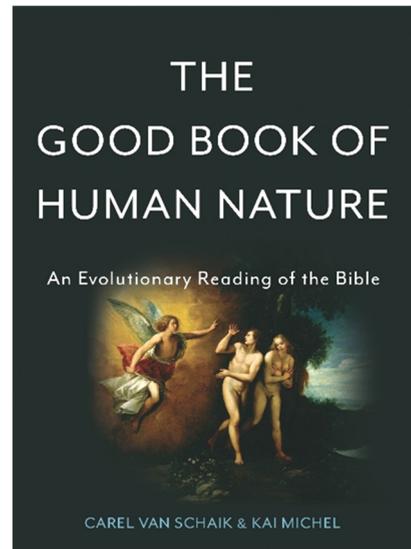


Kristóf LEGÉNDY¹:

Schaik, Carel van – Michel, Kai:
The Good Book of Human Nature: An Evolutionary Reading of the Bible². Hachette Book Group; USA; 2016; 480 pages;
ISBN: 0465074707

*“It would be a great pity
if the Bible were solely the concern of religion.”*

The book co-authored by primatologist Carel van Schaik and historian Kai Michel offers a truly interesting reading for theologians and scientists alike. They examine the Bible as a historical record of the cultural evolution of Homo sapiens. Their basic thesis is that the texts of the Bible came into being during the cultural evolution from a hunter-gatherer way of life to a settled agricultural lifestyle, even if they were not composed as a direct result of the revolution of farming (as



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² Hungarian edition: MICHEL, Kai – VAN SCHAİK, Carel (2019): *Az ember három természete – A Biblia evolucionista olvasata*. Transl. Miklós Fenyves. Budapest, Typotex.



the two events were thousands of years apart). The Bible was written by countless authors, but God was not one of them – claim the co-authors. In fact, the working approach and basic concept of their book views the spiritual reading of the Bible as merely a subsequent addition or extra layer, and thus it was primarily written for those open to a purely scientific exegesis of the texts of the Bible, those willing to forgo its moral-spiritual interpretation. There is no room for me to present every point made in the book step by step from Genesis up to the Gospels – partly because it is a work of nearly 500 pages –, therefore I will only give highlights of what the co-authors mean by an evolutionary reading of the Bible.

Culture is the cause and solution of the problem. It is its cause, as settlement entailed new customs and norms unknown to hunter-gatherers (such as private property and the systems of social relations). The solution is smart, as they claim that cultural difficulties can only be managed with cultural methods, e.g. via stories and teachings that frame humanity's origins, its enormous struggles and its seemingly hopeless daily life in a cosmic-spiritual order in which hard work, social regulation, and, in general, the entirety of human existence gains a meaning. The co-authors refer to this cultural process – of which the Bible also forms part – as cumulative cultural evolution. During the course of this process, we do not only create knowledge, ideas, or inventions but also pass these on and improve them, enriching the available repertoire of cultural knowledge and techniques. The Bible is a monumental achievement of cumulative cultural evolution, as it posits humanity in the infinite will of a higher power, against which it is helpless, yet it is more bearable to find comfort in his plans than to live without causes and explanations. Thus, God appears as a kind of cultural auxiliary existence who is able to quell the primary nature of farming folk and get them to believe truths against which their first nature had always rebelled – for instance, the idea that lawfulness is the path to freedom.

According to the authors, we have a threefold nature. The first one comprises our innate feelings and reactions that came into being over hundreds of millennia (such as our sense of justice, our outrage at inequality, our fear of the unknown, and our sense of religion, which sees the hand of supernatural agents in everything). The second one: the cultural solutions for our existential problems involved in settlement (customs, conventions, mentalities). These vary from culture to culture and will never be quite as straightforward as our primary nature since the majority of these came into existence

much later, approximately 10–15 thousand years before Christ. The third is our rational nature, which frequently goes against our primary nature, thus making us feel bad. This includes things we do unwillingly, although we know they are for our benefit, such as healthy eating, sports, observing speed limits, or New Year's resolutions – claim the co-authors. Armed with this information, we may understand how, in the authors' view, the Bible is a response to the cultural challenges of a new way of life, a collection of stories from which we can always decipher the challenges of a farming lifestyle – i.e. it is a creation of our second nature. Since humanity lived a hunter-gatherer lifestyle for hundreds of thousands of years, it had no time to adapt to the demands of the new agricultural lifestyle, which resulted in the emergence of so-called mismatches (or discrepancies). Biological evolution enables us to adapt to our living environment both physically and psychologically; cultural evolution, however, proceeds in its wake; that is why there is a gap or mismatch between them. Thus, in order to manage the challenges of an agricultural lifestyle, humankind called upon mental culture – this is what is known as the Bible today –, i.e. culture is the cause and solution to the problem.

