

# Teaching the Bible TO SENATORS

BY RICHARD WILKINSON

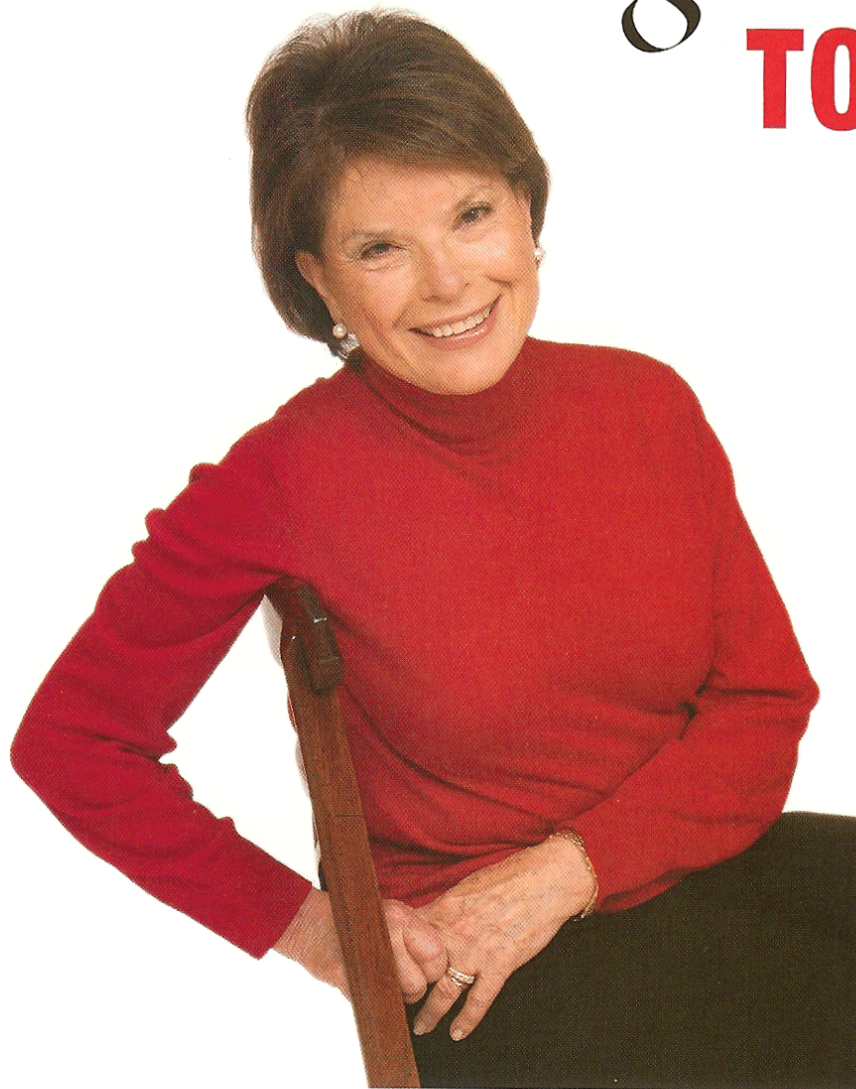


Photo by Leslie Cashen

**T**he U.S. Senate can be a pretty religious place. There's a weekly interfaith prayer breakfast — led by the senators themselves. The chaplain of the Senate leads five weekly Bible discussion groups, and national religious organizations also hold meetings that some senators attend.

Still, as Naomi Harris Rosenblatt, M.S.W. 1977, told Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., in the early 1980s, "One thing the Senate doesn't have is a group that studies the Hebrew Bible from a Jewish perspective."

It was a passing comment, made in her own dining room, but with it, the CUA-trained psychotherapist and longtime student of the Bible opened the door to become something of a Capitol Hill institution.

Specter, who, like Rosenblatt, is Jewish, is an old Yale Law School chum of Rosenblatt's husband, and the Rosenblatts and Specters were eating supper together when Naomi made her comment.

"In reply to my comment, Arlen, who is absolutely fearless, turned to me and said, 'Naomi, why don't you start next week teaching the Bible in the Senate?'" Rosenblatt recalls. "I said, 'Arlen, I can't

distinguish one senator from another. I wouldn't know them if I bumped into them.'"

"Don't worry," Specter replied. "You get the Bible. I'll get the senators."

The next Wednesday afternoon, with an Old Testament under her arm, Rosenblatt stepped into the elevator of the Hart Senate Office Building, feeling, she says, a little like an evangelist getting ready to stand on a wagon and start preaching.

Wonder of wonders, though, her effort proved a great success and the weekly study continued for 15 years, until around 1997, attended religiously (in both senses of that word) by senators of several faiths and from both sides of the aisle.

In fact, Rosenblatt's leadership of Bible studies and her own study of the Scriptures led her to writing, beginning with her *Wrestling With Angels: What Genesis Teaches Us About Our Spiritual Identity, Sexuality and Personal Relationships* (Delta Books, 1996). That book provided her entrée to becoming a featured Bible commentator on Bill Moyers' 1997 PBS series, "Genesis:

A Living Conversation." And she's now promoting a second book: *After the Apple: Women in the Bible — Timeless Stories of Love, Lust and Longing* (Miramax, 2005).

