 Samuel 7, where a prophet named Nathan announces to David that Yahweh has chosen his family to rule in Jerusalem FOREVER. This was a very powerful ideology that helped the Davidic family rule for 400 years. There was never an internal coup against the Davidic family in Jerusalem; the Davidic kings did not fall until they were toppled by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E. Notice the role of the prophet here is to relay messages from the god (Yahweh) to the king or the people. We will see more prophets in the coming weeks. Sometimes they prop up the ruler (as in this case) and sometimes they criticize him. Discuss with the students the concept of the “prophet.” Are there any modern day prophets?

Session # 13 Solomon’s Temple and his wisdom. 1 Kings 3:16-28; 4:20 – 5:17

David’s son Solomon inherited the throne from his father around the year 960 B.C.E. He expanded the Israelite territory and made the nation even more wealthy. He was known as an extremely wise ruler, evidenced by the famous story in 1 Kings 3. He built up Jerusalem, including the magnificent Temple to house the ark of the covenant and to offer sacrifices to Yahweh. He used forced labor from all over Israel for his building project (1 Kings 5:13-14), and this caused the northern tribes to rebel from his son’s rule after Solomon’s death. So that part of his rule perhaps wasn’t so wise! Solomon had numerous wives, many of them acquired by treaty with foreign kings (the foreign king would send a daughter to Solomon’s harem as a gift in order to cement the relationship).

Activity: The best activity for this day is to build a model of Solomon’s Temple. Scholarly reconstructions of what it looked like may be found all over the Internet and also in most printed bibles. You’ll need some cardboard boxes, aluminum foil, pipe cleaners, glue, and clay. This temple stood from 940 B.C.E. down to 587 B.C.E. when it was destroyed by the Babylonians. Jews who returned from exile in Babylon

built a new temple on the same spot in Jerusalem in 515 B.C.E. (called the “second temple”). This second temple was radically expanded and beautified by King Herod in the first century B.C.E. The second temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E., and only one retaining wall of Herod’s complex remains, the famous “Wailing Wall.” Later, Muslims built the “Dome of the Rock” on the same spot in the 7th century C.E. While building the model, it’s another occasion to discuss animal sacrifice and its role in religion.

Session #14 Stories about Elijah

[optional session, depending on how many weeks are available]

1 Kings 17-21. Elijah was a prophet who lived in Israel around 850 B.C.E. He was highly critical of the Israelite king Ahab and Ahab’s foreign wife Jezebel. Jezebel was a Ba’al worshipper, and it appears many Israelites were, too. Ba’al was the ancient storm god of the Canaanite pantheon, thought to be responsible for agriculture. These stories about Elijah make the point that Yahweh, not Ba’al, is in charge of the weather and agriculture, and they document a violent struggle over religious ideas within the nation of Israel. Make a selection of stories from these chapters and have the students either draw or act out. If you’re doing Elijah, see the historical note under the Amos lesson (session #15). End with Elijah being whisked up to heaven in a chariot, 2 Kings 2. He’s only the second person in the Hebrew Bible who didn’t die (the other is Enoch in Genesis 5:24). Everyone else goes down into the earth to “Sheol,” the underworld (a neutral place for everyone, good and bad). But Elijah was thought to be so special he got to go up to the heavens to be with Yahweh.

Session # 15 Prophet Amos. Read the entire book of Amos, starting with chapters 7 and 8, then returning to chapter 1 and reading all the way through.

Amos was a prophet who lived around the year 760 B.C.E. He’s the earliest Israelite prophet we have whose sayings and visions were collected into a separate book; for prophets before him we only have stories told about them. Whereas Elijah the prophet (see optional session above) thought Yahweh was upset with his own people for worshipping the god Ba’al, Amos emphasized that Yahweh was upset because the Israelites were practicing social injustice.

First a bit of historical background that should be shared with the students before tackling either Elijah or Amos: After King Solomon died around 920 B.C.E., the 10 Northern Israelite tribes rebelled against rule from Jerusalem. They set up their own Israelite kingdom with a new capital at Samaria. They set up their own king who was not from David’s family. Two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, remained loyal to the Davidic king in Jerusalem. So after 920 B.C.E. we speak of two Israelite kingdoms: 1) the north, called “Israel” and also called Samaria (whence the name “Samaritans”); and 2) the south, called Judah or Judea (whence the name “Jews”), with its capital still at Jerusalem. Anointed Davidic kings continued to rule there. Both kingdoms

spoke Hebrew and both continued to worship Yahweh. This political situation lasted for 200 years, down to 721 B.C.E.

So within that context, Amos was a prophet from Judah who went up north to Samaria to preach against the nation of Israel. He might have said a few things against his own nation of Judah, but the bulk of the surviving oracles we have from him are against the north. He thinks Yahweh is about to send a powerful foreign nation against Israel (Samaria) to destroy it because of its sinful, wicked ways. He was probably thinking of Assyria in northern Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq), which was gaining strength at the time and threatening its neighbors to the west. For Amos, this disaster is about to happen because of the horrible social injustice present in the northern kingdom. The rich are exploiting the poor, they are dealing with them unjustly, they are imposing heavy religious taxes on the poor to pay for religious rituals, etc. All of this has angered Yahweh so much that he has decided to wipe Israel off the map—ironically, both rich and poor alike will suffer when the foreign nation invades. The people will be exiled off their land (this was well-known Assyrian policy of dealing with conquered nations). Amos' strident call for social justice has stirred many over the years, including Martin Luther King (see Amos 5:21-24). Amos does not deal with the question of whether the Assyrians deserve Yahweh's favor—after all, they don't worship him at all! He only cares about the fact that his holy community has broken apart over social class, and therefore it deserves to be destroyed. A few passages might indicate that Amos thought they could avoid the disaster if they mend their ways (5:14), but it is more likely he thought the die was cast, and only a remnant of righteous ones might be preserved if they established justice after the disaster (5:15).

