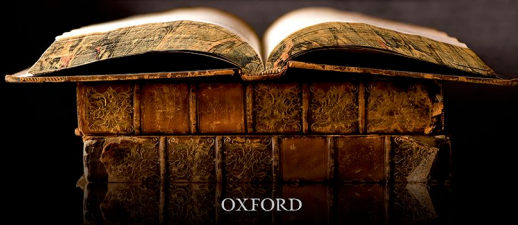


SAMUEL FLEISCHACKER

THE  
GOOD  
& THE  
GOOD  
BOOK



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## The Good and the Good Book

*"The Good and the Good Book: Revelation as a Guide to Life* is a constructive, reflective, and highly personal meditation on belief, religion, and the good life by a scholar and believer deeply engaged in modern philosophical and theological thought. Written almost like a spiritual memoir, Sam Fleischacker takes his reader through a series of theological challenges that face anyone invested in 'revealed religion' who is equally concerned about tolerance and pluralism, and presents a case where revealed religion can survive its modern critique. *The Good and the Good Book* is a work of very accessible philosophical theology that should be of interest to scholars of religion, constructive theologians, and anyone struggling with living inside a religious tradition in these troubling times."

Shaul Magid, Indiana University

"Sam Fleischacker has given us a conceptual tour de force that illuminates the path for those seeking to have an ethical faith that is grounded in revelation. Lesser thinkers choose only one side of the tension or create false harmonies. In contrast, Fleischacker carefully untangles the knotty issues then he boldly and cogently shows a path of combining Divine teachings based on revelation with liberal virtues and modern science. The book deserves a broad reception and engagement with its timely ideas."

Alan Brill, Seton Hall University



# The Good and the Good Book

*Revelation as a Guide to Life*

Samuel Fleischacker

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S.F.

*Evanston, Illinois*



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# Introduction

My wife and I took a long honeymoon in 1990, which was supposed to end with a four-month stay in Israel. We arrived in Israel on 3 August, the day after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. Shortly thereafter, Saddam threatened to send gas-tipped missiles into Israel if the US took military action against him. My in-laws, extremely safety-conscious in the best of times, immediately began to pressure us to leave. I was appalled at that idea. Long a supporter of Israel's *Peace Now* movement, I had been dogged for years by the question, "How can you urge Israelis to take risks for peace when you yourself live safely in America, and don't have to share those risks?" So I welcomed the opportunity to share a danger Israel faced, and felt I would convict myself of cowardice if I left. Besides, we had found a lovely apartment in Jerusalem and I wanted to introduce my wife to the joys of that city, and of living in a majority-Jewish environment. I therefore refused to leave. My wife was torn between my views, which she respected but did not entirely share, and the call of her parents.

Thus things stood for a week or two, while the pressure from my in-laws grew steadily. I felt firm in my decision to stay; I was even ready to end my new marriage, if necessary, for the sake of what I took to be a crucial test of my courage and commitments. Then one morning, after a particularly difficult run of phone calls from America, I came across the following line, in the traditional Torah reading for the week: "When a man has taken a new wife, he shall not go out to war . . . but he shall be free at home one year, and shall cheer his wife whom he has taken." (Deuteronomy 24:5) The relevance of this line to my own situation seemed unmistakable. I took God to be speaking directly to me—and, rather to my surprise, taking the side of my relatively secular in-laws. Whatever the circumstances in which the passage was originally written, right then and right there it served as God's word to me, telling me to get

off my high horse about my supposed courage and commitments, and to attend to my wife and our marriage. So we left Israel. I felt very bitter about this decision. But who am I to argue with God? And I believe that God speaks to me through the Torah.

A story like this raises a host of issues. Here are just a few:

