

"Monumentality," she writes, "creates the sense of social cohesion that is central to the consolidation of a community by impressing upon people the importance and power of a thing or a person. . . . Central to this impression of social power is the sense of long-lastingness; the perception that this city, building, institution, or artwork—and the values it represents—will last through generations, societies, time." That is well said, and it alerts us to a central problem of modernism.

In contrast to what we expect in the monumental, the typical works of modernism looked as if they had been put together with a stapler or a screwdriver,

and could be taken apart as easily. Modernism suggested the temporary, the immediate, the satisfaction of this particular need, here, now. The idea of building for the ages was foreign to modernism. Who knew what functions would need to be satisfied tomorrow? I do not know whether Louis Kahn's buildings were built for the ages, but he tried to make them look as if they were. In doing so, he moved far from both the aesthetic program and the social program of modernism. And we have not yet found the answer to the question that Kahn brilliantly asked about the limitations of modernism. We are still living with his dilemma. ■

ruin of Jerusalem and its temple, of the inspired threats and visions of God's spokesmen. Finally, the songs and the poems and the stories that run from Psalms to Chronicles are grouped as Writings (*Ketuvim* in Hebrew). The acronym by which Jews refer to their Bible, "Tanakh"—Torah, *Nevi'im*, *Ketuvim*—recapitulates this canonical sequence, which preserves a sense of both the manifold nature of the collection and the lengthiness of its period of composition. (In "narrative time," these writings cover the period from the beginning of the universe—by current Jewish reckoning, 5,762 years ago—to circa 533 B.C.E., the Persian conquest of Babylon.)

Taking Genesis 12:1-3, which I have quoted above, as the promontory from which we can survey this vast textual territory, we can see how these biblical books all expand upon the story of the realization of God's promise to Abraham. The core canon, the Torah, ends with the children of Israel on the east bank of the Jordan, poised to come into the Land. The larger canon, containing the Prophets and the Writings, ends similarly. In the time since Moses, centuries have passed. Israel has become a mighty nation, unified under David and his family. It has split between the northern and southern kingdoms. It has fallen to the Assyrians, then to the Babylonians, and finally to the Persians. The country is desolate, the temple and its city ruined, the people exiled. The covenant seems shattered, God's promises broken. Yet the very last sentence of the Tanakh recalls God's first words to Abraham. God stirs the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, so that the king frees the Judean exiles to make *aliyah*, to "go up," that is, to return. The final word in the Jewish collection is *ya'ul*: go up, go home.

IN THE 1990s, Jack Miles decided to read the Tanakh from a novel vantage point. He eschewed the historical and theological approaches to the texts familiar to him from his academic work, and instead chose to regard these ancient books, in their Jewish sequence from Genesis to Chronicles, as material for a sort of psychological study of their prime character, God. The growth and the development of God's personality provided the unifying idea for Miles's reading, which was self-consciously, lyrically literary. The result was *God: A Biography*, which appeared in 1995.

Miles's "God" was troubled, talented, moody, passionate, impetuous. A cosmic orphan (as Miles, on the basis of the Bible's presentation, characterized him), parentless, childless, the only one of his kind, "God" left to himself was incapable of self-knowledge and therefore of personal

Like Father, Like Son

By PAULA FREDRIKSEN

Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God

by Jack Miles

(Alfred A. Knopf, 348 pp., \$26)

WE THINK OF the Bible as a book. It begins at the Beginning, with Genesis, and proceeds through to its closing (2 Chronicles for Jews, Revelation for Christians), tucked neatly between two covers. But the ancient Greek term that stands behind its modern English equivalent—*ta biblia*, "the books"—conveys more accurately the manifold nature of this ancient text. This collection comprises a multitude of individual writings, whose period of composition stretches for well over a millennium. And the writings themselves are often composite documents, containing within the seeming unity of their continuous prose a multiplicity of literary genres and religious visions, of communal and regional oral traditions, of countless now-lost scribes, editors, and authors. In short, the Bible is not a book, but a library.