Activities: Have the students draw Amos' dramatic visions in chapter 7. He was simply a dresser of sycamore trees, not a professional prophet at all, when Yahweh starting showing him these visions. The first was of locusts, the second was of fire devouring the land, the third was of destruction of cities by the sword. Yahweh decides not to enact the first two, but decides the third will be fulfilled. Amos then goes north to relay his message, where he receives a chilly reception, to say the least. The students could draw or act out the scene described in 7:10-17 between Amos, Amaziah the priest at Bethel (a northern Yahweh shrine), and King Jeroboam II of Israel. It took a lot of courage to be a prophet, because the king could easily have had him killed! Ask the students to think of any prophetic voices in our own day or more recent history. Talk about social inequalities, and what causes them, and what might be done about them. Notice that Amos had no practical plan for establishing social justice, other than having a foreign nation come in to wipe everyone out so Yahweh could start again with a clean slate.

The reason Amos's oracles were preserved is no doubt because his predictions eventually came true, about 40 years after he delivered his original message. In 721 B.C.E., the Assyrians did come in and conquer Israel (Northern Kingdom only), and they exiled 27,000 men and their families, according to Assyrian accounts chiseled in stone on palaces in Iraq. The survivors were mixed with Assyrian settlers and

became the Assyrian province of Samaria. These are the ancestors of the “Samaritans” that one encounters in the New Testament, and still exist today as a small community of about 400 people in Israel. They have died out largely because they don’t allow intermarriage or conversion. The kingdom of Judah survived in 721 by paying huge bribes to the Assyrians as protection money. It lived on another 150 years under Davidic kings, but as a very weak state, mostly surrounded by Assyrian colonies or puppet kingdoms.

Session # 16 Prophet Jonah. Read the entire book of Jonah.

After a heavy-duty social justice prophet like Amos, it’s nice to study a prophet who has an easier story to understand, namely Jonah. In all likelihood, Jonah was written as pure fiction, perhaps even as a satire on prophecy in general. Jonah tries to avoid God’s call, but can’t seem to escape. He lives in the “great fish” (whale?) and then finally goes to fulfill his mission. His message is purely for a foreign land (Nineveh was the capital of Assyria), unique among the Israelite prophets. The notion of a massive repentance in Nineveh due to the preaching of an Israelite prophet is even more absurd historically than living in a fish for three days. This tale was told to make a several points: 1) you can’t get away from God no matter how hard you try 2) Yahweh is God of the Ninevites as well, even if they don’t know it 3) God can be merciful and change his mind about destruction if the people repent 4) a prophet may get upset if God is merciful, because it turns his prophecy “false” [Think how upset Amos would have been if the Assyrians had never come to destroy Israel! That’s why the book of Jonah is a satire].

Activities: This is a wonderful story to act out, and it’s such a classic of world literature. You need God, Jonah, the fellow sailors, the great fish, the King (or Queen) of Nineveh, and the various people of Nineveh.

Session # 17 Nebuchadnezzar, Exile, and Return. Readings: 2 Kings 24-25 and Isaiah 45.

The year 587 B.C.E. was a pivotal one in Jewish history. In that year, King Nebuchadnezzar came up to Jerusalem from Babylon (present-day Iraq) for the second time. The Babylonians are also called “Chaldeans” in the Bible. The first time Nebuchadnezzar had come in 597, he installed a Davidic king to his liking (Zedekiah), hoping that Judah would become docile and subservient to Babylon. But that King Zedekiah decided to rebel against Babylonian thuggery, and he paid a heavy price. In 587, King Nebuchadnezzar returned to Jerusalem to punish the Jewish nation for its rebellion. He destroyed Solomon’s Temple, he slaughtered many Jews, he exiled the leading citizens of the nation to Babylon, he killed Zedekiah’s sons, and he blinded Zedekiah and took him in chains to Babylon. The basic thrust of these events (not necessarily every detail) is well-documented outside the Bible, so with these stories we’re on firm historical ground.

The period from 587-538 B.C.E. is known as the “Babylonian Exile.” Most Jews at this time were living in Babylon along with other captive peoples whom Nebuchadnezzar had conquered. Some of the poorer Jews (“the people of the land”) were allowed to stay behind in Judah, but the city of Jerusalem was a smoldering ruin.

The Jewish exiles in Babylon collectively are the ones primarily responsible for the compilation of the Hebrew Bible as we know it. They collected the old stories, rewrote the histories, preserved the hymns from the first temple (Book of Psalms), and most importantly, compiled their ancient law codes into the Torah. All of their work was undertaken from the perspective of Babylonian exile, namely, that Yahweh had punished them for their sins by sending them into exile, but if they remained loyal to him and his laws, they would get a renewed chance to try again with a new start in their homeland.