- (1) Would I or any other religious person really want to say that any verse we happen to stumble over, in our sacred texts, should guide our actions? What if I had come across one of the verses in the Torah calling for idolaters to be killed? Would I have rushed out to fulfill that command? The answer, of course, is “Certainly not,” but that simply shows that even devout believers bring certain moral principles or attitudes to their sacred text, and figure out how to follow it in that light. In this case, it matters that I could see my wife’s and wife’s family’s concerns as morally respectable, for all that I disagreed with them, even before I encountered the verse that led me to my decision. So I did not rely on the Torah alone in making my decision: I needed a moral prism, independent of the Torah, to determine what it was saying.
- (2) I needed to do other interpretive work as well to see the verse I came across as addressing my situation. I was *not* after all heading off to war, merely staying in a country that might come under military threat. Nor is the command exempting new husbands from military duty understood by the Jewish tradition to apply to wars of self-defense. So although it is understandable, I think, why I took Deuteronomy 24:5 to be addressing me, I did *choose to take* the verse that way. There are choices about how to interpret it, and it could be read very differently.
- (3) The two questions I have thus far raised bring out the degree to which sacred or revealed texts shape a believer’s life only via a particular way of receiving that text (the topic of Chapter 6 of this book) and for many believers, in many religions, that way does not much consist in the sort of direct, personal response I have described. Traditional Judaism indeed discourages such responses. The story I have told is more characteristic of how certain Protestants respond to the Bible—Christians who, for reasons rooted in a theology very different from that of most Jews, think

we should as much as possible do without mediation between Holy Scripture and its readers. Jews, by contrast, like Catholics and Muslims, emphasize the importance of a community and tradition in the reception of sacred texts, and urge one another to hear God's word through that sort of mediation. Even in these traditions, there may remain a role for God to speak to us individually through our texts, but we are taught to be wary of thinking we have had such a communication, and to fit anything we think we have learned that way into accepted communal and traditional practices.

- (4) All these problems pale before the basic question of why any sensible person in the modern day would dream of supposing that the Torah, or any other traditional teaching or text, really comes from God. Do I really believe that the Torah was written by Moses at God's dictation, and has come down to us in an unbroken chain ever since? Do I believe that God spoke on Sinai in thunder and fire? Even if there is a God—and that's a big "if"—the idea that that God wrote the Torah seems patently absurd, in the light of what we now know about its authorship, let alone about the physics and biology that it ignores or defies.

I do not plan to defend the Torah's scientific or historical accuracy; I will indeed argue that one can suppose the Torah to be highly *inaccurate*, scientifically and historically, yet still regard it as God's word. Nor do I think that Jews need to show the Torah to be superior to all other putatively revealed texts in order to take it as God's word. They can instead regard it, as I did in the story above, as God's way of speaking to *them*, while leaving open the possibility that God has other ways of speaking to other people. That is to say: other people can just as reasonably regard *their* sacred texts as scientifically and historically inaccurate, but nevertheless God's word to them (or in some other way their source of supreme ethical wisdom).

All these claims no doubt seem puzzling and unpersuasive, when asserted thus briefly. The purpose of this book is to expand and defend them, although I do not provide anything close to a knockdown argument for them. Religious commitment does not on my view follow primarily from rational argument: it depends on a non-rational faith or trust, and one of my main purposes is indeed to elucidate why a reasonable person might adopt a non-rational faith or trust. I want,

centrally, to explain why it might be reasonable to place such a non-rational faith or trust in the teaching of a *text*, passed down by a community as sacred like the “good book” of my title, rather than in the glimpses of the divine one might think to attain by way of personal experience or intuition. Texts form the focus of revealed religions, and it is the reverent attitude towards them that especially irritates modern liberal and scientifically-minded people. Two centuries ago, Kant already complained about people who say “It is written” when asked to explain what they do, and that complaint continues to be made, widely, by critics of traditional religions.

The emphasis on a text is particularly important to traditional *Judaism*, of course, and there are other religious believers who would say that revelation takes a different form for them. Many Christians might say that revelation for them takes place primarily in the life of Jesus, or in their relationship to him, not in the New Testament, while immediate experience at a shrine or in a home ritual may be a prime source of revelation for a Hindu. Still, even here a central text tends to inform how the significance of Jesus, or of the ritual experience, is understood. Thus a Christian will normally say that the life of Jesus, or her relationship to Jesus, reveals him as *God*, not just as a prophet or a sage; a Christian will, that is, normally understand Jesus, and her relationship with Jesus, by way of the New Testament. Similarly, a Hindu will normally understand any mystical insight she experiences by way of the Vedas and Upanishads. So even though other traditions may not emphasize a text as explicitly as Jews do, a sacred text or set of texts does play a defining role in practically all traditional religions.

To work, now. The first problem we need to overcome, in rendering reverence for a religious text comprehensible, is why a truthful God (or other source of supreme wisdom) might communicate with us through a text that seems filled with blatant falsehoods. We will find it useful for this purpose to expand the notion of “truth” with which we usually work; that is the subject of Chapter 1.

