



STATEMENT DG-119

BOOK REVIEW

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE: GOD: A Biography

by Jack Miles

To call *God: A Biography* a misnomer is an understatement. This recent book by Jack Miles is neither about God nor a biography. The source of Miles's revisionist work is the Hebrew Scriptures or what Christians usually call the Old Testament, yet his interpretation of these books is not only unorthodox but idiosyncratic.

A literary critic for the *Los Angeles Times* and formerly a Jesuit, Miles claims he is not interested in matters of objective truth, whether theological or historical. Rather, he wants to treat the God of the Hebrew Scriptures as a literary character, to interpret God through these varied texts as a Shakespearean scholar would interpret various leading characters such as Hamlet, MacBeth, or Lear. In this case, his work is not a biography, but literary criticism. Because the idea of the Hebrew God has left an indelible mark on Western civilization, Miles deems it important to explore the temperament of the Hebrew Lord.

The result is a best-selling book. Its popularity fits the larger pattern of current interest in spirituality and the soul, as evidenced by best sellers from New Agers such as Deepak Chopra, Thomas More, James Redfield, and M. Scott Peck. *God: A Biography* has even won the Pulitzer prize for best biography! Since the literary world often chases after novelties, this should not be surprising. *The New York Times* referred to it as "a dazzling piece of work."¹

Yet literary novelty, however dazzling, is no substitute for truth. In accordance with postmodernist literary criticism, Miles rejects the idea of texts having a received, fixed, and objective meaning and opts instead for various deconstructions, which require decoding esoteric meanings and offering any number of original "interpretations." His treatment yields a God who is not a unified character, but a curious collection of differing and even contradictory personalities. Before looking at Miles's literary experiment, we need to understand the biblical view of the Scriptures he deconstructs.

Conservative Jews and Christians know the Hebrew Scriptures to be both biographies and autobiographies of their ultimate author, God himself. The various genres of the Scriptures are biographies of God because their human writers — whether poets, sages, historians, kings, or prophets — captured various facets of God's life in relation to His creation, and particularly concerning His chosen and covenanted people, the Jews. Simultaneously, the holy books are also autobiographies of God because the Holy Spirit directed what each human writer recorded about the Creator, Sustainer, Savior, and Judge of the universe. As the Apostle Peter reminds us, the prophetic word of Scripture does not have its origin in human will, but in the Holy Spirit, who providentially carried along its writers (2 Pet. 1:20-21). The Apostle Paul endorses the holy Scriptures in their totality by declaring, "All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16). Jesus Himself affirmed the full authority of the Old Testament as God's infallible word (Matt. 5:18; John 10:35).

Miles covers the entire Old Testament, but he bases his case on the order of the books used in Judaism (the Tanakh), which differs from the Christian Old Testament. He claims this is highly significant, since the Tanakh ends not with the books of the minor prophets (which Christians believe refer often to the coming of Jesus), but with historical

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books in which God's presence and power, he says, are less obvious. Miles believes that "God never speaks again" after His discourse with Job (p. 11), even though God is referred to in various ways in the books that follow Job in the Tanakh. In fact, the precise ordering of the books in the canon is not as important as the chronology of the events they describe. But since Miles is approaching the matter in a literary fashion, he places great importance on the canonical ordering of the Tanakh. He believes that God ceases to be a major player by the end of the Tanakh.

Although Miles claims to have bracketed the questions of historical and theological truth when dealing with the Scriptures, he subscribes to the higher critical approach stemming from the end of the nineteenth century. Because the presuppositions of higher criticism affect all of Miles's interpretations, they must be exposed and examined.

Higher criticism assumes that religion is a matter of historical evolution, which excludes any divine intervention. Therefore, the various aspects of God's character can be explained as a synthesis of the personalities of gods worshipped by Israel's neighbors. According to this approach, the monotheism of Israel was not due to God's divine revelation and providential care of His people, but to a gradual cultural change from polytheism to the worship of a single deity, who absorbs many of the characteristics of the other gods.

