



Reviews

Honest to God

Bringing mind and faith to the story.

Ann Monroe

Book Review: Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.: 1995).

Those of us who read the Bible with our minds as well as our faith tend to have a high regard for biblical scholars. We may be skeptical about some of the further shores of academe, like the attempts by scholars of the hypothetical gospel source "Q" to reconstruct the history of the even-more-hypothetical community out of which Q might have come. But by and large, I think most of us feel we owe the academy a debt of gratitude.

Imagine, then, the shock of discovering—as I did when I attended last fall's convention of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), the biblical academic guild—that by those same scholars I am held in something perilously close to disdain.

Not me personally, mind you. As a visitor, I met nothing but friendliness, though a friendliness often tinged with condescension. At one session, for instance, I listened to a speaker making the (to him wildly controversial) case that it was a good thing for people with AIDS to read the Psalms. When I said to him afterward that people with AIDS had been not just reading but praying the Psalms at my Greenwich Village church for more than a decade, I got the verbal equivalent of a pat on the shoulder. "I'm so glad," he said warmly, "that what we espouse in theory is being done in practice."

"How are those of us who don't know Hebrew going to get this?" I asked another scholar after a presentation that hinged on linguistic subtleties. "Learn Hebrew," she said. (At my parish, we think we're doing well to have a few takers for

New Testament Greek.)

Disdain may not be the right word. What I felt was disregarded. It was as though I and the centuries of believers who have searched for the Word of God in this book didn't exist. They talked a lot at the SBL about "the reader." But it was a reader whose reasons for opening the book were hard to fathom. "If they don't believe it's true," I was asked by a bewildered fundamentalist at a publisher's party, "why do they spend all this time on it?"

IN THIS ACADEMIC limbo, though, I had good company. One of the most interesting events of the convention took place outside its academic rituals. As a gesture toward bringing the world of scholarship closer to the world outside it, *Publishers Weekly* invited Jack Miles, author of the best-selling, Pulitzer-Prize-winning *God: A Biography*, to give a talk on writing for a popular audience.

They got more than they bargained for. "They were expecting something more like tricks of the trade, coaching on how to write," Miles told me afterward. What they got instead was a call to liberation, addressed in particular to the graduate students and part-time faculty who have—in the current academic economy—almost no hope of a permanent place. "The intellectual life and the academic life are not coextensive," he told them. "The moment when you leave the field may be the moment when you begin the hunt."

"A very Sojourners-ey message," I wrote at the end of my notes on his speech, so directly aimed at those on the margins. "Work brought to fruition under the gaze of a tenure review board rarely gains longevity," Miles told his hearers. "I couldn't have written *God* if I hadn't been away from academe for many years." He was so right. Not that *God: A Biography* isn't scholarly—it is. As its notes attest, Miles moves with easy familiarity through every variety of biblical and extra-biblical scholarship.

But he has also done precisely what he told the assembled academics at the SBL meeting that they don't know how to do. He has used his scholarship in the service of a dazzling act of imagination, a mind-exploding "what if." If God is the protagonist of the Bible, Miles asks, what is his story? (Miles' God-the-character is unequivocally, though not exclusively, male.)

If we had nothing but the *tanakh*, the Hebrew scriptures, to go on, what would we make of this God person?

Miles begins his biography of God as abruptly as the Bible

itself. "He is talking to himself," he says of this being without history or relationship. His call for light is "not intended to communicate anything to anyone....It is rather as if a carpenter reaching for his hammer were to speak the word hammer aloud." The God Miles gives us is a creator who can only know himself through his relationship with his created image; who understands his actions only after he has performed them; who is obsessed with human generativity (or, to put it bluntly, sex). His first command to humankind is to be fruitful and multiply; his first demand is for control, through circumcision, of Abraham's penis.

But this is also a God who becomes more complex, and more self-conscious; experience teaches him who he is. He comes, eventually, to love the human creatures he originally wished only to command.

MILES PAINTS AN unnerving picture: a violent, arbitrary, and unpredictable God who is finally tamed only by becoming, in the odd mixture of books that ends the *tanakh*, almost irrelevant. In many ways, that picture goes over better with conservatives than with liberals, he told me. "Conservatives know God orders Israel to commit genocide, but liberals are used to improving God." As a good liberal, I often found myself arguing with what I was reading. These are people's views of God, I said anxiously to the page in front of me, not God's own character.

But the genius of Miles' approach is that it sails right past that argument. Of course they are, he says—but let's pretend they're not, and see what we find. It's an approach that can't be shoehorned into easy categories; in Israel, where the Hebrew translation is a best-seller, one major newspaper puts the book in its non-fiction category while the other lists it as fiction. Miles invites us to meet the Bible in a spirit of deep playfulness that is at once illuminating, exhilarating, and enormously entertaining.

To the scholars, though, the Bible is Serious Business. *God: A Biography* has never been reviewed by an academic journal, Miles told me, and it has not escaped his notice that the invitation to speak to the SBL (his first) sprang from his book's popularity rather than from what he had to say.

But to us in what, by the end of the SBL convention, I could only think of as the real world, Miles has a lot to say, especially about being honest about this God we worship. "I have to believe," he said to me, "that it's better rather than worse to be honest about the picture we have."

But when the picture is so often complex and troubling?

"What I think we gain," he said, "is an awareness that whether the correction is made on the pages of the New Testament or not, a correction is called for. The *tanakh*, and the [Christian] Old Testament, and for my money the entire Christian Bible, is the first draft."

"There is a strand within both Judaism and Christianity that looks forward and anticipates further revelation and vision," he continued. "Elijah may return, Jesus will have a second coming, the heavenly city will come down, all nations will stream to Zion to acknowledge that God is God. Those are intonations that we don't find religion by always looking backward, but also by looking forward, with the hope that our very imperfect grasp of things may in some unforeseeable way be rescued."

"I have to believe that," said this non-academic scholar. "I can't regard our current collective pooled knowledge about anything, and certainly not religion, as adequate. It's not."

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God: A Biography. Jack Miles. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1995.