One might imagine that the expansion in question will take the form of saying that sacred texts deal with ethical rather than scientific truth. That’s not quite right, however, since we come to most moral principles—the core of what we mean by “ethics”—independently of religious revelation. What is revealed to us is not exactly morality but

*the overall good* of our lives. Sorting out morality from our overall good is the subject of Chapters 2 and 3.

I turn in Chapter 4 to why revelation might give us access to our overall good. The remaining chapters concern how my account of revelation makes sense of belief in God, an afterlife, and the other metaphysical mysteries that normally go with revealed religion (Chapter 5); what role it gives to the interpretation of revealed texts, to ritual practice, and to religious community (Chapter 6); and how it allows for believers in one religion to respect other sorts of believers, and secular people (Chapter 7). With all these pieces in hand, it will I hope be possible to see how commitment to a revealed religion can go along with a full acceptance of modern science and liberal morality.

Whether any particular revealed religion is worthy of such commitment is a further question which I do not try to address. I think that rational argument can do little to bring about religious commitment. Rational argument can lay out the framework within which a non-rational religious commitment makes sense, but revelation itself, if there is such a thing, must take us the rest of the way. Those of us who are committed to a revealed religion believe that something has been disclosed to us that rational argument alone cannot provide. We turn to rational argument just to help us figure out how this disclosure can be brought together with the aspects of our lives that must remain rational. The framework I sketch in this book is meant as a contribution to that endeavor.

# 1

## Truth

Revealed religion stands in contrast, primarily, with rational or personal religion. Revealed religions don't simply argue for their central beliefs, as a purely rational religion would, nor do they urge believers to find spiritual meaning by way of meditation, mystical insight, or other forms of personal experience. Rather, they take their view of what the universe is fundamentally like, and what human beings ought to do in it, from something that they claim was taught by God, or by an extraordinary human being (Confucius, the Buddha, Lao-tzu) after a moment of extraordinary insight. This teaching is enshrined in a text or set of sayings that gets passed down, along with interpretations of it and a ritual practice said to derive from it, from generation to generation. "Passing down" in Latin is *traditio* and a religion that passes down its teachings and practices in this way may also be called a "traditional religion."

A revealed religion is, then, a religion centered around a text and a tradition. Almost everything we ordinarily call "religion"—Judaism, Islam, Hinduism—is a revealed or traditional religion; this is also what people mean when they talk of "organized religion." Indeed, even when groups break off from a traditional religion, rejecting its texts or practices as stifling to true spirituality, they tend to claim a new revelation of their own. This is the story of early Christianity; in more recent years the Christian Scientists have put up *Science and Health With a Key to the Scriptures* alongside the Bible and Mormons have added *The Book of Mormon*. Even the Bahais, who are committed to a search for truth free of tradition, have a series of texts that they regard as a new revelation. Aside from the practices of a few animist tribes that are too amorphous to be identified with a particular teaching, what the phrases "revealed religion" and "traditional religion" clearly exclude is just rational religion, to the extent that that exists, and personal religions of the sort

associated with New Age spirituality. But over the past two centuries liberal or progressive branches of Judaism and Christianity have also tended to play down the importance of revelation and tradition, in favor of reason and personal experience. The idea that God's nature or will, or any other spiritually important fact, might be best disclosed in a text composed centuries ago makes people trained in modern science uneasy; reverence for an ancient text is also thought to entrench sexist, racist, and other prejudices.

These concerns are eminently reasonable. The idea that we should show reverence for an ancient text, and the teachings and practices passed down in its name, raises serious concerns for us moderns from both a scientific and a moral point of view. Nevertheless, my point in this book is to defend that idea. Indeed, I will offer reasons in defense of all the features of revealed religion that most offend secular people, and embarrass progressive believers: a sacred text, prescribed rituals, and the communal organizations that preserve these things. All these features flow from the idea of revelation, as I understand it—from the deference to sacred texts that defines traditional Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and the like. And the scientific and moral concerns raised by the idea of revelation are answerable, although they require us to re-think what revelation is, to some degree. My main concern throughout this book is to lay out and defend this revised conception of revelation, not to argue against the non-revelatory sorts of religion taught by progressive churches and synagogues. I will not even argue, much, against a complete rejection of religion. I want to show simply that, if one is to be religious, one has good reason to revere a traditional religious text, and the teaching and practices associated with it.

