



The Good Book: Writers Reflect on Favorite Bible Passages

From Simon & Schuster



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In *The Good Book*, thirty-two of today's most prominent writers share never-before-published pieces about passages in the Bible that are most meaningful to them.

The Good Book, with an introduction by Adam Gopnik, collects new pieces by writers from many different faiths and ethnicities including literary fiction writers (Colm Tóibín, Edwidge Danticat, Tobias Wolff, Rick Moody); bestselling nonfiction writers (A.J. Jacobs, Ian Frazier, Thomas Lynch); notable figures in the media (Charles McGrath, Cokie Roberts, Steven V. Roberts); and social activists (Al Sharpton, Kerry Kennedy). While these contributors are not primarily known as religious thinkers, they write intelligently and movingly about specific passages in the Bible that inform the way they live, think about past experiences, and see society today. Some pieces are close readings of specific passages, some are anecdotes from everyday life, and all will inspire, provoke, or illuminate.

Addressing some of the best-known and best-loved characters and stories from Genesis to Revelation, *The Good Book* will be a beautiful, enlightening gift for secular readers and readers of faith as well as a collection of interest to reading groups, readers of creative nonfiction and personal essays, and fans of each of the individual contributors.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Lovely....It really does justice to the richness and complexity of the texts and how they resonate in lives."
(Krista Tippett, host of NPR's On Being)

"This is one of those marvelous collections you can dip into for a moment's sustenance, or linger for a long read....these pages will open layers of meaning and draw you deeper into contemplation of the essential questions and quandaries found in its chapters and verse." (*Chicago Tribune*)

"Substantive reading that casts the Good Book in a new light." (*BookPage*)

"The Good Book records the efforts of diverse readers working to make sense of the Bible—a book at once too foreign and too familiar—and in the process, treating it as though it could still somehow speak."
(*Commonweal*)

"As The Good Book's contributors demonstrate, whether it's viewed as a source of spiritual guidance, a work of literature or history or simply as an anchor for memory, in the hands of writers as talented as the group Andrew Blauner has gathered here, the Bible's riches are both inexhaustible and infinitely challenging."
(*Shelf Awareness*)

"A rich tapestry of reflections." (*Publishers Weekly, starred review*)

"Anthologist Blauner has done a particularly good job of choosing an eclectic group of commentators who offer mostly insightful and often very personal thoughts about their favorite Biblical passages....An often inspiring and always interesting collection." (*Booklist, starred review*)

"Reading these writings filled with humor, sadness, grief, anger, deep reflection, and fanciful wit, one is struck by the myriad ways of encountering the Bible, its place in our culture, or at least the culture it helped create.... This collection has something for everyone who appreciates good writing, regardless of what one may think of the Bible as scripture, or for that matter as literature." (*Library Journal*)

"It's the Sunday School class you've been waiting for, the one whose members have thought hard about the texts and are free to say what they think. The one you look forward to. God bless the Word."

(Garrison Keillor)

"What a marvelous book of encounters and revelations! These writers raise questions that are age-old, yet utterly contemporary, pressing, thoughtful, eternal." (Edward Hirsch)

"Each of these thoughtful and beautifully written pieces sheds new light on one of the world's oldest and most influential books. People of all faiths will find common ground within these pages." (Reza Aslan, author of *No god but God* and *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*)

About the Author

Andrew Blauner is the editor of five anthologies: *The Good Book: Writers Reflect on Favorite Bible Passages*; *Coach*; *Brothers*; *Our Boston*; *Central Park*, and *In Their Lives: A Chorus of Writers Sing the Praises of Their Favorite Beatles Songs*, and is the co-editor of *For the Love of Baseball*. His writing has been published in *The New York Times*, and he has appeared on NPR's *On Point*, *The Leonard Lopate Show*, ABC, CBS, NBC, and other media outlets. He is the founder of Blauner Books Literary Agency; a graduate of Collegiate School, Brown University, and Columbia Business School; and a member of PEN American Center and National Book Critics Circle.

