

*God of Abraham*, by Lenn Goodman (Oxford University Press, 1996) 364pp.

Reviewed by Eyal Mozes

*God of Abraham*, by Lenn Goodman, is a presentation and defense of monotheism. The author specifically defends Jewish traditions and thinking, but much of the book's content seems to apply to Christianity as well. While Goodman devotes two chapters (chs. 2 and 8) to discussing metaphysical issues regarding the existence of God and creation, the focus of the book is on ethics.

The book is extremely heavy, difficult reading. Goodman's writing style is very dense, and he seems to care more about displaying his erudition than about making his points or arguments clear. He alternates between extensive quoting of medieval Jewish philosophers such as Sa'adiah Ga'on and Maimonides, as well as of modern philosophers; and dense, often rambling discussions of his personal interpretations of the meaning of Jewish stories or doctrines. For large parts of the book, I was unable to determine just what Goodman's point is, or how it is connected to the rest of the book.

Goodman's basic theme is the equation of God with the entire realm of values. To value is to worship god; to deny god is to deny values and to deny importance, or an exalted status, to anything; to hold consistent values is to be a monotheist; to hold contradictory values is to be a polytheist. This equation is never argued for, but taken for granted, serving as the basis of all of Goodman's arguments throughout his book.

### **The binding of Isaac and its meaning**

Much of Goodman's method in this book consists of quoting biblical stories or commandments, and then offering far-fetched interpretations of them to fit his theme. Typical of this method is Goodman's treatment of the story of the binding of Isaac - the one biblical story which, to Goodman, symbolizes the central meaning of monotheism, and which provides the book's title.

According to the story, in Genesis, ch. 22, God ordered Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac; Abraham obeyed, bound Isaac and prepared him for sacrifice, but then, at the last moment, an angel called to him, ordered him to stop, and said: "now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thy only son from me."<sup>1</sup> Abraham then saw a ram which miraculously appeared in the place; he unbound Isaac, sacrificed the ram instead, and was then blessed by God.

The meaning of this story seems straightforward; Abraham has proven his loyalty to God by his willingness, on God's command, to sacrifice a value of crucial importance to him, his beloved son; and he is blessed by God for this willingness. This is the meaning commonly ascribed to the story. Goodman, however, has another interpretation.

According to Goodman, Abraham is blessed for *not* killing Isaac, for the moral insight he shows in understanding that the evil of sacrificing his son is not a proper part of worshipping god. Goodman's interpretation of the phrase "thou hast not withheld thy son"

are: "since you made no exception of your son to the command of goodness, and did not accept the ghastly but ready notion that the gravest enormity would be the greatest gift, for that reason you are blessed."<sup>2</sup> This is a very far-fetched interpretation, clearly inconsistent with the actual text (the words of praise to Abraham for having "not withheld thy son, thine only son from me" are said *before* Abraham's action in unbinding Isaac, deciding not to sacrifice him); and, given that the story has been read and taught to Jews for many centuries as having a diametrically opposite meaning, Goodman's claim that his interpretation represents the meaning of Jewish monotheism seems truly bizarre. This incongruity, however, evidently does not bother Goodman, and he never says anything to address it.

Goodman sees the essence of monotheism in the coherence of values. Pagans see the divine in anything exciting or extraordinary, whether good or evil; monotheists believe in a God who is entirely good, who takes no part of any evil. This is symbolized by the fact that pagans accept acts of violence, such as animal sacrifice, as part of the ritual of worship, whereas monotheism rejects all such rituals (the fact that animal sacrifice is well-documented throughout the old testament as an important part of Jewish rituals of worship is explained as a necessary transition period out of paganism).

### **Goodman on the existence of God**

In discussing the question of the existence of God, Goodman focuses more on modern philosophy rather than on the bible. In defending faith in god, Goodman relies on Humean scepticism as proving that accepting the existence of the physical world is just as much an act of faith. Goodman discusses logical positivism at length, and takes it for granted that demolishing the logical positivist programme, demonstrating that none of our knowledge conforms to the logical positivist standard of verification, is enough to establish the legitimacy of faith, putting belief in god on a par with scientific knowledge. Goodman here seems like a perfect example of Ayn Rand's insight that scepticism and dogmatism are two forms of the same fallacy, and are mutually reinforcing.

Goodman's main positive argument for God is a combination of the standard ontological, cosmological and design arguments. Goodman acknowledges that the ontological argument is not a good argument for refuting doubts about God's existence; but he still regards it as an important argument, in that viewing God as "a necessary being" is essential to monotheism, and that explaining existence requires a "necessary, absolute being."