Beyond the conventions of modern publishing and ancient canonization, what unifies this collection? For the Jewish canon, the thread that binds together this huge mass, organizing as well as coordinating its contents, is the idea of Israel. True, Genesis opens with God creating the universe and all life in it, including that

creature uniquely made in his image and likeness, "both male and female," namely, humankind. But then God himself rests and blesses the day that follows his labors, the seventh day or Sabbath, a practice and a privilege that eventually he will extend to the family of only one man, Abraham. God makes the universe by divine fiat; but Israel he creates by an unexplained choice, over time, through a promise:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go out from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the Land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Thereafter the great stories of Genesis—the saga from Abraham to Jacob, the adventures of Jacob's twelve sons, most especially of Joseph in Egypt—cede to the huge body of legislation, stretching from the middle of Exodus through Deuteronomy, that sets the terms of God's covenant with Israel. These five books of the Torah (the Hebrew word means "teaching") make up the core canon of the Jewish Bible. Its next sub-collection, Prophets (*Nevi'im* in Hebrew), runs from Joshua to Malachi. These books tell of the rise and fall of Israel's power, of the sovereignty and the

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growth. His only means to self-knowledge lay in his relations with the creature that he had formed in the Beginning in his image—that is, humanity. By turns creating his human self-image and then destroying it, “God” ultimately embarked on his peculiar relationship with Israel. The historical vicissitudes of the people of Israel as presented and preserved in the huge stretch of the biblical stories became, in Miles’s reading, the stuff of his characterological study of “God.” Through Israel, Miles’s “God” learned, as best he could, about himself.

THE CHARACTER WHO emerged from this original combination of literary theory, developmental and psychoanalytic psychology, and biblical texts was complicated, forceful, and surprisingly unappealing. By creating humans in his image, and then by giving them the order, and thus the power, to “be fertile and increase”—in effect, to make others in his image, but independently of himself—“God” inadvertently triggered “an ongoing struggle with mankind over the control of human fertility.” This struggle defined their relationship, and thus “God”’s development of his own personality. Raging against Adam and Eve for breaking a trivial prohibition, “God” cursed what he had created. Humanity’s dominion over the earth, which he himself had commanded (“fill the earth and subdue it”), he now linked inexorably with hard labor, human fertility with excruciating pain. And human life itself he blighted forever with the curse of death.

This conflicted relationship with humanity in general, which reaches a nadir when “God” destroys most of his creation with the Flood, is re-enacted *in nuce* with the family of Abraham, whom “God” blesses, curses, redeems (most spectacularly from Egypt), then abuses and abandons (most definitively through Babylon). The biblical themes of God’s mercy and of his justice, of his anger and of his compassion, of Israel’s disobedience and of their steadfastness, of the moral and historical pull of the Land in the story of the people, become in Miles’s retelling the expression of “God”’s own highly charged, deeply flawed character wherein reside both good and evil, weal and woe. In short—and little wonder, considering the historically and literarily manifold document that Miles reads as a history of a single character—“God” has a particularly violent, peculiarly unresolvable multiple personality disorder. He cannot decide who he is, he cannot define what he wants, and too often he improvises, with damaging consequences. Hideous human suffering—in particular, Israel’s suffering—is the result.

Thus the twice-told tale of exile and return that loosely shapes the Jewish canon becomes, in this case history of “God,” a recursive cycle of destruction, regret, and unstable reconciliation. “God”’s making man in his image means making man as his rival; and his destroying his rival—in Noah’s generation or later, in the Israelite generations that suffered under Assyria and Babylon—means regretting the loss of his image. In pursuit of his theme, Miles works his way in sequence from the five books of the Torah through the Prophets. Here “God,” definitely shattering his covenant by destroying Jerusalem and exiling Israel, works through his dreadful ambivalence in stages, whether manic (Isaiah), depressive (Jeremiah), or psychotic (Ezekiel). But it is only when “God”—on a whim, making a wager with Satan—inflicts unbearable sorrows on his servant Job that he finally sees, and understands that he sees, the fiend that dwells within him.