One more introductory note. As I've indicated, I consider the notion of a revealed religion a broad one, which can include non-theistic traditions like Buddhism and Taoism as well as the so-called "Abrahamic" religions familiar to us in the West. But some followers of Eastern religions, especially Buddhism, do not see the texts they care about as revealed in any obvious sense. I don't want to dispute these issues here, and my focus is in fact primarily on theistic religions; I simply hope and believe that much of what I say will be transferable, with but minor changes, to religions like Buddhism and Taoism. Still, so as not to speak presumptuously about traditions I don't know well, for the most part I will talk of "God" in this book, and of people who speak for God rather



than of sages, like the Buddha, whose teachings are not theistic. Indeed, I will draw many of my examples from the Jewish tradition, since I know it best.

To begin in earnest, now, what do believers mean by calling their sacred texts “true”? Given the obvious scientific errors and historical inaccuracies that fill practically every religious book, how can anyone regard them as true? Traditional Jews, Christians, and Muslims take their Bibles and Quran to be not just true but the *paradigm* of truth, the source of the highest wisdom human beings can attain. But surely we have every reason, today, to reject these claims. The Torah and the Gospels report all sorts of events that modern science considers impossible, and scientifically-minded historians have shown them to be riddled with historical inaccuracies. What on earth can a person mean, then, by calling them “true”? Of course, some believers mean that modern science is wrong, to the extent that it contradicts their sacred scripture, and that everything in the text is literally correct. But other believers are, I think, using the word “true” in a rather different way from the way it gets used in science: they are indeed challenging the monopoly that our society tends to grant science over that word.

Let us start our investigation with these issues. Consider first the people who suggest that modern science is wrong, insofar as it conflicts with the Bible. There are more and less sophisticated versions of this claim. Those who espouse the less sophisticated version may insist that fossil evidence is unreliable, or that the fossil evidence we have, properly read, is compatible with a 6000-year-old earth. Not unrelated, I think, are those who say they have scientific evidence of a special sort showing that the Bible is true: personal experiences of miraculous cures, say, or remarkable predictions of the sort that have been drawn from the so-called “Bible Code” (a numerological reading of the Bible that supposedly shows how the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, for instance, was foreseen by Biblical verses). Some of these claims are flatly incorrect: fossil evidence is not compatible with a 6000-year-old earth, for instance. Others demonstrate a misunderstanding of the nature of science. Claims to the effect that evolution by natural selection is “just a theory,” for instance, misunderstand what “theory” means in science (all science consists of theories: direct observations are themselves informed by theory, and have no scientific significance until they are combined, sifted,

and explained by theories). The sorts of evidence that fans of the Bible Code produce—which depend pervasively on implausible readings, and lack any experimental control (for example an attempt to apply the same methods to texts other than the Bible)—demonstrate similar failures to understand how scientific evidence works. In any case, these claims are all overwhelmingly rejected by practicing scientists. Science is a social project, in which empirical evidence is gathered, tested, and analyzed by enormous numbers of trained people. So the fact that practically no respected expert in any relevant scientific field—no physicist, no biologist, no geologist—accepts today that the world was created 6000 years ago, or in six days, or with all species just as they are now, tells strongly against these claims. To stand against the overwhelming consensus of scientists on a matter of empirical fact is already to fail to appreciate scientific procedure; we have good reason to think that an overwhelming consensus of scientists, on a matter within their expertise, is likely to be correct.

All of which helps to explain why people trained in science tend quickly to dismiss those who enlist science in support of a Biblical faith. Perhaps too quickly. Scientific theories have after all come and gone many times in the course of human history, and supposed experts have often been massively wrong, even when they have agreed among themselves. Astrology, the four humors theory of medicine, and the idea that a flat earth lies at the center of the universe were all upheld with just the sort of overwhelming expert support that today is accorded to the Big Bang and evolution by natural selection. Yet they were nonetheless incorrect, and dissidents like Galileo were right to stand up against them. Why could the same not be true of today's consensus on evolution? How can anyone be confident that the religious dissidents who uphold a creationist theory, far from being crazy, are not the real Galileos of our time?

But the comparison is specious. It is true that many wildly incorrect theories, from geocentrism to the notion that stars are bodiless intelligences, dominated the world before the rise of modern science in the seventeenth century. Their dominance was however due largely to the fact that investigation of the world in pre-modern times was conducted under the threat of punishment for those who dissented from a religious party line. The method of investigation was also never carried out by way of the controlled experiments, the massive collection of data (aided by