

GOD

God: A Biography
by Jack Miles

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Miles shows us God in the guise of a great literary character, the hero of the Old Testament. In a close, careful, and inspired reading of that testament - book by book, verse by verse - God is seen from his first appearance as Creator to his last as Ancient of Days. The God whom Miles reveals to us is a warrior whose greatest battle is with himself. We see God torn by conflicting urges. To his own sorrow, he is by turns destructive and creative, vain and modest, subtle and naive, ruthless and tender, lawful and lawless, powerful yet powerless, omniscient and blind. As we watch him change amazingly, we are drawn into the epic drama of his search for self-knowledge, the search that prompted him to create mankind as his mirror. In that mirror he seeks to examine his own reflection, but he also finds there a rival. We then witness God's own perilous passage from power to wisdom. For generations our culture's approach to the Bible has been more a reverential act than a pursuit of knowledge about the Bible's protagonist; and so, through the centuries the complexity of God's being and "life" has been diluted in our consciousness. In this book we find - in precisely chiseled relief - the infinitely complex God who made infinitely complex man in his image. Here, we come closer to the essence of that literary masterpiece that has shaped our culture no less than our religious life. In God: A Biography, Jack Miles addresses his great subject with imagination, insight, learning, daring, and dazzling originality, giving us at the same time an illumination of the Old Testament as a work of consummate art and a journey to the secret heart of God.

God: A Biography Details

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From Reader Review God: A Biography for online ebook

Kelly says

This book is amazing. It really opened my eyes. It's written by a former Jesuit named Jack Miles. Who is brilliant. This was given to me by a friend late in high school, while we were both struggling with our Catholic backgrounds. It deals with God as a literary character, and what his choices would mean if the Old Testament were analyzed simply from the perspective of literary criticism. I think it's fascinating and erudite. It is guaranteed to give you a few more questions about religion than you had before starting it. Everything is seen in a different light.

I would recommend having some basic religious education in the Judeo-Christian form, otherwise a lot of this is not going to make sense. But I would absolutely and completely recommend this to both Christians and Jews alike, or anyone who's had some measure of bible study. To say it is worth the read is obviously underestimating it.

Marguerite says

Only a former Jesuit could have written this. Treating God as the protagonist in an epic that's "more" chronological than Christian Scripture is thought-provoking, if not earthshaking. Jack Miles looks at the different roles Scripture gives to God. It has the effect of remaking the divine in very mortal form. This God grows in understanding. This God can be bested. This God is conflicted: "A monotheism in which the divine is not just conceived but also imagined as one must have a different effect on its adherents than one in which the divine is conceived as one but imagined -- and portrayed in art, drama, and folklore -- as many. ... It must foster a way of thinking of the self as similarly composite and similarly alone." This book is not for fundamentalists; the reader has to be able to keep the premise foremost while reading it. I think it also helps to read the book as the first of a two-volume work, the second being **Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God**, Miles' sequel.

Matthew says

I was excited about the idea that this was going to be a book analyzing the God of the Old Testament/Hebrew Tanakh as a literary character, which is exactly what the author, Jack Miles, promised he was going to give me. It didn't turn out that way, however, and even though I enjoyed learning a lot about the Old Testament, its historical context, its major figures, and the many deities who were amalgamated over time to become God, I can't help being very disappointed that Miles never really achieved his goal and that his editors let him publish a book where a thesis very clearly and explicitly articulated is never properly met. The reason I say this is because Miles never ceases defining God as a split personality. Of course there is plenty of historical proof that Elohim and Yahweh, etc. were initially separate deities, which goes a long way toward explaining why God can sometimes command two opposite things at once or repent his actions immediately after he has performed them, but if one really tries to think of God as a character, which is what Miles says he is setting out to do, I don't understand how it can be acceptable to say that his contradictions merely prove that he has more than one personality. If Hamlet or Captain Ahab were reduced by a literary critic to split personalities, people would immediately be annoyed that that critic was being lazy and