## STRUCK BY THE BIBLE'S RELEVANCE

The Senate is not the only place where Rosenblatt has led high-profile weekly Bible studies. Having fallen in love with the Bible as a child, she has immersed herself in studying it ever since — to this day often surrounding herself with rabbinic commentaries as she sits up in bed pondering a scriptural passage. Her friends encouraged her to begin leading Bible studies, which she has been doing now for 30 years — at her dining room table in Northwest D.C. (teaching such notables as TV newsmen Ted Koppel and Marvin Kalb), at the home of Israel's ambassador to the United States, and in New York City. But the Senate study was especially memorable.

"One of the best parts of my tenure in the Senate was Naomi's Bible class. She is one of the best teachers I ever had," says Larry Pressler, a Republican senator who represented South Dakota

from 1979 to 1996. “The class reinforced honesty and ethics as something I should be striving for.”

The Bible study certainly proved relevant to the politicians. Their discussion of King David’s adultery with Bathsheba coincided with the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal, leading to frank debate on the troubling symbiosis of power and sex and the extent to which the personal life of a leader impacts the quality of his or her governance. The study of David’s life gave the group a safe place in which to discuss issues of power, temptation and moral responsibilities as these related to their personal lives, says Rosenblatt.

Moreover, passages such as the Ten Commandments led to discussions of “the right to die,” genetic engineering, individual privacy in the age of high-tech communication, and other ethical issues the senators were grappling with legislatively.

“Always the spine of the meeting was the biblical text,” says Rosenblatt. She would have the senators read a section of the Bible aloud, then she would talk about why she thought the passage was important and pose provocative questions. After that, every participant would share his or her reflections on the text.

Those who attended the study included Catholics (such as David Durenberger,



once got into a verbal battle during the study because the former maintained that a particular passage of the Bible was literally true and the latter said it wasn’t.

“It got pretty testy,” Sen. Bennett later told *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Rosenblatt’s own views can be controversial, too — e.g., she sees Adam and Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit as not so much a sinful rebellion against God as a metaphor for man’s thirst for knowledge and his sexual awakening. The sin, she says, came in Adam and Eve’s denial of moral responsibility for their disobedience and their shifting of the blame from themselves. The emphasis of Rosenblatt’s teaching, however, is not on systematic theology but on the tensions and struggles facing Bible figures.

“Naomi focused on human nature — its strengths but also its frailties — as people sitting in the Senate can only too well understand but don’t want to believe,” says David Durenberger, a senator from 1978 to 1995. “The nature of the job is that half of the senators go into politics because there’s something about our personalities that craves the substitute of a power position for some of the things that we presume to be shortcomings in our lives.”

One of the reasons prayer and Bible study flourish in the Senate, says Durenberger, is that the members “need an environment in which to be honest when they’re in a political institution that is so competitive.” And he says that Rosenblatt was a master at receiving vulnerability and honesty. “She pretended — in the best sense of the word — to be surprised when someone would admit that they had a weakness,” recalls Durenberger.

As for Rosenblatt, she sums up her experience teaching senators with the same words with which she addressed them: “Go forth and fear not,” paraphrasing God’s words to Abraham.

“‘Fear not’ doesn’t suggest a guarantee against setbacks or suffering, but rather the kind of faith that endows one with inner strength to overcome cynicism, apathy and anxiety,” she explains. “I felt that my senators were on a challenging journey of great responsibility and that God’s ancient blessing to the patriarch applied to them, too.”

R-Minn.), Jews (Specter and Howard Metzenbaum, D-Ohio), Protestants (Strom Thurmond, R-S.C., and Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa), and a Mormon (Robert Bennett, R-Utah). Senators’ wives attended as well, including those of Metzenbaum; Chuck Robb, D-Va.; Alan Simpson, R-Wyo.; and Carl Levin, D-Mich.

Jewish comedian Jackie Mason even popped in for an impromptu meeting of the group in 1989. “It looked like a gentiles’ conversion-to-Judaism meeting to me,” he quipped to *The Washington Post* afterward.

### “GO FORTH AND FEAR NOT”

Rosenblatt’s psychological approach to the Old Testament — *Publishers Weekly* says “she infuses each chapter with her experience as a relationship therapist” — jibes with her CUA degree, a master’s in social work. It was in the early 1970s — once her three children were all old enough to be in school — that she decided to get the degree and become a psychotherapist.

“I realized that Catholic University was *the* best in the whole area for training licensed clinical social workers,” she recalls. “And because it is a religious school, I knew that the values I was brought up on — compassion, social justice, responsibilities to the poor — would be values that Catholic University would deeply believe in.”

The knowledge of the human psyche that she gained at CUA is what led her to write her books examining the psychology of biblical figures, she says. Her CUA training in how to lead group therapy also helped in leading the Senate study, which could get heated and controversial at times. For example, Sen. Bill Armstrong, R-Colo., and Sen. Metzenbaum



A photo of the Senate Bible study that ran in *The New York Times* in 1987. From left: Sen. Durenberger, Sen. Pressler, Rosenblatt, Sen. Specter and Senate Chaplain Richard Halverson.

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