This moment of hideous self-knowledge shocks “God.” From this point onward in the Bible, Miles observes, “God” is silent, as he has no more direct speech. The closing writings of the Tanakh serve as his fade-out. In the books of Ruth and Esther, Daniel and Chronicles, human moral autonomy comes to compensate for divine silence and occultation, when “actions that once God would have taken on behalf of the Jews, statements that he once would have made to them, they now take and make for themselves.” “God,” trapped and perhaps paralyzed by the conflicting elements of his own character, recedes. Man alone is left.

HERE, AT THE close of his book, Miles ends with a haunting reflection on the problem of evil. All cultures deal with the questions arising from war, death, disease, meaning (and its dark twin, meaninglessness), the unbearable suffering of the innocent. In Western monotheistic systems, however, the problem is particularly acute, because it ends as an indictment of God. (“How can a good God allow this to happen?”) Reading the Bible as a record of “God”’s moral development, Miles construed evil as a symptom of a divine identity conflict, created when the various ancient Semitic deities with their particular functions (creator, destroyer, warrior, guardian, lover, mother) all fused, in Israelite monotheism, into an impossibly overcharged single personality. Thus the troubled character of the biblical God is as much (or even more) a part of the problem of evil than a part of its solution. Contemporary Western culture, Miles concluded, remains even now haunted by this God who, though absent, has never finally de-

parted. This God is the “divided original whose divided image we remain. His is the restless breathing we still hear in our sleep.”

What made Miles’s book enjoyable, even exhilarating, was not its chief character—his “God” gave me, and even himself, the creeps—but the breadth of education and culture that his development of its tortured chief character put on display. Miles drew widely and deeply on great stores of knowledge—of literature and music; of Semitic philology and ancient Near Eastern history; of poetry ancient and modern, in myriad languages. His writing made the reader think; his ideas about various aspects of biblical literature made one stop and reflect on familiar texts in new ways. Despite his creation of one of the most repellent characters in recent fiction, then, Miles communicated an image of himself as a writer that was appealing, erudite, ethical, and deeply humane. The pleasure of reading *God* was, in no small way, the pleasure of getting to know Miles.

God: A Biography, based as it was on the Jewish canon, inevitably suggested its own sequel. Could Miles produce a characterological study of Christ, the chief *dramatis persona* of the New Testament, by similarly following the sequence of books in the Christian canon?

AS AN EPILOGUE to the Tanakh, the New Testament is both similar and dissimilar to the foundational collection. Much newer and much shorter (its twenty-seven texts all seem to have been written sometime roughly in the closing half of the first century), it is much more focused on a single and singular theme: the redemptive consequences of the life and the death of Jesus of Nazareth, a historical personage in a way that God is not. Like the Tanakh, this shorter collection can itself be seen as a twice-told tale of suffering and salvation. The first and tighter cycle follows the narrative of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as conveyed (variously) in the first four writings that open the Christian canon, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The second and longer cycle that involves Jesus’s generation (he died circa 30 C.E.) and the generations thereafter unrolls in the rest of the New Testament’s writings (some of which, such as Paul’s letters, were written some twenty years before the Gospel of Mark, the earliest Gospel). These describe and promise a recapitulation of Jesus’s experience of death and resurrection for the believer, to be accomplished definitely when Jesus himself repeats the divine drama by coming again, defeating evil, and returning to God the Father together with those who have now been raised, like him, from the dead.

But the New Testament's first four books are not like the Tanakh's first five. Rather than developing a master narrative that moves across all four writings from a start to a close, the Gospels tell Jesus's story four times, around the core of his public mission, from baptism to crucifixion. The effect is like *Rashomon*, and the personality of Jesus, the characterizations of his friends, followers, and opponents, the sequence and the significance of speeches and events, all shift and change in each re-telling. Their central message, like their central character, changes too. The first three Gospels, of Matthew, Mark, and Luke—the synoptic or “seen-together” gospels—all proclaim, with different accents, Jesus of Nazareth's teachings about the coming Kingdom of God. The fourth Gospel, John, is strikingly different, and focuses instead on the theological significance of Jesus as the divine Son.