unperceptive. The best characters (and many of the most intriguing real people -- look at any U.S. president) are often defined by their contradictions, because big, interesting personalities are usually inscrutably complex personalities. If I felt that Miles had treated God as that kind of character instead of continually reminding his readers that God is referred to by two different names in thus-and-such passage in the original Hebrew, I wouldn't feel like he totally failed to accomplish his supposed goal. To the very end of the book, he doesn't treat God the same way a critic would treat Ahab or Hamlet, but keeps defining him as a "fusion character". His final chapter even has a section called "Imagining the One God as Many". He just seems to miss the fact that God's unpredictability and inconsistency of character are exactly what make God such a great literary figure (singular).

The book was incredibly well researched and very clearly and carefully written, but I just can't escape feeling like Jack Miles failed to do what he set out to do and then published the book pretending to himself that he had. I wish somebody else would write the book that was promised.

Mallory says

Overall I found this book very interesting. The premise is to read the Hebrew testament, focusing on God as the character in a piece of literature. It was an interesting point of view, and also provided some insights into how the Jewish community arranges these books of the Bible. There were also some historical insights to put the Hebrew testament into context, and also provided, for me, an additional fresh perspective for reading the Old Testament in the Bible. There definitely some moments where I raised an eyebrow or rolled an eye when I felt he was taking the literary reading of the God-character to the extreme. (For example, trying to bring a little bit of Freud in to analyze God? Please, no.) However, that may simply reveal the bias I have of growing up thinking of God as...God and not a literary character.

Judith Bienvenu says

So, this is a long book, and deep reading.

The author proceeds through every book in the Jewish bible (the Tanach). It has a lot more books in it than the Christian Old Testament, and does not include the New Testament.

What I found fascinating is that he basically rips up "God". The author lays out arguments that God is not omnipotent, not all powerful, not all loving, and is in fact a confusing mess of different personalities. And then ends the book saying how terrific the Tanach is.

I came to a very different conclusion. From his own arguments, I see the God of those books as a completely human construction. God gradually plays less and less a role in the stories until he's not there at all. Yes, I am an atheist. I feel that much of the world's problems come from believing in this religion or that one -- that if "God is on my side" then he's not on yours, and that makes you less than me -- less important, less valuable, less "right", and okay for me to ignore, denigrate or kill.

So, it's a fascinating book. Long, hard to get through (I had started it several years ago and failed to finish it, but I finished it this time).

I think you may get out of it what you expect to get out of it.

I realize my views may offend some. It's not my objective to offend, but to make folks think.

Eric says

I've owned this book for years, but only just gathered the courage to dive in. I guess the Pulitzer should have tipped me off to the quality of the author, but it's been a very pleasant surprise.

What I like most is that Miles introduces God as history's most compelling novel character, whose personality shifts and changes in each new chapter. For example, we see both wrathful God and whiny God.

Miles argues that insight from reading about God from this perspective casts light on the central motivations of the Western personality, what you and I walk around with carried in our subconscious everyday.

Still reading, will update.

Zach Waldis says

This is a book with which I thoroughly disagreed, and thoroughly enjoyed. On the one hand, Miles is a vivid interpreter and helps you to really appreciate the Old Testament (or Tanakh, as he rather forcefully presents with his in my opinion forced narrative of an active beginning God and a closing God who "loses interest") as literature, compelling and enthralling literature. On the other hand, he pushes his thesis (narrative?) of "God in tension" to the breaking point. He finds the tension within Yahweh to be irreducible; he seems to have little favor for the idea that "God is one" (presented in the book as the view of the Dtr). For my part, certainly there is a tension in the character of the OT God, but it is not as irreducible as Miles says it is. For example, in the closing Miles blithely states that "...but it may also be taken as a statement about the initial untransparency of God to himself. He wants an image because he needs an image" (402). I found myself saying "Really? The text just doesn't say that!"