Indeed, the Jews did get that chance: in 540 B.C.E. a Persian (i.e., Iranian) ruler arose named Cyrus the Great. He conquered the Babylonians and issued a decree allowing all the captive peoples (including the Jews) to go back to their homelands and rebuild their Temples. This is precisely what a band of Jews did in 538 B.C.E., inspired by pro-Cyrus preaching like that found in Isaiah 45. Many Jews, however, chose to remain in Babylon, the beginnings of a 2500 year old Jewish community in Iraq that has only now disappeared with the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Virtually all of the Jews of Iraq have now gone to Israel, whereas in 1941 there were 150,000 Jews in Iraq.

The second temple was built in 515 B.C.E., and the Jews living in the Holy Land now truly became a “people of the book,” following the Torah and trying to curry the favor of the God who had exiled them for their sins in an earlier generation. The Persians allowed the Jews to live under their own laws (the Torah) with a lot of self-rule, but one thing the Persians did not allow: the Jews were not allowed to have their own king. There was some early hope centered around a member of the Davidic family who had returned to Jerusalem with the returnees (his name was Zerubbabel), but the Persians did not allow him to become king. After that, we lose track of the Davidic family, but many Jews began to hope that some day a Davidic king would arise to restore the ancient kingship. This figure becomes known as the “Messiah” (in Hebrew) or the “Christ” (in Greek). Both words mean “anointed one.”

Activities: This is a complicated history for fourth-graders, but its basic outlines are essential if they are to understand where the bible came from and why it has the perspective it has. Try to get them to imagine how they would react if someone came in and attacked their city and their homes, and sent them off to live in a strange foreign country. What would it be like to be a refugee? The Hebrew Bible is essentially the literature of refugees who are hoping some day to return to their land. Would they want to blend in and become like their captors, or would they want to try to preserve their heritage? All this is a very heavy discussion, but if managed well it can be extremely enlightening for both the students and teachers alike. No drawing

or acting out today; it's enough to review the main events and discuss the implications.

Session # 18 Book of Esther. Reading: entire book of Esther.
[optional session, depending on how many weeks are available]

This book forms the basis for the Jewish holiday of Purim, which takes place in late winter (February). The tale probably has little or no basis in history; it was a fictional tale told to inspire Jews living outside their homeland. One point is that a Jew can gain tremendous respect and influence (as both Mordecai and Esther achieve) even living in a foreign land (Persia). It also allowed for Jews living under foreign rule to have a party every year to celebrate at least one occasion (probably fictitious) in which they had achieved revenge on their enemies. Many Jewish rabbis and theologians to this day are troubled by the message of vengeance in the book.

Activities: It's a fantastic story for dressing up and acting out, which is precisely what Jews often do at Purim parties even today.

Session # 19. Book of Daniel. Readings: Daniel 1-6.

The first six chapters of this book contain some of the most famous stories of the Bible. The last six chapters contain bizarre apocalyptic visions written in a stylized "code" language only understood by initiates. The story is set during the Babylonian exile (around 560 B.C.E.), but the text as we have it was written hundreds of years later—in fact, it's the youngest book of the entire Hebrew Bible, having been composed in 165 B.C.E. In that later time, the pious Jews in Jerusalem were experiencing persecution from both their Greek overlords and fellow Jews who admired the Greek way of life. The stories of Daniel and his companions would have inspired the pious Jews to remain steadfast and stand up for their religion in spite of hostility from non-believers. The stories may be used to promote a concept of religious freedom: the various wicked rulers in the text pay a heavy price for not allowing the Jews to worship as their God has commanded them.

Activities: We've often acted out and even performed some of the main episodes in chapters 1-6 for other classes at the UU Sunday school. They lend themselves extremely well to dramatization.

Session # 20 Apocalyptic Visions of the End-Times.

In many of the late books of the Hebrew Bible, prophets and visionaries describe what the long-term future will look like. Their hope is generally for a dramatic intervention by God into human history. God will correct injustices and restore the people of Israel to their rightful place as God's chosen people. Sometimes these visions involve a messiah, sometimes they do not.

Activities: This is a great day to have each individual student read one particular apocalyptic vision, draw it on paper, and then explain it to the rest of the class.

Afterward they can be hung on the wall. The following may be used as good examples. I have put them in descending order of appropriateness, so start at the top and work down, depending on the number of students in the class. If there are any left over, teachers can pick one and draw it as well. They should also float around to help individual students understand what they are reading and strategize ways to depict it.

Zechariah 9:9-17

Zechariah 14:1-9

Joel 3:14-21

Daniel 12:1-4 (the only clear reference to resurrection of the dead in the Hebrew Bible)

Amos 9:11-15 (probably a later addition to the original Book of Amos)

Isaiah 65:17-25

Haggai 2:20-23 (remember, Zerubbabel was the grandson of the last Davidic king)

Malachi 3:1-5

Malachi 3:16 to the end of the book.

Isaiah 66:10-16

Session # 21 Introduction to the New Testament

We ended our study of the Hebrew Bible with the apocalyptic visions for a reason: it was precisely this sort of Judaism, focused on hopes for a more divine future, which spawned the Jesus movement and early Christianity. The Jesus movement was a group of Jews in the first-century C.E. who thought that God was starting to put in motion the sorts of end-time events described in the late books of the Hebrew Bible. Their leader was Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew who was put to death by the Roman Empire on a political charge around the year 30 C.E. Rome had been ruling the Jewish homeland to one degree or another since 63 B.C.E. Sometimes they used local client kings like Herod the Great and his descendants, and at other times they ruled directly through a Roman governor like Pontius Pilate. Sometimes the land was divided up with different jurisdictions, but in all cases the Romans had the final say on everything.