The book follows the sequence of the books of the Bible, starting with the analysis of Genesis and then going on to examine the relationship of Moses and Yahweh, as well as the coming into being of monotheism; subsequently, following a review of the kings, the prophets, and the psalms, it reaches the New Testament. In order to understand the basic thesis of the book, let us briefly review its statements regarding Genesis.

Hunter-gatherers lived in clans consisting of families, had no fixed dwellings, were naked, and had few possessions. There was no explicit hierarchy, nor was there a ruling class. Their coexistence was governed by their primary nature. Researchers of prehistory do not know for sure what put an end to their existence in this state of Paradise: it might have been climate change or a decline in the numbers of animals due to overhunting. Whatever triggered the change of lifestyle, approximately 15,000 years ago, the agricultural revolution began, as well as the domestication of livestock and settlement in permanent camps rather than continuing their wandering lifestyle. The new way of life was anything but easy, as Genesis says: "It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food." Often the farmers experiencing the new way of life as a curse had a far harder fate and a significantly shorter lifespan than people before the shift in lifestyle. Due to the hardships of field labour, social interactions declined. Thus, we can understand how

the first peasants might have regarded the previous way of life as Paradise. Therefore, the everyday drudgery of tilling the soil demanded an explanation, and the paradigm of divine retribution suited this perfectly. Losing Paradise: God's strict punishment. The desire for the knowledge of good and evil – which is portrayed as a sin perhaps only in Genesis – is the desire for social order of the newly formed second nature that was gaining in strength. A mismatch was created, among other things, due to the emergence of ownership, as hunter-gatherers would have been baffled by the statement, “this tree is mine, you mustn't eat from its fruit”. Therefore, second nature had to come up with something in order to protect property. And cautionary tales like “if you eat from it, something very bad is going to happen to you” were perfectly suited to this purpose. But the power of words was not sufficient to keep people from gorging themselves on fruits, so God made Paradise into a private garden and set guards to protect it – just as many newly-made landowners must have done. In fact, property has still not become second nature; it is something we have to teach our children, too, claim the authors. Thus, the Neolithic Revolution did away with one of the most basic rules – which had been practised for many thousands of years –, namely that food should be shared. What was previously a common resource now became monopolized. The appearance of labour pains is a similar mismatch phenomenon: due to the farming way of life, women's stature decreased and the pain involved in giving birth significantly increased. According to research, the occurrence of prenatal mortality rose significantly compared to hunter-gatherer people. Thus, the judgment pronounced on Eve becomes clear: “I will increase your pain when you give birth. You will be in great pain when you have children.” Put simply: according to the authors, the stories of Paradise sanction as God's will, for instance, women's subordination or the self-explanatory nature of property, as well as all the new circumstances arising out of farming as a way to give earthly power relations a divine legitimization. It figures that calling on God's help via historical etiology has helped only to understand the hardships but not to eliminate them.

In the authors' view, the story of Cain and Abel carries the message that in the new world the unequal distribution of resources could even turn a brother into a murderer. According to the Bible, Cain's descendants aptly monopolized property, power, and land, thus leading humanity into civilization, i.e. the establishment of states, the creation of hierarchies and systems of power. The authors claim the Bible hit the nail on the head, i.e. it precisely describes what happened (rendering a different, spiritual

reading of the Bible unnecessary). A society based on ownership unleashed competition, inequality, and violence into the world: fratricide follows with an almost inevitable necessity from the agricultural revolution. The authors need but take one step from here to explain why religion came to be, why Big Brother in the Sky is important for our second nature: communities with a fictitious guard of morality are more resilient, last longer, and have a more stable structure. Naturally, all of this does not lead the co-authors to conclude that God is real; rather, they conclude that we have a cognitive function that also directs cumulative cultural evolution, namely: our brains trace everything back to causes and intentions. Thus, the big gods appeared in history simultaneously with the emergence of hierarchies and the creation of religion and states.