To sum up perhaps the major difference between myself and Miles is that I am a Christian interpreter. The literary drama of the First Testament finds its climax in Jesus Christ, not "God losing interest". Perhaps his biography is closer to the raw "tragedy" of a hopelessly deluded God, but I am one who thinks that the Biblical story (and indeed life itself) goes "Beyond Tragedy". From a literary standpoint, though, tragedy is quite the cathartic experience.

Will says

Examines God as a character, the protagonist of the Tanakh/Old Testament. God doesn't always come out great—he's whiny and capricious, and doesn't always know what's doing. Turning God into a protagonist makes the inconsistencies of the text into a dramatically conflicted character. The book doesn't answer the tensions, ambiguities, and inconsistencies it highlights, but offers a reading of them; probes them rather than resolves them.

Erik Graff says

I was loaned this by a nominally Catholic friend who is attracted to offbeat books. Though an autobiography of the first person of the trinity, the creator of heaven and earth, is certainly unusual, this one made the mainstream, winning a Pulitzer for biography. Normally, I wouldn't have touched the thing, but this friend's recommendations have weight.

As it was, I found the deity's life story less interesting than any number of biographies I've read of human beings. What interest the book held was in seeing how the author handled the various gods of the Hebrew canon, combining disparate traditions into a single picture--which is, after all, what believing, conservative theologians do in any case. The job was done intelligently, but, for me, uncompellingly. Not being a Jew or a Christian, I have no motive to reconcile such irreconcilables.

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Randy Cauthen says

On the multiple personalities of the Old Testament God. Miles reads the Bible as he would a novel or play, examining the motivations of the protagonist.

Paige says

Okay, another religion book that I am finding too heavy to wade through. Made it a couple of chapters...not a read if you want something light.

Audrey says

This book is at once an incredibly interesting introduction to the literary structure of the Hebrew Bible for someone with little religious background, and a book that would be greatly supplemented by a thorough understanding of the text being analyzed. Similarly, this analysis of God as a literary figure is one that could both supplement a religious reading of the Bible, or lend a more secular appreciation for the Bible as a literary text. So, despite the subject matter of this book, there is no agenda other than to analyze the main character of the text at the heart of Western civilization.

I didn't know what to expect when I first approached this book, and was thus pleasantly surprised with what I found. This book is written as a literary analysis, breaking down the Bible to get a better understanding of its main character, the chronology of his actions, and the way he grows, learns and changes throughout. But at

the same time, Jack Miles discusses the factors that influenced the creation of the Bible, the ways in which gods from older polytheistic religions were fused into the Judeo-Christian God, how this fusion led to seeming inner conflicts in God's personality, and finally, how these different facets of God's personalities can be put together to understand God as a holistic literary figure.

This text is slightly dense, and would definitely be more easily read by someone with some knowledge and understanding of the Bible, but it is definitely a worthwhile read that offers a new perspective on how to approach the idea of God.

John Martindale says

Here we have an unique perspective of someone who doesn't appear to be a man of faith, within the book Miles considers God purely as a literary character that evolves in the unfolding of the canon as ordered in the Tanakh. If Miles is even close to correct in his reading of the Hebrew bible, the God that Jews and Christians worship has very little in common with the extremely ambiguous, amoral and multi-personalitiy deity that he thinks the ancient writers conveyed. Towards the end of the book, Miles briefly retold the story of the Tanakh as it might be told if the Hebrews were polytheist, which would make it where the different personalities, motivations, intentions and moral tendencies would be found in different homogeneous gods, I found this part to interesting. Miles writes how since the Hebrews, believed in one God, the many different portraits are conglomerated into one, resulting in a very ambiguous being, one who is occasionally good and while at other times evil; a very unstable God with a divide self. Miles also details the progression of a God that seems to have no back story, or identity outside of man who he made in his own image. Within the story God acts, kills, kills some more, promises, reneges, kills some more, regrets, recalculates, readjust, viciously retaliates, only to eventually begin to fade, after being shown to be unjust be Job. Towards the close of the Tanakh, God comes comes reclusive, and inconsequential as the divine tragedy comes to a close.