Use this session to familiarize the students with the New Testament. Point out the 4 gospels (biographies of Jesus): Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The word “gospel” is from an old English word “good spell,” meaning “good message.” It’s translating a Greek word “evangelion,” also meaning “good message” (hence our term “evangelist”). Mark was probably the first one written, sometime around 70 C.E., or roughly 40 years after the death of Jesus. Matthew and Luke each independently revised Mark and added their own material; this took place probably in the 80s C.E. The Gospel of John is completely different from the other three, with a very different understanding of who Jesus was. It was written some time before the year 120 C.E., but we don’t know exactly when. Tell the students that there are other gospels beyond these four; most are later than these four, and all depict Jesus in a different way. During the second century, the Christian churches gradually began to recognize

only these four as capturing the “true” essence of Jesus as they understood him. There are about 30 other gospels that survive either in whole or in part from the late first/early second century.

Then show them the Book of Acts: this book tells the story of Jesus’ followers in the 3 decades after his death. The Book of Acts was written by the same person as the Gospel of Luke as a two-volume work, the first telling the story of Jesus and the second telling the story of the early Christian churches. This author, “Luke,” was probably a non-Jewish companion of the apostle Paul in Paul’s later years. Luke clearly says he never met Jesus but based his account on reports he had heard from others (Luke 1:1).

Following Acts are 13 letters attributed to the apostle Paul. Paul was a Greek-speaking Jew who never met Jesus, and who was opposed to the Jesus movement in its early years, but then he had a dramatic religious experience that led him to join the movement he had opposed. He founded numerous communities of Christians throughout Greece and Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) and then wrote letters to them; these are the letters collected here. Paul’s letters are the oldest Christian literature in existence, even older than any gospels. The letters date from roughly 50-60 C.E. Some of the letters attributed to Paul may not have been actually written by him. It is almost certain that 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus were written slightly after Paul’s own time. No one disputes the authenticity of Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Philemon. Next comes an early Christian treatise called “Hebrews,” author unknown. Then follow letters from other prominent early Christians: Peter, James, John, and Jude. Some of these may be later forgeries; scholars dispute this all the time. Finally is the New Testament’s own apocalyptic book, based on the Old Testament examples, namely, the Book of Revelation (also called the Apocalypse of John).

The New Testament books were all written in Greek between 50 and 150 C.E. Greek had become the standard language of the eastern Mediterranean after the conquests of Alexander the Great around 300 B.C.E. Jesus himself probably spoke Aramaic, originally the language of Damascus, Syria, but widespread among Jews of Jesus’ day. But the authors of the Gospels or Christians prior to them had to translate his sayings and accounts of his deeds into Greek for a wider audience. Most New Testament authors (with the prominent exception of the author of Luke-Acts) were ethnically Jewish, meaning they had been born and raised as Jews. All of them became members of the Jesus movement, and this is important: in no way are the New Testament texts “objective” accounts of Jesus and the early Christian movement. They all start with the conviction that Jesus is the messiah (=the Christ) and that he is the most important person who ever lived. The Gospel of John even says that he was God in the flesh!

Activities: It will be plenty today to familiarize the students with the New Testament text and the history of how it came to be.

Session # 22 John the Baptist

Any history of the Jesus movement has to begin with John the Baptist. The sources all indicate that an encounter between John the Baptist and Jesus in the late 20s C.E. was a decisive moment in launching the preaching, teaching, and healing career of Jesus, leading to his death a year later (or three years later according to the Gospel of John). Be careful: John the Baptist is not the same as the author of the Gospel, Letters, and Revelation of John. John was a common Jewish name: Jehonatan, meaning “Gift of Yahweh.” That’s why John has an “h” in it.

Activities: The story of John the Baptist lends itself to drawing, either a mural or individual pieces that can be hung side-by-side on the wall. Have each student draw one portion of the mural based on a short text read uniquely by that student. Teachers should float around, helping the students make sense of the text and helping them think of what to draw. Usually boys love to get the final scene, because they get to depict the decapitated John the Baptist. Each student then relates their part of the story to the class.

Here are the key texts in order. I’ve built in some flexibility to adjust for class size. This works for as many as 10 students or for as few as 6. A teacher can always fill gaps.

Luke 1:5-25. This section can be drawn in two parts, with one student drawing verses 8-17, and the other taking on verses 18-25. Both students will need to read the whole passage.

Luke 1: 39-45. According to Luke (and only according to Luke), John the Baptist and Jesus were related because their mothers were cousins.

Luke 1:57-66. (This one can be skipped if there are not enough students)

--30 years later!--

Mark 1:4-8

Matthew 3:7-12 (teachers should read Luke 3:1-20 to get more background, but let the kids stick with Matthew here. Notice the fiery end-time language used by John. He sounds like one of those Old Testament apocalyptic texts!)

Mark 1: 9-11

Mark 6:17-20

Mark 6:21-24

Mark 6:26-29 (these last three can be combined, depending on number of students).

After the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus embarked on his own career of preaching and teaching. It is obvious that with John the Baptist, a large number of Jews were expecting some sort of dramatic turning point in history with God's intervention. This helped spawn the Jesus movement. John met a tragic end because he dared to question authority and criticize his own people the way the ancient prophets had done. The Herod who arrested and executed him was Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, who was a Jewish puppet king of the Romans ruling in Galilee and on the east side of the Jordan River from 4 B.C.E. to 37 C.E. Jews before and after John have had a tradition of periodic ritual cleansings in water (this is from the Torah), but John re-interpreted this and invented a new ritual: a once and for all baptism to wipe away sins in order to prepare for God's judgment. This became an integral part of Christian practice from the movement's earliest days, so Christianity owes a lot to John.