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The Good Book

The Good Book: An Introduction

Adam Gopnik

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? And how should we read the Bible in a secular age? At a time when this odd, disjointed compilation of ancient Hebrew texts and later Greek texts has lost its claims to historical truth, or to supernatural revelation, it would seem to some that we might simply let it fade, read, until it becomes one more of those texts, like Galen's medicine or the physics of Aristotle, that everyone knows once mattered but now are left quietly to sit on the shelf and wait for a scholar.

As history and revelation its stories have long ago fallen away; we know that almost nothing that happens in it actually happened, and that its miracles, large and small, are of the same kind and credibility as all the other miracles that crowd the world's great granary of superstition. Only a handful of fundamentalists—granted that in America that handful is sometimes more like an armful, and at times like a roomful—read it literally, and, though the noes may not always have it in raw numbers, the successive triumphs of critical reason mean that they have it in all educated circles. (Believers may cry elitism at this truth—but the simpler truth is that when the educated elite has rejected an idea it's usually because there's something in the idea that resists education.)

And yet. The Bible remains an essential part of the education of what used to be called the well-furnished mind. Not to know it is not to know enough. Most of what we value in our art and architecture, our music and poetry—Bach and Chartres, Shakespeare and Milton, Giotto at the Arena Chapel and Blake's Job among his friends—is entangled with these old books and ancient texts: we enter Chartres and see the Tree of Jacob, and we need to know that this is the line of the inheritance of Jesus. We queue for hours to see the Sistine Ceiling, and our hearts stop at what Michelangelo's hand has done all the quicker if we see the sublime text in our mind as we look at the picture with our eyes—"and God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also." We listen to Bach's St. John Passion, and it means nothing if we do not know what a passion was, and how this one horribly unfolded.

Though our search for the spiritual needs no help from the supernatural—it is fully accounted for by human sensibility—still, it does need help. The philistinism of the "new atheists," the meagerness of their aesthetic responses, is the one fair reproach against them; the human content of the art and music of the past too often seems duly "appreciated" by them, as a tiresome obligation, rather than really known and felt, as an irresistible temptation. The past dependency of our whole civilization on a scaffolding made from scripture is a low stile that they leap over lazily, with a shrug, rather than a high one, demanding a huge leap of, well, non-faith.

Yet some other part of its appeal lies beyond its history in art and architecture, lies rather in our daily bread—our continuing need for guidance through the harsher perplexities of earthly existence. The Twenty-Third Psalm remains as stirring for those who take heart simply at its image of a shepherd's care as it does for those who think the Lord exists to exercise it. No, modern people are drawn to faith while practicing doubt, as our ancestors confessed their doubts while practicing their faith. Each of us engages, casually or self-consciously, with the idea of faith and the fact of doubt—and so there is a vein of modern literature, philosophical and poetic, that will always remain a chronicle of how we read the Bible. The shuttle between the arguments made by liberal doubt and the magnetic pull of the art made by belief is not one that can be avoided by thinking modern men and women, and it turns, always, to the question of scripture, and how it's read. How do we reconcile the power of the prose and the passions described—the wisdom of the Psalms and the beauty of the Song of Solomon—with the plainer but truer truths of a civilization of rational inquiry? That fugue of doubt and faith, experienced as argument and art, is the music of our lives.

But how do we do it? How, we may ask as we propose to embark upon reading, do we go on reading scripture in a secular time? There seems something dispiriting about merely reading for “effect,” or for “pleasure.” Some may recall that in Goldfinger, Bond carried his Walther PPK in a hollowed-out book called *The Bible to Be Read as Literature*. The mordant joke was that, once we read the Bible only for pleasure, we might as well use it to inflict the more glamorous kind of pain: after faith goes, nothing but vodka, bullets, and a void. If the Bible is to be read as literature, as something more than a joke, or an antiquarian oddity, how is it to be done?