Subsequently, the book dwells at length on sin, the Flood, sicknesses, ceremonies, loyalty to Yahweh, and the secrets of Deuteronomic historiography. The point remains the same: the stories of the Old Testament can be interpreted as the evolutionary etiology of the new civilized-cultural way of life. According to the authors' claim, the real stars of the Hebrew Bible are the prophets, messengers corresponding to the shamans of the old world; they are the ones who solidified the idea of monotheism; thanks to them, Yahweh became the moral creature hitherto unknown to the cultural evolution of the times. The book concludes the analysis of the Old Testament with the examination of the Psalms. The Psalms present a new face of God, as humankind could now turn to Yahweh any time among its existential tribulations; he would listen to and aid those who believed in him. It is not the destructive God of the Flood who appears here, who would frequently expose his people to their enemies, but rather a God who guards and protects them. Yahweh slowly starts to be depicted as a father for the people of the Old Testament. A fatherly aspect that also includes the role of judge of the afterlife, as the concept of the resurrection appears as early as the book of Daniel. This brings us to the last big chapter of the book, dealing with the New Testament and, subsequently, with nature and the sciences.

In the authors' opinion, the New Testament is nothing but a response to the mismatch-type problems of the Old Testament. For them, the historical research into the person of Jesus suggests that he was a new, more advanced form of the miracle-working prophets of the Old Testament, who fulfils all the anticipations of the Old Testament. In reality, this is the result of conscious evolutionary editorial work that portrays Jesus as a talented miracle worker and proves beyond all doubt that he was not

a charlatan out for gains: he finally defeats death and returns to life, releasing the cultural anxieties of thousands of years. Jesus's agenda is none other than to restore the old order of the world: the rediscovery of hunter-gatherer morality based on equality and justice. The heavenly kingdom is none other than our primary nature, to which humankind, now settled, wishes to return; its Lord is Jesus Christ, who also lived a wanderer-gatherer way of life himself along with his followers, in accordance with the old tribal lifestyle (Jesus and his disciples did not do any regular work). The disciples follow Jesus by leaving behind all their property that would be required for settlement, eating together like hunter-gatherer groups (cf. the Eucharist). The primal pattern, i.e. life in Paradise, now appears as our internal, moral world, where we can feel free to address Jesus: he will always listen to and help us. We have come full circle, our second nature has found its way to the primary, i.e. to the person who leaves behind the settled, agricultural way of life (Mt 4:1), who feels authorized to pick the crops anytime (Mk 2:23–28), who does not want to eliminate their social-religious roots but rather fuse them with their primary nature (Mt 5:17), and who insists on the strictest code of morality: such a person becomes God.

In the authors' reading, the Bible is a description of the human character. Apart from its numerous valuable and useful points, the book is also plagued by an abundance of logical contradictions and presents as facts certain assumptions slightly too liberally. Reading through the book, one might have the feeling that despite all their express intentions, the authors idealize the hunter-gatherer way of life, when people lived morally in a way that was somehow self-explanatory. If this was truly the case, then how are we to understand morality and religion as a social response to the new way of life? Furthermore, the authors take the transcendental openness of *Homo sapiens* for granted, attempting to no avail to explain it as some kind of cognitive function, since the sheer fact that this openness exists cannot be readily understood as a result of biological evolution. How is it possible that prehistoric hunters were able to come up with transcendent reality, while at the same time the general human experience was that we could not even bring something new into existence (we were merely able to combine previously existing things)? How could the authors of the Bible come up with a real God who is detached from experiential existence? Assuming that what the authors presented as primary nature, i.e. our sense of justice, selflessness, and compassion, is an innate part of *Homo sapiens*, what we are talking about is not the invention of God but the evolution of the

way we think about God. Christians can doubtless accept that even religious consciousness has an evolution, which we may discover in the books of the Bible; yet to suppose that due to their changed way of life the people of antiquity, as part of their cultural evolution, came up with God by deceiving themselves (to explain the challenges of existence), does seem rather illogical or, in fact, impossible. In the light of the above, we may study the evolutionary reading of the Bible more as an interesting reflection on how humankind, once settled, found a way to God culturally, as well as reshaping and placing within a historical-social context the natural experience of God gained during their hunter-gatherer way of life (through stories in writing); and how they understood and recognized the reality of God as the one who saved humankind and who was the heavenly father to all of us.

Interpreted thus, we can accept the thesis of the book: the second nature of the authors of the Bible did not conceive but rather recognized God. The story of Job is an excellent example of this. The reason Job believes is not to make it easier to bear the burden of existence, nor in order to be healed, not even in the hope of life in Paradise and not as a way to explain some fact of existence. The story of Job is the realization that God's will is good even if it is manifested as the greatest evil in our existence. If Job's story had no basis in reality, it would have been impossible for it to be conceived.

Considering the intention and aim of the work, it is a carefully written scientific treatise, which can appear as an interesting addition to or a dab of colour among the innumerable Bible commentaries. If one does not take its claims at face value but rather allows to be guided towards new thoughts about the Book of Books, it will definitely enrich and complement our knowledge of our culture and religion.