Session # 23 Birth stories of Jesus

Long after the Jesus movement was up and running, Christians began to tell stories about the birth of Jesus. The gospels of Mark and John have no account of this. Only in Matthew and Luke do we find these stories, and they agree on no detail except for the notion that Jesus' mother was a virgin whose child was miraculous.

Activity: Divide the class into two equal groups. Have one teacher accompany each group. One group will need to find an alternative space to meet for part of the class. One group will read and prepare a skit for Matthew's version of Jesus birth (Matthew 1:18-2:23), and the other group will do the same with Luke's version (Luke 1:26-56 and 2:1-40). Then the groups re-assemble and perform the skits for one another. A discussion can follow about the differences and what those differences might mean. Here are some hints to guide the discussion:

In Matthew, the emphasis is on Jesus as a royal, kingly figure, and on Jesus as a new lawgiver like Moses. Just as Moses' life was in danger as a baby, so was that of Jesus. Just as Moses came out of Egypt, so did Jesus. The visitors in Matthew are magi (wise men/astronomers) who bring gifts fit for royalty. King Herod the Great feels threatened by Jesus' royal lineage from the house of David (King Herod could only wish that he himself had such blue blood). In Matthew, Joseph receives all the messages from the angels; Mary is a purely passive vessel and says nothing. Notice in Matthew there is no need for the holy family to find lodging, because they already *live* in Bethlehem! After coming out of Egypt, they only go to Nazareth *for the first time ever* out of fear of Archelaus, Herod the Great's son and short-term successor.

In Luke, by contrast, the family starts out in Nazareth and has to go to Bethlehem for a census. Their return to Nazareth is simply a return home. There is no "flight to Egypt" in Luke, no danger from Herod, no visits from magi. Mary is the center of attention as she receives all the angelic messages and speaks her mind; Joseph is just window dressing. The visitors to Jesus are lowly shepherds bearing no gifts. Luke is emphasizing how common and obscure Jesus was—only a few lowly people were

given the divine insight of how important he would become. Mary's song emphasizes how Jesus' birth is "good news to the poor" and outcast.

Both Matthew and Luke agree that Jesus was born in Bethlehem since that's the city of David and it's essential that the Messiah from David's line be born there. But Jesus was known throughout his life as "Jesus of Nazareth," not "Jesus of Bethlehem," so it was necessary for Christian storytellers to square the circle and explain how Bethlehem was really his birthplace. Matthew and Luke represent two independent versions of this legend-making process. We'll never know where Jesus was *actually* born—most likely it was Nazareth in Galilee, as John 7:27, 40-42, and 52 seem to indicate.

If there's time, either today or in the next session, you can cover the only story in the New Testament about Jesus' childhood: the famous episode when he's age 12 and he escapes from his parents to stay in Jerusalem to converse with the scribes and elders in the Temple (Luke 2:41-52). Luke is showing here how Jesus was a prodigy from an early age, clearly destined for great things.

Session # 24 Famous miracles of Jesus.

Remind the students of Jesus' baptism by John. Both men were about 30 when they had this encounter. Tell them that slightly before or after John was arrested, Jesus embarked on his own career of teaching, preaching, and healing in Galilee, the region around his hometown of Nazareth. According to Mark, Jesus public ministry began with a burst of miraculous healing activity, especially the casting out of demons. Remember, in the ancient world, some physical illnesses and almost all mental illnesses were attributed to the work of demonic possession. Jesus became known for this talent of healing both mental and physical infirmities. Other miracles of controlling nature itself were also attributed to him. You can have a discussion with the students about what they think of miracles. Are they ever possible? Is this just overblown storytelling? They are likely to have a variety of opinions on this subject (the teachers will as well, no doubt).

Activity: These miracles are great for drawing—again, the students can each uniquely read an account of one miracle, draw a depiction of it, and explain to the rest of the class what they read and illustrated.

Here's a list of miracles that will serve the purpose, start at the top and work down for the number of students, or just choose your favorites. If there's time and fewer students, each student can do two, or the teachers can do some:

Mark 1:21-28 (unclean spirit)

Mark 2:1-2 (paralyzed man through the roof)

Mark 8:22-26 (blind man)

Matthew 14:22-23 (walking on water)

Mark 6:30-44 (feeding 5000)
Mark 5:21-24 and 35-43 (raising Jairus' daughter)
John 2: 1-12 (changing water into wine)
Mark 4:35-41 (stilling a storm)
John 11:1-6 and 11:17-44 (raising Lazarus)
Mark 5:1-20 (Gerasene demoniac)
Mark 7: 31-37 (Deaf man)

Session # 25 Famous Parables of Jesus

Jesus was famous for teaching in *parables*, symbolic stories where certain characters and events stand for theological concepts. Only rarely do the parables have a clear moral lesson. More often they are symbolic of the new way in which God is now dealing with the world through the advent of Jesus, the Messiah. Many parables are found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but there's only one in the Gospel of John.

Activity: These parables are ripe for acting out. You can divide into groups, practice separately, and then perform them for each other, the way you did with the birth stories of Jesus. Or you can act them all out with the whole group.