Historians going at this diverse material must endlessly sort through and discriminate among traditions—earlier and later; plausible, implausible, and impossible—in quest of the Jesus of history. Theologians too, like historians, though according to different criteria, must also make choices, deciding what to emphasize and what to play down when constructing or interpreting church doctrine about Jesus within the traditions of their particular communities of faith. How might Miles, as a “literary” writer telling a unified story while drawing on the Gospels' many different ones, approach these sources and negotiate their differences? Miles came up with a simple, audacious interpretive stratagem. His new book is not a story about Jesus. It is, instead, a continuation of his earlier fictional biography based on the Tanakh. The main character in *Christ* is not Jesus: it is “God.”

THINGS HAVE NOT gone well, either for “God” or for Israel, since last we saw them at the end of Miles's earlier book. The prophets had spoken in luminous terms of the glories of Israel's return from exile: the crooked ways would be made straight; David's line would be established forever; the Temple, restored and beautiful, would draw all nations to itself. Evidently, says Miles, the prophets—and thus “God,” whose message they mediated—were wrong. The victorious parade home was canceled. Few responded to Cyrus's invitation to return. The Second Temple was a paltry, inglorious affair. And in the half-millennium between Cyrus and Jesus, the people and the land of Israel simply passed from one foreign suzerainty to another, from Persia to the Hellenistic kingdoms that followed Alexander the Great to—finally and most disastrously—Rome.

In sum, “God” has discovered that he could not or would not keep his promise. Owing to his failure, not theirs, his covenant with Israel has lapsed. Worse, “God” foresees in the coming of Rome a more devastating destruction than even Babylon had wrought. In the year 70 C.E., Rome would demolish Jerusalem, crucifying so many thousands of Jews in the course of a long and vicious siege that the land surrounding the city would be stripped, denuded of trees. After 135 C.E., defeating the Bar Kochba revolt that in many ways was the last gasp of the war in 70, Rome erased Jerusalem altogether, planting in its stead a pagan city called Aelia Capitolina. Israel again was savaged and scattered in an exile more enduring than that under Babylon. “God” cannot or will not do anything about any of this; but still he must do something.

But what? Relying primarily on John's Gospel, Miles presents the answer to the conundrum that he has constructed. His tormented chief character determines to resolve the ongoing crisis of his conflicted personality. “God” understands that he is the one fundamentally responsible for having humanity in general, and Israel in particular, in their dreadful situation of suffering and death. He understands that he, not Israel, has failed to keep their covenant. Finally, and most fundamentally, he understands that he, not they, is the one who sinned in the Garden of Eden. They ate the forbidden fruit; but he, in his intemperate fury, cursed his own creation with suffering and death. In the past, from time to time, “God” has been merciful; but now, on the cusp of a new devastation, he has become penitent. And so he resolves to change—to change himself, to change the covenant, to change the world. “God” decides to become “God Incarnate.”

Entering human history as an embodied male Jew, Miles writes, “God” atones for his abandoning Jerusalem to Rome by arranging for Jerusalem to abandon him to Rome first. Hence, for purposes of emplotment, the prominence of Passover in this story about the death of “God” and the redemption of his character. “The lamb whose blood saved the Israelites from God's Angel of Death at the first Passover becomes the divine lamb or Lamb of God whose blood saves all mankind from God's own curse at the second Passover.” By becoming human, by dying as he knows so many Jews will die, “God” reconstitutes his own identity. By rising from the dead and thus promising eternal life to all humanity, “God” renews his own creation. Through his own incarnation, death, and resurrection, “God” starts over again.

RE-READING THESE familiar texts from a novel perspective, Miles once more produces startling, even daring results. “God” as “God Incarnate” can flirt with women, duel with Satan, toy with his followers, and baffle his interlocutors in ways that speak immediately, indeed shockingly, to modern sensibilities. Released from any obligation to history or to theology, telling his tale with anachronistic abandon, Miles uses these culturally powerful scenes from the Gospels in imaginative ways to create new insights into these texts and into ourselves, their cultural progeny.