As usual, to answer the question of what we should do, it is best to look at what we do do. There are, in place already, four pervasive methods or styles, shared by modern people, for reading the Bible (all illustrated, often overlapping and hybridized, in these pages).

There is first of all the aesthetic habit of reading—we read and dissect the books and verses of the Bible because they tell beautiful stories, stirring and shapely. We read the good book because it is a good book. We explore the stories because they are transfixing stories, dense and compelling. The beauty of the Song of Songs, or the nobility of the account of creation in Genesis, or the poetic hum of the Psalms—these things are beautiful as poetic myths alone can be. That they were best translated into our own language in the highest period of English prose and verse, in Shakespeare's rhythms and vocabulary—conceivably with his hand at work, and certainly with hands near as good as his—only makes them more seductive. (Even when more modern translations are not as good, they often echo the King James Version.) These are good tales and great poetry, and we need not worry about their sources any more than we worry about which level at that endless archaeological dig in Turkey is truly Troy. We read them not as “myth” but as fiction—we read them as we read all good stories, for their perplexities as much as for their obvious points.

Nor is an aesthetic reading—the idea of the Bible fiction as narrative—an aesthetic idea alone. It is itself a view from within faith, meaning that the best way to save the faith is to admit its fictions. The theologian Hans Frei is often associated with this view—that the force of the Bible is exactly the force of stories of a particular kind, and that discovering that scripture can be storytelling is not a limiting case, but what gives scripture power. We do not, Frei points out, need to believe in Pierre and Natasha to, in a real sense, believe in *War and Peace*—to believe in its picture of human affairs, its vision of history, its knowledge of what was once called the human heart. To ask if Pierre existed, or to track down partial Pierres and early Pierre literature in Russian history, is to miss the point of *War and Peace* entirely. To say that the Bible's stories are good stories is to say that they are sustaining stories: tales we tell ourselves in order to live. The story of Job's suffering, defiance, and faith, or the story of Esther, like the passion of Jesus, is applicable as Tolstoy or Tolkien is applicable—they need be neither true nor heavy, academic allegories. The recognition that fiction is not a synonym for falsehood but another way at the truth is in itself powerful and helps us read on.

Next, there is the accommodationist, or moral-metaphorical way of reading. This is different from the aesthetic or literary reading because, instead of asking us to be stirred by scripture for its narrative complexities, it asks us to be stirred by the Bible as enduring moral inquiry—the accommodationist seeks to translate the gnomic knots of the Bible stories into acceptable, contemporary, and even universal ethical truths. It is the kind of reading that shows how, in texts that might otherwise seem obnoxious or alien to a modern mind, enduring moral teaching can still be found. Thomas Jefferson’s famous version of the Gospels—the miracles left out, the humane teachings left in—is of this kind. In another way, in our own era, when the scholar Elaine Pagels reads Revelation for us, she both untangles its real first-century history and finds in it a convincing larger allegory of the long, bending arc of justice. It belongs to its time, but still has much to teach ours. In this way, we continually recast, through subtle rereading, a tribal or schismatic or merely difficult text into a universal one. If at times this may seem merely to turn brutal injunctions into liberal mysteries, at others it clears away the encrustations of time and the barnacles of old rhetoric and lets us see the real yearnings for justice and freedom that enlighten the book. That the slaves in the American South, being told of the Israelites begging to be let go from bondage heard in that story the echo of their own plight shows how powerful the right kind of “accommodationist” reading can be—how far-reaching the metaphors, how strong the morals.

Then, there is the anthropological habit of reading. This style insists on intellectual detachment, on a sense that the Bible is an extraordinary compilation of truths about how we imagine miracles—that the miracles are imagined does not diminish what they tell us about that imagination, or about mankind. We don’t read scripture to hear good stories or learn good morals. We read to learn about human history, and human nature. How do laws get made? How do dietary restrictions work? Why? How does order come from warfare? Or, looking at the New Testament, the anthropological-minded reader asks: What is the nature of charismatic leadership? Academic in origin, the anthropological view need not be merely academic in practice. By seeking to use the holy text right at hand, it tries to enlarge our views of how we make ideas of holiness.