I thought some of Miles interpretations seemed tenuous at best, occasionally I felt he suppressed some evidence, and he definitely gave certain passages a very negative spin. Though I think Miles goes too far in his very uncharitable interpretation of the God portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures, I still think he does bring to light some things that are actually there, things which the majority of Christians can't see, because the presupposition of the love and justice of God, means one automatically give the Old Testament a positive wholesome spin.

Johannes C says

The first time I encountered Jack Miles was in a video of him interviewing Slavoj Zizek about theology and Zizek's book "God in Pain." Yet at the time, I didn't quite know who Jack Miles was, and the sort of mythic status he had taken on by then in some intellectual/literary circles. It was only later that I more consciously encountered Jack Miles when his name came up in a PBS program I watched with Bill Moyers interviewing Margaret Atwood on religion. Atwood confessed her love for Miles' work and being an admirer of Atwood's commentary on religion, especially in her novels, I thought it would be worth checking out this book.

I'm still in the process of reading the Bible in its canonical order, though I am currently reading it through the Christian canonical order, whereas Miles spends most of the book commenting on the biblical canon by

way of the Hebrew Bible. Early in the book Miles comments on the divergence in literary effect between the Christian Old Testament's ordering of the books compared to that of the Jewish Tanakh, a section I found particularly interesting.

I found the first half of the book really fascinating, especially the Pentateuch, which is most familiar to me. However, I struggled with the second half, and I suspect this is because I have not yet read through the second half of the Tanakh or so-called Old Testament very thoroughly, other than the popular prophetic texts that Christianity later appropriates. So, it is certainly a possibility I will return again to some of the later chapters of Miles' book after finishing with the second half of the Hebrew Bible.

I have watched all the Hebrew Bible lectures by Christine Hayes that Yale has put out as open courseware, and I think those series of lectures have deeply shaped my conception of the Tanakh's contours. Like Sam Sifton's pizza cognition theory, which suggests the first slice of pizza as often strongly defining one's sense of pizza proper, those Yale lectures have inescapably become the framework by which I judge all other meta-readings of the Tanakh. And there were a few points of divergence between Miles' reading and that of Hayes', such as the way Miles treats the Satan character, especially the way he relates it to the Edenic serpent character as tradition often does. And while Miles does peddle in historical criticism here, a lot more than I would have expected (or even wanted lol), his primary concern (at least this is his claim) is a literary reading of the Tanakh. I have also encountered readings by Harold Bloom and Northrop Frye, both of whom I enjoy a bit more than Miles, but whose work I have also read much less of.

What I found most frustrating about Miles' reading however were his frequent appeals to some argumentum ex silentio, like if God doesn't suddenly interrupt or respond to a particular thing in the text, this must mean [something]. Or how Miles often does not leave room for events that are subtly implied or suggested, that happen behind or outside the perspective of the text, but only what is explicitly written is taken as a narrative event. I think a lot of the narrative points to something outside of itself, and there are things that occur in subtle suggestion, requiring the reader to imagine what is left unsaid, or what is covertly done outside the direct view of the reader. Hence the generative midrashic tradition which has followed in the Bible's wake.

So I basically think Miles reads far too much into the absence of explicit articulations, and asserts the points derived from these absences a bit too strongly (in my opinion). I still wouldn't want to miss out on any of these comments. I just think they could have been better presented more gently, e.g. as possible readings among many, or as questions even (although I do understand parsimony is a virtue in accessible writing). I also think some of his attempts at contorting the texts into an overarching structure, were not entirely plausible to me, but they were still very interesting and memorable. And I think the texts he curated in this book were a very satisfying collection.