Still, as readers of his story we must ask: how does “God”'s crucifixion resolve anything, really? What difference does it make whether “God” himself dies if his death fails to avert the deaths of so many others? How does an indefinitely postponed celestial wedding of “God” and humanity—the happy ending for which Miles strains by concluding with themes culled from the Book of Revelation—help anything at all? If “God”'s character, in Miles's fiction, is the question, then how do any of these other elements—suffering, death, resurrection—provide an aesthetically pleasing and dramatically satisfying answer?

They do not, and they cannot. Flush with mythological potency in antiquity, their power has diminished with age: what worked as a resolution to the problem of evil as it was imagined in the first century does not work in the same way now. Miles uses these elements of the Gospel stories because he has to use them: if they are unsuccessful, they are also obligatory. Why? Because Miles, despite his authorial freedom to cast his chief character as an intemperate, conflicted sadist and then to change him into a prescient, penitent masochist, is himself constrained by his texts. As the postmodern author of a postmodern fiction, Miles could eschew a resolution to his story entirely, rather than re-use an ancient one that does not fit the tale that he tells; but he seems to want his book to be both a fictional story about “God Incarnate” and a literary reading of the New Testament. He thus cannot bypass or ignore the canon's emphasis on crucifixion and resurrection, though aesthetically these elements compromise his story by moving it, at the end, from fiction to fantasy. For this reason, what defines his project also limits it.

But what is Miles's project? In a foreword to the reader of his book, at several points along the way, and again in a concluding appendix (“The Bible as Rose Window, or, How Not to See Through the Bible”), Miles offers his text as a form of literary appreciation of the New Testa-

ment. His essay, he says, is meant to help the reader to regard and to savor the New Testament's religiously motivated artistry, just as the visitor to a cathedral might enjoy the play of light in stained glass. And again at several points in this book, as in his earlier one, he remarks upon the parsimony of biblical prose in order to state one of his chief principles of interpretation. It is this: since everything insignificant has been left out, assume that everything kept in is significant. By so committing his attention, Miles can conjure observations of genuine subtlety from seemingly incidental narrative details.

The problem is that Miles the author of this theo-biographical fiction must abandon, overlook, or ignore the greater part of those New Testament texts to which Miles the literary critic is committed to interpreting. He does so in order to use them to tell the story of Jesus as a continuation of the story of his previous fictive character, "God." Thus the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke scarcely figure in his account at all, because the literary conceit that Jesus is actually "God" is best accommodated by the Gospel of John. Where scenes or sayings that Miles does want to use occur in the Synoptics, he will splice lines into block paragraphs taken from John, and then comment on the text that he has thereby created. The intellectual end point—what Miles has to say—is often pleasing. But to write a new biblical text by clever editing in order to make the point seems, well, unorthodox, or at least not quite kosher, as a technique of biblical interpretation, literary or otherwise.

MILES'S SEVERAL FEINTS in the direction of history also confuse his enterprise. Invoking Josephus, he suggests that the number of Jews slaughtered by Rome following the siege of Jerusalem was "comparable to the portion that perished in the Nazi *shoah*." But we do not know how many Jews—or, for that matter, how many people—lived in the Roman Empire in the first century, nor how many resided farther east, outside the empire. Nor do we know how many died in the siege: Josephus's figures are notoriously unreliable. Hence we do not and cannot know if the one slaughter correlates in any respect—impact, numbers—with the other. Why does Miles speak as if he does know, or can know? He seems to be reaching for an aesthetic effect, wherein Romans correlate with Nazis, first-century debacle with twentieth-century genocide. His true subject is theodicy, God's (and, for his story, "God"'s) inaction in the face of evil. The poor historical analogies just get in the way.