And finally, there is the antagonistic, or frankly hostile manner of reading. We read holy books in order to show why we need none. We read to fight back. Nor is this habit merely antagonistic. Without strong oppositional readings, how can we ever make sense of texts at all? Indeed, much classic Talmudic reading, though not heretical, is often best described as antagonistic in this sense: fed up with the stolid apparent meanings of the verse, it searches for a meaning that wiser men can live with.

Now, all of these kinds can and do crossbreed. I irregularly attend a Unitarian church in New York where the sermons are almost always exercises in amiable accommodation—the hard texts must mean something else, and it is the job of the clergyman to show us what. (Bar mitzvah readings in the Upper West Side are of this kind, too. The thirteen-year-old draws his or her day’s text, often with an eliminationist or brutally tribal accent—God reneged on a promise, or took pleasure in a mass slaughter— and must make it, under the watchful eye of a worried woman rabbi, into an acceptable NPR editorial.)

Aesthetic, accommodationist, anthropological, antagonistic—any good reading of a biblical text will include elements of all of them. When we read, say, the Book of Esther, we are fascinated by the dramatic history of Esther, Jewish queen in a foreign court, a tense story of a woman torn between loyalties (aesthetic), while we also search for a moral to be plucked from the tale of suddenly renewed loyalty and awakened conscience (accommodationist); and while we may resent the history of massacre and countermassacre (antagonistic), yet we end with thoughts on how surprisingly mixed and multicultural ancient civilization really was (anthropological). Good books have many levels, and good readings take many kinds.

• • •

Yet we cannot pretend that this is not a book without a complicated hero, God—two heroes, really, counting his son as the hero of the second part—and that the way we imagine a Deity is inescapable from the way we feel about his book. The images of God that appear in these pages are as various as the styles of the book: there is an evil deity, vengeful and psychopathic, a sublime creative one in Genesis, a narrowly rule-giving one in Deuteronomy, and an argumentative one in Job.

If the variety proves, to the anthropological or historically minded reader, how complex and historically conditioned the idea of the Deity is—Simon Schama has recently given us a clear sense that monotheism was never monolithic—for the common reader it suggests more. It suggests that we need not regularize the idea of God to contemplate it. The most recent attempt to “save the phenomenon” among desperate theologians has been to remove the Deity entirely from his creation, moving him backwards from the fields of biology and geology, where we know no sign of him can be seen, into a metaphysical background where at best he blinks mysteriously, like a distant star.

This is, of course, as a historical claim about belief, absurd. As any reader of the book can see, this is not what theologians have “always” believed; it is all they have left. But can this big, foggy, metaphysical idea of God, immunized from all empirical examination, still somehow do the things he does in his chronicles: make moral rules, choose up sides in battle, much less sanctify temples and dictate complicated rules for how many hooves the food you eat has to have? Logically, no. No one has remotely succeeded in finding a way for him to do this, because no one can. The obviously anthropomorphic sky-God of actual practice and empirical interference can never be subsumed into the metaphysical and removed God, untouched by it.

But things that defeat logic can often invite imagination, and as a fictional creation the idea of the Deity remains compelling exactly in its—in his—plurality. We need neither believe nor doubt as we read, but remain suspended in that ether of scruples, credulity, and wonder where all good reading really takes place.

A deeper point remains. No moral idea worth preserving has been lost as the idea of God has diminished. Indeed, many moral ideas—of inclusion, tolerance, pluralism, and the equality of man, and the emancipation of women—depend on the diminishment and destruction of a traditional idea of an absolute authority Deity. But nor have moral ideas worth saving been gained simply by diminishing the idea of God. Atheism is a fact about the world, but humanism is a value that we make. Supernaturalism needs the cure of sanity. But humanism needs humility.

