

**Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God**

By Jack Miles

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Reviewed by Dennis Patrick Slattery

As he did so successfully in his earlier Pulitzer-prize winning book, **God: A Biography**, again Jack Miles breaks open the casing that has often locked the Bible in a crusty coating of dogmatic interpretation, reserved for scriptural exegetes and Sunday morning theologians. His great feat is to reimagine the wonderful and mysterious stories of the Bible, and here most specifically, the New Testament, less as theology and more as poetry. No small shift occurs when the stories of God, his people and the enfleshed divinity in the figure of Christ mingle, clash, contradict and finally resolve key differences, as a literary action. As he shifted God into a literary figure in **Biography**, so here does he reveal the dilemma God creates for himself and its final resolution in becoming, himself, enfleshed and sacrificing himself so that Paradise might be retrieved.

I want to admit at the outset that I am unfazed by whether I believe Miles' argument or not, as persuasive as it is. What I admire in his work is the shifting lenses by which we can each discern anew the way that "God as a divine self-consciousness" comes to expression in the incarnation. Miles'

approach is mythic, even mytho-poetic. As he states, myths uncover, make conscious and give voice to mystery, paradox, suffering and longing.”

Miles’ argument, for me, is less relevant to his study than that he has given each reader an interpretive handle by which to see the poetics of the story of God’s transformation from the Old to New Testaments.

The book, both scholarly and erudite as well as imaginative and playful, is divided into four parts and an Epilogue: Part One: The Messiah, Ironically; 2. A Prophet Against the Promise; 3. The Lord of Blasphemy; 4. The Lamb of God; Epilogue: On Writing the Lives of God. There follows then two ornate and involved Appendices, both of which are crucial for understanding the author’s methodology. My own suggestion to readers is: read the Epilogue first. It frames the entire narrative-argument and helps the reader grasp the heuristic approach Miles employs.

Essentially, Miles’ argument from the beginning is that God’s speaking in the Old Testament reveals an unawareness of himself which, as his awareness matures into the New Testament, becomes more complex and mysterious. The God of the Old Testament seems fixed in punishment, violence, favoritism, ostracism. Miles asks: Is God too weak to keep his covenant with Israel? Is his way out through Christ’s admonition to love friend and enemy the same?” God then becomes a human being to resolve

his dilemma. Is Christ then the crisis of God becoming mortal to espouse universal love? Such is the nature of the crisis.

Through his entire exploration of the above questions, Miles weaves the skeins of Old Testament stories with New Testament revelations to show with persuasive examples the fulfillment of the former through the narratives of the latter. In the process, he entertains the difference between seeing the New Testament as historical reality vs. literary creation. Affirming that there is no single or correct way to read the New Testament, Miles nonetheless believes that “when the divinity of Christ the Lord is embraced as a literary opportunity rather than resisted as a theological imposition, the protagonist of this work can seem illumined from within.”

Christ, as the incarnated God, makes something actual in himself that would perhaps have remained potential. The paradox implicit in the Christian mystery, for me, is that Christ as God’s humanness completes Yahweh of the Old Testament. Ours is the kingdom of heaven, Miles suggests, because he became one of us. Christ as God is slain by his enemies, but in his becoming one of us, all are now blessed, not just a few chosen elites. I find this realization to be the crux of God’s crisis resolved nonetheless in Christ’s birth and crucifixion.

God's shifting identity occurs here, in the death of the lamb of Christ in which Christ is both the priest of his own execution as well as its victim. In that sacrificial act, God's covenant shifts from violence and envy to kindness and generosity; God becomes human to live out this new regime, Miles writes, and he dies without resistance. As Paschal Lamb, Christ in his blood-shedding, "will save mortals from the curse of mortality itself." God has given the crisis in his life human form. In his becoming human and suffering, "human hope and divine honor are redeemed together at a single transcendent stroke." In his death, God revisioned and revived the Old Testament and the Psalms. His action also reveals, for Miles, the comic epic quality of Christianity, for it ends in a gala wedding in which "the Lamb's intended is the human race itself."

Provocative, disturbing at times, and utterly refreshing is his argument. I salute Miles for what he has done to and for the Bible: opened it up as a work of imaginative literature through which we can glimpse, as through a glass clearly, God's theophany in the lives of mortals. For this breakthrough I am grateful to his scholarship and his vision.

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