These assumptions are questionable on many grounds. For one thing, the religion of the Hebrews marked a radical departure from the polytheistic religions of the ancient Near East. Its uncompromising ethical monotheism, its abhorrence of idolatry, and its sense of linear and providential history are unique theological elements that do not derive from a pastiche of previously existing pagan theologies.² Miles ignores the Bible's own testimony as well as the considerable conservative literature that challenges his naturalistic and evolutionary approach.³

Moreover, Miles disregards the New Testament and is silent on one arresting witness to the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus Christ Himself. If it can be established that the Gospels are historically reliable⁴ and that Jesus spoke the truth as God's Son, then His testimony concerning the veracity and abiding authority of the Scriptures becomes unimpeachable. Jesus spoke of the Scriptures and the Scriptures spoke of Jesus (Luke 24:44-46). Yet Miles refuses to consider the New Testament or Jesus' view of the Scriptures; nor does he seriously consider the messianic prophecies so liberally distributed throughout the Old Testament, especially in the prophets (Isa. 9, 53, etc.).⁵

The assumptions of higher criticism allow Miles to engage in the wildest speculations. Instead of viewing God as a multifaceted and sometimes mysterious personality, Miles sees Him as an artificially constructed composite of irreconcilable elements. God is both angry and loving; both near to His people and transcendent; and so on. For all Miles's knowledge of the Bible and ancient cultures — he holds a Ph.D. in Near Eastern languages — he is quite unsympathetic to the texts he deconstructs. To borrow a line from C. S. Lewis, Miles is so busy reading between the lines he fails to read the lines themselves.⁶ Instead of reading the Hebrew texts charitably as part of an unfolding and multidimensional narrative of God's interaction with the human race, Miles attributes any puzzling or problematic elements of this story to internal contradictions in the divine character. God is depicted as a powerful but short-sighted, confused, and rather pitiable deity.

We find this in Miles's treatment of the account of creation and the fall into sin. He claims that God creates the universe through "effortless sovereignty" in the Genesis 1 account, but shows weakness in the narrative of the second chapter when He "rested" from His work on day seven (2:2). Miles comments, "God is already, at this earliest moment of his story, a mix of strength and weakness, of resolve and regret" (29). He finds a contradiction where there is none. Humans rest in order to regain strength after a loss of available energy; rest for God simply means a cessation of creative activity after the initial work of creation is finished. God shows no weakness in "resting" on the seventh day. This kind of unwarranted fault-finding regrettably sets the tone for the book as a whole.

Miles's interpretation of the Fall (Gen. 3) desecrates the biblical meaning by making God the culprit, the serpent a sage, and Adam and Eve innocent victims of God's bungled creation. He claims the serpent tells the truth when he says that Adam and Eve will not die if they eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (3:1-5). It was God who lied, since they didn't immediately die physically after eating the fruit. Miles ignores the fact that Satan insinuated a lie when he asked Eve if God had forbidden them to eat of *any* tree in the garden (3:1); for God had only restricted them from eating from one tree (2:16-17). Furthermore, our first parents did immediately become mortal through their disobedience of God's clear command. They would eventually die physically — as would their offspring (see the repeated references to death in Gen. 5:5, 11, 14, 17, 20, 27, 31). They also died spiritually that very day, in the sense of separating themselves from God's goodness, placing themselves under His curse, and being evicted and barred from paradise (3:14-24; see also Rom. 5:12-19 and Eph. 2:1).

Nevertheless, Miles shuns these reasonable and biblically consistent explanations and resorts to the blasphemous notion that recurs throughout his "biography," namely, that the real problem is God Himself. He says that "we may trace the conflict [of good and evil] back to the Lord God, a cause of both weal and woe in the lives of his creatures because good and evil impulses conflict within his character" (32). This perspective on things has significance for us all, according to Miles: "The peculiar, culturally determined interior life of Western man begins, in a way, with the divided interior life of the deity" (33; see also 38, 408), who in Miles's view is a creation of man. Miles's real interest is not in God in an objective sense, but in the human image of God in relation to our fractured self-images. A morally divided deity, of course, can give us no hope for our own moral or spiritual redemption. It can only enable us to rationalize our own lostness.

Miles's twisting of the Genesis story resembles the views of the ancient Gnostic heretics who accused the Creator of wrongdoing, exalted the serpent, and excused Adam and Eve.⁷ Such a view is both bad biblical interpretation and poison for the soul (2 Pet. 3:16). Unless God is light without any darkness, our darkness can never be overcome by God's light (1 John 1:5-10). If any interpreter of Scripture lacks the most fundamental understanding of God's goodness, human freedom and rebellion, satanic deception, and God's righteous judgment on disobedience, he or she cannot provide much insight into any aspect of the Bible.