There is, in truth, really, nothing at all complex or mysterious about the relation between “soulfulness” and science. There is a huge range of human inquiry, questions of meaning and purpose and value and morality, that are too complicated or variable or ever newly folded to be subject to scientific investigation properly so called. Attempts to make a science of affections, or an evolutionary psychology of art, always end by being fatuous. There is no science of siblings, much less a science of sonnets. These games are too mutable, their terms too changeable, their goals too open to creative tinkering to sit still for confident predictive generalization. From the indisputably hardwired human need to find mates to make more humans we can deduce the polygamous court of a polygamous king and the marriage of Leonard and Virginia Woolf.

And no philosopher of science has ever disputed this. Karl Popper, mistaken for a positivist, insisted throughout his life that his famous criterion of testability was only a criterion of science, not of rationality, much less of meaning, and that, as he wrote, the specificities of a single smile would never be susceptible to science.

But the persistence of the metaphysical has nothing in common with the intercession of the magical. The alternative to science is human sensibility. It lies in poetic description and singular witness—the manifold

distinctions of philosophy and the thick observations of psychology. An argument for intellectual pluralism is hardly an argument for divine intercession. Existence is itself miraculous. But that water is amazing, and wine a miracle, does not alter the truth that water has never become wine except by people stamping their feet on grapes, a process we know. Our lives are fully accounted for by our lives, our minds make our meanings, and the argument goes on forever.

The paradox in our history has been that the renewal of humanism has come about most often—and the most arresting questions asked of it—by reexamining the old stories, and asking them new questions. This act of replenishment—in W. H. Auden’s Christmas poem, in T. S. Eliot’s austere retellings, in Christina Rossetti’s Victorian Christmas carols, or in Pasolini’s and Scorsese’s passion stories—is the kind that makes the Bible live. Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, once supplied a simple idea: that the Bible is a universal book, with a chapter for every part of human experience—lust, desire, renewal, rage, pedantry, and inexplicable suffering, a book of mourning and a book of passion and many books of pain. Such a book is still worth rereading.

Every myth system has some quiddity essential to it. The beauty of Greek myth is that it understands that contradiction is character, and makes that understanding come alive in ways human and dramatic: Love, Aphrodite, makes an unhappy marriage to Work, Hephaestus, but a gloriously orgiastic relationship with War, Ares. The wild man, the Centaur, is the great teacher. Wisdom springs fully born from the head of Power. Each man secretly wishes to marry his mother, and each of us wants to stare at our own image in the pool.

The special virtue of the biblical myth is its recognition of the ineluctability of human suffering and the possibility of human speech: from the first chapter, the metaphors of the Bible speak to our knowledge of mortality, and they do so by offering us a still-unrivaled cast of characters. They show us recognizable people making recognizable cries. Moses and Aaron, brothers at war; Saul and David, flawed king and pure protégé; David and Absalom—“would to God I had died for thee”—Esther and Solomon and poor cowardly Peter and Jesus himself, arrogant and humbled. No book has ever had more men and women within it. A desert religion, a dark universe of pain into which the light of justice or mercy occasionally breaks, and in which we find small shadowed stations of poetry or nativity to comfort us. Made by men and women, the Bible is populated by people. That’s what makes it, and leaves it, an open book.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Alejandro Jones:

What do you with regards to book? It is not important together with you? Or just adding material when you want something to explain what the one you have problem? How about your free time? Or are you busy man or woman? If you don't have spare time to perform others business, it is make one feel bored faster. And you have time? What did you do? Everyone has many questions above. They must answer that question due to the fact just their can do in which. It said that about publication. Book is familiar on every person. Yes, it is correct. Because start from on pre-school until university need this particular The Good Book: Writers Reflect on Favorite Bible Passages to read.

Harold Walsh:

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Jerry Ingle:

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Arthur Fabry:

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