Parable #1: The Prodigal Son, Luke 15:11-32. This is one of Jesus' most famous parables. The father represents God and the older son represents those (Jews? Long-time Christians?) who have been steadfast with God the whole time. The prodigal son represents the recent convert who has been a sinner. God decides to forgive, making the older son jealous. But he is not rejected by the father. I always have great sympathy for the older son. Slopping pigs is the worst job imaginable for a Jew—the point is the prodigal son has slunk as low as he can go. Interesting discussion question: what if the Prodigal son turned around and left again, squandering his second chance. Should the father take him back again after that?

Parable #2: The Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37. This the only parable in the New Testament that ends with “go and do likewise.” It's a clear morality tale, with a clear character to emulate. Some important things to know: both the priest and the Levite were headed toward Jerusalem, so they probably needed to maintain their ritual purity in order to serve in the Temple. Contact with a dead body would violate that purity, so by going over to the man they risked “contaminating” themselves in case he were dead. This is an implicit attack on the purity codes and perhaps even temple rituals specified in the Torah. Also, one needs to know that a Samaritan was considered not a very desirable person by most Jews. Samaritans were (are!) a community of Yahweh worshippers descended from the old Northern Kingdom of Israel (with its capital at Samaria). They mixed with Assyrian settlers after 721 B.C.E. They have an alternate version of the Torah, they never accepted the Davidic kingship, they had their own separate temple on Mt. Gerizim, and they were seen by Jews as illegitimate. So for a Jew (Jesus) to tell a story with a Samaritan hero was unexpected and shocking indeed. There are about 400 Samaritans left today living in Israel.

Parable #3: Mark 4:1-9. Jesus explains this parable to his disciples in Mark 4:10-20.

Session # 26 The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)

Matthew always portrays Jesus as a lawgiver like Moses, and the Sermon on the Mount fits that paradigm precisely. There's a much shorter, less systematic version of the Sermon in Luke 6:17-49, but in Luke, Jesus stands on a "level place," so scholars call it the "Sermon on the Plain." Matthew's version is the much more famous one. Jesus here comments on, expands, and interprets the Torah of Moses for his followers.

Activity: write down several teachings from the Sermon on paper, fold them up, and put them in a bowl or hat. Create teams of two among students and teachers (mix it up). Have each team pull out a teaching from the hat, then have them do "charades" to get the rest of the class to figure out what the teaching is. The charades can be talking or no-talking. The teams might want to invent a dialogue to get their points across, so talking may be OK. Once the class has figured it out (or after everyone gets tired of guessing and you provide the answer), discuss the teaching. Is it always applicable? Is it a good idea? Are there cases when it might be good to go against one of these teachings?

Here's a list of teachings that work well with this exercise:

- 1) "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt. 5:39)
- 2) "If someone wants to take you coat, give him your cloak as well" (Matt 5:40)
- 3) "If someone forces to walk one mile with him, walk another mile as well. (5:41)
- 4) "Love you enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:44)
- 5) "Not only should you not murder, you shouldn't even be angry!" (Matt 5:21-22)
- 6) "When you give money to the poor, don't let anyone know about it" (6:2-4)
- 7) "Do not judge others without judging yourself first" (Matt 7:1-5)
- 8) "You cannot serve both God and money" (Matt 6:24)

The "Lord's Prayer" is also contained in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6:9-13). Go over this prayer with the students during snack. How would it have us live? Is there an apocalyptic tinge to this prayer? What is the prayer hoping for? Some version of this prayer probably does go back to the historical Jesus.

Remember, the Sermon on the Mount was based on teachings of Jesus and then crafted by early Christians who had absolutely no political power. They were not in charge of keeping order, running a government, preventing crime, or anything of the sort. They were attempting to be a holy community in the midst of an evil world, and that helps explain some of the harsh, impractical, yet at the same time beautiful teachings contained in this sermon.

Session # 27 More famous parables of Jesus.

[Optional session, depending on how many weeks you have available].

Many of Jesus' parables have a sharper edge to them than the ones we've already covered.

Their point seems to be that God *will* judge those who don't get on board with the Jesus movement. God is forgiving, but only up to a point, at which time God will judge fiercely. Often the targets seem to be non-believing Jews, i.e., Jews who have not accepted Jesus as Messiah (the vast majority of Jews in Jesus' day, of course). Another target is superficial followers of Jesus—those who have not joined the Jesus movement with their whole hearts. We must remember that most Jews living at the time would never have heard of Jesus—there was no CNN or YouTube to report it! Of those who did hear about or encounter Jesus, some became followers (perhaps a fairly large number before his death), the majority were probably indifferent to him, and some were actively hostile, just as you would expect with any new social or religious movement. These parables make sense in that context:

Mark 12: 1-12

Matthew 18:23-35

Matthew 22:1-14

All of these parables are good for acting out and discussion.

Session # 28 The last week of Jesus' life—death of Jesus. Read Mark 11-15.

This is a very tough but necessary session. Its subject matter is so serious that it's probably best to conduct it as an interruptible lecture and discussion rather than trying to act out or draw the scenes. Usually there's enough inherent interest in the topic to hold the students' attention.

The earliest account we have of Jesus' death is the one in the Gospel of Mark, chapters 11-15. It's already a highly tendentious theological account, told in such a way as to highlight 1) the greater culpability of Jesus' fellow Jews over the Romans, even though it was a Roman execution 2) the cosmic significance of Jesus' death with darkness over the earth in the afternoon and the Temple curtain torn in two 3) the absolute necessity of Jesus' death in God's plan for salvation. So in the gospels we are not reading straightforward, dispassionate history. It is a historical fact that Jesus was crucified by the Romans. But why that happened is only hinted at in the texts, and any modern reconstruction of the events relies on a lot of speculation and reading between the lines.