According to Miles, God's judgment on Canaan, which he calls "ethnic cleansing," was rather whimsical: "the Lord does not...seem very angry with the Canaanites, but the effect is genocide, all the same" (117). Again, Miles does violence to the texts he claims to interpret. God's judgment was not based on ethnicity, but on their stubborn, protracted rebellion against God (Gen. 15:16). Archaeological artifacts and epic literature found in Northern Syria prove that Canaanite religion promoted child sacrifice, religious prostitution, polytheistic idolatry, and divination. It is no wonder that God called their practices "detestable" and forbade His people from engaging in any one of them (Deut. 18:9-13). Miles commits character assassination against God himself.

Miles's treatment of Job is a masterpiece of perverse hermeneutics, whereby God thoughtlessly allows Satan to attack Job, later feels sorry He has done so, and restores Job's fortunes to make amends for His error. Miles says that the writer of Job imagines a world "ruled by a God who plays games with a fiend, and is manipulated and controlled by a fiend. The never-absent demonic side of the Lord God has suddenly a demonic ally" in Satan (309). Miles asserts that God's speech to Job (38-41) never appeals to God's justice, but only to His power; yet Miles contradicts himself by quoting Job 40:8, where God asks Job, "Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?" By retranslating Job 42:1-6 (against all standard translations), Miles claims that Job really wins his argument with God! Instead of repenting of his accusations against God, Job simply says that he has said his piece and can say no more. After this, God fails to correct him and feels obligated to restore Job's possessions. Even a positive review in *The New York Times* called Miles's treatment of Job "highly subjective."⁸ Indeed.

Miles concludes by reiterating his claim that God is morally ambivalent. "The vision with which the Book of Job ends recognizes no principle operating independently of God, to which both divinity and humanity must submit. There is, in other words, no higher, impersonal synthesis beyond personal good and personal evil. The Lord himself is ultimate in this vision, and therefore evil and good must be found simultaneously and personally in him if they are found anywhere" (327).

Although there is no moral standard above God, Miles's allegation that God is both good and evil is both unbiblical and illogical. Throughout Job and elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is repeatedly affirmed that the God of Israel is the holy one (Isa. 6:3), the just Lawgiver (Exod. 20:1-21) who detests evil (Hab. 1:13), and the judge who rules the universe in sovereign power (Gen. 17:1). Although nothing is beyond His sovereignty, God does not directly will evil, but rather brings good out of evil for His glory (Gen. 50:20).

Logically, the moral categories of good and evil imply an ultimate standard by which to differentiate or measure them. There is no higher standard by which to indict God as evil in any sense. God, as the ultimate personal reality, cannot be both good and evil, since God's very character is the unchanging source and standard of what is good for His creation. Moreover, God remains true to His unchangeably holy character (Mal. 3:6; Rom. 3:4).

Miles notwithstanding, Scripture views evil as stemming from the wills of humans and angels. As St. Augustine pointed out, evil is parasitic on the good. It has no independent reality, but is the perversion of the original good. God is good; rebellion against Him is evil.⁹ As James declares, "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone" (James 1:13). Miles fails to address this soundly biblical and philosophically cogent position.

Any further litany of Miles's literary, theological, and logical transgressions is neither necessary nor edifying. He is often imaginative, but seldom insightful. He has dared to attempt to write the biography of a God he neither knows nor understands. God's words to Job are still pertinent: "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?" (Job 38:2).

—*Douglas Groothuis*

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NOTES

¹Michiko Kakutani, "God, You Imperfect, Conflicted Fella, You," *The New York Times*, 28 March 1995, B-2.

²See "Hebrew History in the Ancient World" in Douglas Groothuis, *Christianity That Counts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 38-51.

³For example, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964); Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

⁴See Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, eds., *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

⁵See Walter Kaiser, *The Messiah of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

⁶C. S. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 152-66.

⁷See Douglas Groothuis, *Jesus in an Age of Controversy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1996), chapters 5 and 6.

⁸Kakutani, C-20.

⁹See Winfried Corduan, *Reasonable Faith* (Nashville: Broadman, Holman, 1993), 131-33.