Goodman's central argument for God's existence seems to be that the intelligibility of nature by the human mind, and "the world's order and beauty," are evidence of its origin with divine intelligence and goodness. In the context of Goodman's book, it is clear that his motivation for asserting the existence of God is ethical. Goodman needs to establish the existence of God because, on his view, God's non-existence is the same as ethical nihilism.

### Goodman's theory of monotheistic ethics

As mentioned above, Goodman's basic premise in his view of ethics is the equation of God with the realm of value. The "ethics of monotheism," on Goodman's view, is the ethics of consistent, coherent values.

Goodman takes this equation completely for granted, never considering the possibility of values or ethics apart from God. Also, while Goodman often pays lip-service to the rationality of values, he takes for granted throughout his discussion that the only basis for moral knowledge is intuition, which makes known to us what is the good, or, equivalently, what is the will of God.

The political implications of Goodman's view seem clearest in chapters 6 and 7, devoted to the relation of ritual to morals and law, and to Goodman's "philosophy of Ritual," and then to applying this general discussion to the biblical laws of diet and sex (ch. 7, discussing these biblical laws, is the one chapter of the book which is irrelevant to Christianity or to monotheism in general, applying exclusively to Judaism). Goodman defines ritual as "a symbolic action that has values among the objects of its intention and that expresses attitudes toward those values through the modalities of its performance."<sup>3</sup> Based on this definition, Goodman argues that there is no valid distinction between religious commandments with a rational basis and commandments that are merely ritualistic.

On the relation of ritual to law, Goodman's view is that all law necessarily has a ritual element; all laws express some symbolic attitude towards society's values. "Penal laws may seek deterrence or reform, but they also, always, intend a message, express a norm, is uniquely coded symbols... Whether or not a punishment effectively deters some future crime, it expresses a societal attitude about specific values. Punishments do not restore a balance or repay a debt. But ritually they undo a wrong, demarcate and underscore a convention."<sup>4</sup> Since the details of any law cannot be completely deduced from its purpose, these details represent a ritual; "since laws always address values, the manner in which slack is taken up speaks of those values, creating a ritual. Rituals specify much more detail than is predictable from a minimal, functionalist account of the behaviours they invest."<sup>5</sup> From this, Goodman concludes that there is nothing wrong with laws enforcing any rituals; and so, given his equation of values and the good with God, it is not surprising that Goodman regards it as appropriate to enforce observance of at least some religious commandments by law. For example, Goodman writes: "A society that tolerates polygamy (as America has begun to do) has sacrificed real interests, violated real boundaries, and will, if the Torah contains any truth at all, pay a real price."<sup>6</sup> In his discussion of the Jewish laws of sex and diet, while never addressing this question explicitly, it seems clear that Goodman sees nothing wrong with political enforcement of these laws. Thus, Goodman's view of monotheism, combined with his philosophy of ritual, seems to lead directly to a justification of legal enforcement of religion.

If there is one overall lesson that we can take from Goodman's book, it is in illustrating the consequences, in philosophy and in politics, of religion's monopoly on the realm of value and morality and on all spiritual, inspiring concepts. As Ayn Rand pointed out: "Just

as religion has preempted the field of ethics, turning morality against man, so it has usurped the highest moral concepts of our language, placing them outside this earth and beyond man's reach. ... "Worship" [is taken to mean] the emotional experience of loyalty and dedication to something higher than man. "Reverence" means the emotion of a sacred respect, to be experience on one's knees. "Sacred" means superior to and not-to-be-touched-by any concerns of man or of this earth. Etc. ... Apart from the man-degrading aspects introduced by religion, that emotional realm is left unidentified, without concepts, words or recognition. It is this highest level of man's emotions that has to be redeemed from the murk of mysticism and redirected at its proper object: man."<sup>7</sup> Almost 30 years later, Goodman's book reminds us that Rand's insight is still as relevant and important as ever. Views like Goodman's which necessitate an authoritarian basis for ethics and make full political freedom impossible, continue to seem appealing and plausible to some people, to the extent that no secular, rational treatment of values, and of concepts such as reverence and the sacred, are available.

### Endnotes

1. Genesis 22:12.
2. Goodman, p.22.
3. p.211.
4. pp.204-205.
5. p.205.
6. p.214.
7. Ayn Rand, Introduction to *The Fountainhead* 25th anniversary edition, 1968.