The following facts are fairly certain: In a certain year during the 10-year reign of the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate over Judea (he ruled from 26-36 C.E.), Jesus decided to go to Jerusalem for the Passover festival in the spring. [Ask the students if they

remember what the Passover festival celebrates. It celebrates the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt! It's a religious and political independence holiday (like our July 4 only more intense religiously), and in Jesus' day it had to be celebrated under the thumb of a political overlord, namely, the Romans. Imagine if we had to celebrate July 4 with Russian soldiers standing guard watching our every move!]. Passover under foreign rule was always a bubbling cauldron of potential political unrest. While near Jerusalem, Jesus was arrested by the Roman authorities (perhaps with the complicity of some Jewish authorities) and put to death by the Romans using the crucifixion method, a common Roman punishment chosen for its slow, painful, excruciating death, and also for its humiliating public character (passersby can read the charge and be admonished not to do likewise).

Why would the Roman government and some Jewish leaders have wanted Jesus to die? Maybe they were offended by those harsh parables and sermons. Maybe they were jealous of his popularity. These factors may have contributed, but a more likely cause is a political one. According to the gospels, the charge against Jesus on the cross read: "King of the Jews" (Iesous Nazaret Rex Ioudaioi in Latin—"INRI"—Mark 15:26). If this is accurate, then from the Roman point of view he was put to death because he and/or his followers claimed he was King, and the Romans did not allow anyone to be a king without their permission.

According to Mark 11, Jesus staged a triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, which resulted in a frenzy of Jews proclaiming the coming kingdom of their ancestor David. Why would some Jews react this way? Well, there was an ancient prophecy (Zechariah 9:9) that said a king would come to Jerusalem in precisely this manner. In my view, either this episode was invented by early Christians to make Jesus look like the Messiah, or else Jesus actually did this. If it's the latter (which I think more probable), then Jesus himself must have been consciously fulfilling this prophecy because indeed he thought he was the promised king. The next day he goes and upsets the ordinary workings of the Temple during the Passover feast, an action that could perhaps be based on Zechariah 14:21. He and his followers were staying out on the Mount of Olives to the east of the city, which is where God's feet will come down according to Zechariah 14:4. Clearly the followers, and perhaps Jesus himself, thought the end-times were here. My hunch is they were expecting the culmination of history and the intervention of God to set things right. What they got, however, is a crucified Messiah. It may be that Jesus himself anticipated his own death as part of the end-time scenario. He certainly saw what happened to John the Baptist and could have absorbed that lesson. Or it may be that Jesus was expecting God's miraculous intervention to change the world before his death. We'll never know.

One thing Jesus did in that last week of his life was to hold a special meal with his disciples. It's a meal connected with the Passover, though at this meal, Jesus talks about his own blood about to be sacrificed. According to the Gospel of John, Jesus himself will be the Passover lamb whose blood saves the people, just as the original Passover lamb's blood saved the Israelites from the Angel of Death in Egypt. It's very important to teach the students about this meal, since it's the basis for the

Christian “eucharist” (“thanksgiving” in Greek), also called “communion,” and the “Lord’s Supper.” The key words of institution are found in Mark 14:22-25. If Jesus himself is responsible for this ritual with these words, it means he played a role in the theological interpretation of his own death. If he died totally surprised by God’s inaction (a possible implication of Mark 15:34), then this theological re-interpretation would have come from the earliest followers of Jesus who were trying to make sense of their leader’s unexpected and tragic demise. [Note: Throughout the gospels, Jesus is depicted predicting his own death. The question is whether these statements go back to the historical Jesus or whether they have been included by the gospel writers after the fact, after they know that Jesus did in fact die].

Students will also be interested in the Judas character. Jesus needs a “betrayor” because the soldiers needed someone to lead the way to where Jesus was, and also because in the days before photographs, Jesus wouldn’t be easily recognizable if the soldiers hadn’t seen him earlier in the Temple precincts. Why would Judas betray Jesus? Maybe he became disillusioned when God didn’t act as promised. Maybe he was in it for the money. Maybe he decided the Jesus movement was causing more trouble than it was worth. We’ll never know. There are two accounts of Judas’s death: one in Matthew 27:3-10, where it’s a suicide, and one in Acts 1:18-20 where it is not.

Like John the Baptist, Jesus paid the ultimate price for his challenging of authority, both Roman authority and those Jewish leaders who collaborated with the Romans.

Activity: The best activity for today is for a teacher to become very familiar with Mark 11-15, and go through the main events step by step with the students, providing insight from the above commentary at appropriate points.