Overall, a worthwhile read, although the book's synopsis sounded quite a bit more exciting to me than the book turned out for me (a sign that book marketing still holds quite a sway on me). He's not my favourite commentator on the Hebrew Bible out there, but still, a pretty fascinating read nonetheless.

George Mills says

There is nothing I can write that can reach the level of scholarship, thought, writing, originality, and sheer mental discipline of this work. The author has taken the Hebrew Bible not as a religious work, but rather as a literary work. He then analyzes the character "God" in the same way he would analyze the character Prospero in Shakespeare's "The Tempest". He is not interested in theological questions, nor is he interested

in proving religious interpretations. He is only interested in God, what he says, does, and even feels. When he refers to actual history and the formation of the Bible, he does so in order to explain what concepts, words, and comparisons meant to the Jews at the likely point in time when a particular book of the Bible is thought to have been written. It is a truly awesome accomplishment. "God: A Biography." should be read carefully and analyzed thoughtfully by all capable of setting aside their prejudices and preconceived notions. This book offers great rewards to all - regardless of their religious convictions.

Drtaxsacto says

Jack Miles takes the approach to consider both the Christian and Hebrew Old Testament(s) as literature and to consider God as literary character. His treatment of the Bible clearly got to some of his reviewers. But from my reading many of his critics did not bother to read the book. His careful scholarship here is pretty interesting. This is not a light book - and indeed one reviewer said it was "dry" - well the subject is dense - but Miles takes a complex subject and applies first rate scholarship to the topic.

Miles takes a sequential approach to looking at how God is portrayed - and thus starts with Genesis. And by reading the text closely one can discern a variable approach in the way that the writers approached their subject.

There are lots of conclusions from this book. One of the most interesting is whether the character of God is more like a Greek (Oedipus) or a Shakespearean Tragedy. Are some of the inherent qualities in God's portrayal more internally or externally caused. He makes a pretty good case that he follows the latter characterization.

Are there points in the book where a religious person might take exception? Sure, but don't think that because their might be interpretive differences that this book is not worth the read. I found it to be challenging and worth the time.

Paula W says

God, written as a literary character. I have some ideas on how to review this. Bear with me for a few days.

Judith says

God: a Biography by Jack Miles offers a thorough literary approach to the Bible, through the life of its protagonist, God. Setting aside puzzles of historical veracity, and ignoring issues of religious interpretation, Miles examines the character as written, from Creator to the Ancient of Days. Character development requires an authoritative ordering of the books , and Miles shows how the sequence of the Hebrew scriptures, the Tanakh, as opposed to the Christian Old Testament, provides continuity in the story of the relationship between God and Israel. This secular scholarly work neither confirms nor denies any spiritual perspective, but illuminates the foundation of Christianity and Islam, as well as Judaism.

Szplug says

Miles won the Pulitzer for this absorbing study of the life of the Biblical God, beginning with the opening chapter of *Genesis* and taking us through the entirety of the Old Testament in the Jewish ordering of the books from the Torah. Jehovah makes for a stirring and multifaceted subject - an omniscient and omnipotent deity that was assembled from the personalities and powers of a variety of ancient pagan pantheons, running the gamut from demiurge to demon; a terrifying and vengeful master, breaking his creations and his promises; maturing to a remorseful and avenging spirit, ragged from love and unyielding in justice; and then apparently abandoning his children to exile and slavery, only to be discovered once more - remote but present, restless but steadfast - when his far-flung flock regathered in the Chosen Land.

Miles provides a remarkable exegesis, bringing erudition and analysis to this fascinating portrait of a singular entity who proved to be remarkably differentiated and inconsistent throughout his sorrow-filled paternity - imparting an eminently human element to his earthly involvement, the Almighty as a tyronic parent who experiences all the vicissitudes and difficulties of an evolving responsibility, adapting his divine mediations as his children mature within time - and yet emerged at the end with the sagacity, capacity, and audacity to resolve the crisis in his being through a human form: Jesus Christ, the subject of Miles equally excellent follow-up *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God*.