But Miles makes such analogies because he attempts to situate his modern literary understanding of Christianity in real time, in the ancient past. Despite his explicit disavowal of a historical standpoint, his project veers into an attempt at historical explanation. Thus he writes that the horror of the war with Rome "can scarcely fail to have raised many of the radical or desperate questions about God that, to some, seem to have arisen for the first time in the twentieth century. As for radical or desperate answers to those questions, one seems to have been the Christian vision of the divine warrior self-disarmed." The pacifism that "God Incarnate" preaches—love your enemy, turn the other cheek, and so on—is the "radical reversal in the divine identity" required, indeed created, by the ancient evangelists contemplating God's failure to protect his people. An ancient religious imagination, writes Miles, transformed the Jews' slaughter into God's crisis of conscience, resolved in and through the Christian revision of the Tanakh. God, newly pacifist, put himself on the cross; God, newly international, made a new covenant with all mankind.

BUT MILES IS WRONG. The ancient slaughter *did* fail to raise the same sorts of "radical or desperate questions about God" that the twentieth-century slaughter raised, because ancient people are not modern people, and they thought about things differently. The New Testament texts, unedited, advance different claims about Jesus, about God, and about the resolution of the problem of evil from the ones that Miles creates and then, confusingly, attributes to them. First and most obviously, the Gospels do not identify Jesus with God: they are two different persons. Even in those passages that present Jesus as divine, he is subordinate, and this subordination of divine entities under one supreme deity is consistent with the tenets of ancient monotheism. Moreover, the doctrine of Christ as fully God and fully man was a fourth-century teaching, one that could be defended by an appeal to the first-century texts, but not one native to them. And even the fully divine/fully human Christ was imagined as another "person" distinct from God.

Christian pacifist traditions predate the war with Rome by twenty years (they appear also in Paul's letters), so they are not a response to it. And the pacifists were Jesus's followers, not Jesus himself. During his mission, Jesus threatened unsympathetic villages with total annihilation. In post-resurrection traditions about him, he returns as a warrior, descending from heaven with a cry of command, leading

angelic legions, defeating powers and principalities: no divine disarmament here. And the canonical vision of the Christian end-time is not at all inclusive. From among all the nations, only the "saints"—that is, those Christians whose religious vision coincides with that of the particular author—will be saved. Plenty of others—Jews, pagans, other Christians—are excluded from salvation.

As for Rome's defeat of Jerusalem, as far as the historical evangelists are concerned, God did act, just as he had acted through Assyria and Babylon in the more distant past. The old paradigm, renounced by Miles's "God," worked fine for them. The evangelists' God sent Rome against Jerusalem to punish Jerusalem for killing Christ. No mystery there; and little visible trauma; and, for that matter, no turning of the messianic cheek. Imperial slaughter did not imperil the world's meaning, or the Bible's meaning, for these ancient authors. They were innocent of Spinoza and Nietzsche. Atrocity, for them, did not entail the peril of atheism.

THE FORCE AND the originality of Miles's reading of ancient Christian texts lie precisely in his freedom from responsibility either to history (what may or may not have actually happened in the past) or to theology (the systematic religious sense that Christian communities have made of their books and their view of that past). It is Miles's modern secular imagination, not some ancient Jewish religious one, that conceived of the Gospels as a tale of divine disarmament. And it is our world, not the world of antiquity, that provides the generative elements of Miles's story, and the moral and cultural context that gives it power. Miles knows this, though when he reaches for historical explanation he seems to forget it.

The biblical rose window of Miles's literary appreciation has been shattered by modernity's experience of the problem of evil. And it is to this problem—the death of God as imagined not by John, but by Nietzsche; the death of man as accomplished not by Nebuchadnezzar or Vespasian, but by Hitler and so many others—that Miles has directed his imagination. Whatever his intentions, his book conducts us to an appreciation not of the Bible, but of our own nihilism. By drawing selectively on the richest library to have survived from antiquity, the most generatively important collection of books in our culture, Miles has narratively re-imagined the problem of evil and provided a resolution. But alas: the happy ending, even in a work of fiction, is a victim of our times, and cannot convincingly conclude this story. ■

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