Session # 29 Stories of Jesus’ resurrection. 1 Corinthians 15: 3-9; Mark 16:1-8; Matthew 27:57-28:20; Luke 23:50-24:52; Acts 1:1-11; John 19:38-21:25

The death of Jesus could have been the end of the story, but as we all know, it was just the beginning. The earliest account of Jesus’ resurrection is found in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, verses 3-9. This account was written around the year 50 C.E., so roughly 20 years after the events it describes. It’s definitely earlier than any of the gospel accounts. Interesting things to note about this account: 1) Paul claims he’s handing on what was taught to him 2) Cephas (the Aramaic name for Peter) was the first to have an experience of Jesus’ resurrection; this contradicts the accounts in the gospels 3) Paul says Jesus’ resurrection is “in accordance with the scriptures,” meaning the Hebrew Bible, but he doesn’t say which passage(s) those might be 4) Jesus appeared to 500 people at one time, an event related nowhere else 5) everything is spoken of in the language of “appearance,” and coupled with what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:50, I think that Paul did not envision Jesus’ old body coming back to life, but rather he had a notion that God provided Jesus with a new resurrection body, like the one everyone will get at the general resurrection 6) In 1

Corinthians 15:20, we see that Paul definitely saw Jesus' resurrection as the "first fruits" of the general resurrection. In other words, Jesus is the first of many to be raised up, and the fact that God has raised one means that the end-times are near and soon God will raise all humanity for judgment. So Jesus' resurrection is to be understood in light of Jewish expectations of a general resurrection, expectations that were widespread at the time.

The 4 Gospels have different conceptions of Jesus' resurrection—different from Paul and different from each other. The Gospel of Mark only has an empty tomb, with women running away in fear. The original ending of Mark was at 16:8; the subsequent verses were added in later manuscripts and were concocted from the other gospels.

Matthew adds an appearance of Jesus to the two women and to the eleven assembled disciples in Galilee. Luke adds the story of the Road to Emmaus, an appearance of Jesus to the disciples in Jerusalem, and the bodily ascension of Jesus into heaven (Acts 1). Luke makes clear that Jesus ate some fish in order to indicate that he was really alive and not a ghost. John has Jesus appear to Mary Magdalene, then to the disciples without Thomas and again to the disciples with Thomas (the famous "doubting Thomas" story). John 21 is probably a later addition to the original gospel.

Activity: Take the number of people in the class, combining both students and teachers, and divide into groups of two. A group can have three if there's an odd number total, or if there are more than 10 total people. Assign one of the five versions of the story to each group. A group with only students in it can handle Mark 16:1-8 and 1 Corinthians 15:3-9; groups doing Matthew, Luke, or John should probably have a teacher helping. The goal for each group is to read the story of Jesus' resurrection in that particular text, and then communicate the essence of the story to the rest of the class. Afterwards you can have a discussion about the differences in the stories and the overall meaning of the early Christians' belief in Jesus' resurrection.

Session # 30 Christianity after Jesus. Readings for the teachers: Acts 1-10; Galatians 1-2

The main point of this day is to end the year giving the students some sense of what happened to the Christian movement after Jesus' death. Starting out as a group of Jews who believed in Jesus as the risen Messiah, and who believed Jesus would come again (soon!) to judge the living and the dead, the movement quickly spread among the Jewish communities throughout the Mediterranean world, and then to non-Jews who joined as a means of securing other-worldly salvation in a turbulent world. Of course, most Jews found the whole notion of a crucified messiah absurd, so most declined to join this new Jewish sect when they heard about it. Eventually, the Christian message became more successful among non-Jews, especially after the apostle Paul succeeded in convincing the Christian leadership that non-Jewish converts need not become Jews first in order to be good Christians (Galatians 1-2). The Christian group also provided a sense of community and rootedness for people in

the cosmopolitan Roman Empire. Slaves and women could join as equals, at least within the community, so it was very popular among lower classes and outcasts. For the most part, Roman authorities left the Christians to their own devices until the early second century, with the major exception of the emperor Nero's brief persecution of the Christians in the city of Rome in the year 64. But starting in the second century, it became illegal to practice Christianity, because the Roman government considered it to be an insidious cult that turned people away from their families and their ancestral forms of worship. Sporadic persecutions ensued until the early 300s, producing many Christian martyrs. Despite this persecution, or perhaps in part because of it, Christianity gained in popularity until by the year 300, it is estimated that maybe 10% of the empire's population was Christian. Then, in a dramatic turn around, the Roman Emperor Constantine embraced Christianity in the year 312, and the persecuted minority went down the road toward becoming the persecuting majority. By the end of the 300s, almost the entire population of the empire was Christian, and it became illegal to practice polytheism openly in the Roman Empire! Christianity had triumphed to become the state religion, and would remain so for most of Europe for the next 1400 years, until the Enlightenment and the secularization of the modern period. Different branches of Christianity came into existence: the first major split was that between Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism that became official in the year 1054. Then the various Protestant denominations (Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, Congregationalist, etc.) broke away from Roman Catholicism in the 1500s, often splintering even further after that. Unitarianism and Universalism branched off from Protestant Congregationalist Christianity in the early 1800s, so the roots of our own denomination are in the Christian tradition, though at times radically diverging from it. Most UUs today no longer consider themselves Christian, though some do.

Activities: Use maps and a timeline to relate the above history to the students. See how much they already know. Draw a big tree showing the major branches of Christianity described above. Discuss the fact that Islam, a new monotheistic religion, arose in Arabia in the 600s C.E., converting many peoples in many lands away from Christianity, and posing a major challenge to Christian identity. (For instance, Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Tunisia and the rest of North Africa used to be mostly Christian—they gradually converted to Islam after the Arab conquests of the 600s and 700s). Each of those countries still has a Christian minority, some large, some tiny.

Take some time to review the whole year. What did they like most about the biblical stories they learned? What did they like least? If someone asked them, "what's the bible about?" what would they say? What would you as teachers say? Prepare them for the bible presentation that will take place on the "Wheel of Life" Sunday service in June. Encourage them to attend with their families if they can.