

God, A Biography

In the beginning there is nothing other than God.

Think about it. God speaks and the world comes into being. But before God spoke, what was there? Only God and nothing but God.

God creates the scene and then appears in it.

He is a being without a past, without any kind of history—no character development, no childhood, no parents, no siblings. A being without a family or friends. By way of contrast, consider the Greek God Zeus. Zeus had Apollo and Demeter, even Hades to work with, to play with, even to fight with. But not so the God we find in the book of Genesis, the God of Abraham, Moses, and David. Might not such a God be lonely? Might not such a God be unaware of the effect his actions might have?

God as revealed in the scripture is difficult to know. He has no past. He doesn't appear to talk to himself but only to humankind. Aside from the account of creation, there are no stories of God acting by himself. God's only way of pursuing an interest seems to require interacting with humankind.

His manner always seems very confident and self-assured. (I will use the male pronoun when referring to the God found in the Jewish Scriptures for that God is definitely male in character.)

Again and again, God seems displeased, but sometimes it seems that it is only through being surprised that God can learn what it is he does want. One scholar suggests that God is like a director of a play whose actors never seem to get it right. He is frustrated with them but doesn't seem to know beforehand what getting it right would look like. Finally, the actors seem to stumble into the right way, and God is satisfied, at least for the moment. We might imagine that the point of the play is for humankind to become the image of God.

What image is that? How can we know who this being is who arrives unannounced, seems to have no past, no parents, no brothers or sisters, and doesn't talk about himself? To return to the metaphor of the frustrated director and his actors, the director relies on his actors to discover the image he wants. We may justifiably wonder, if humankind wanted nothing, could God ever discover what God wanted?

Such are just a few of the questions Jack Miles, a former Jesuit Priest, raises in his book *God, a Biography*¹, winner of the 1996 Pulitzer Prize in the category of biography.

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Many of us have trouble with the many faces of God presented in the scripture. We have the image of God as father and comforter. A God who is compassionate, wise, and merciful. But how do we reconcile this with the God who told Joshua to kill not only every man in Jericho but every woman and child as well?

What are to make of the God addressed in the closing words of Psalm 137, a lament over the destruction of Jerusalem,

Remember, O Lord, against the day of the Edomites, the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, "Tear it down, tear it down." O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock! (All scripture references from NRSV)

How do we reconcile God, the perfect father, with the God who hardened the heart of the Egyptians and then killed their first-born?

What about the God who instructed Abraham to kill Isaac?

Finally, what about Job, a good and God-fearing man by all accounts, yet a man whose wife and children were killed to show up the adversary, Satan, in a bet?

Clearly, God is no saint.

Instead, God is a uneasy combination of opposites:

Creator-Destroyer

Lawgiver-Warmonger

Remote ruler-Intimate friend

I came across *God, A Biography* while perusing the shelves in Barnes and Noble for a book related to the quest for the historical Jesus. I was amazed at the audacity of the title, *God, A Biography!* How could anyone hope to write a biography of God? I picked it up and, after reading the introduction, decided it was worth buying.

At first a biography of God seemed ridiculous. But Miles soon convinced me of the legitimacy of his self-appointed task. His basic thesis is that we can approach God as a literary character in much the same way we might approach the character of Hamlet or Don Quixote. We know Hamlet is a fiction, yet Hamlet can seem real to us. We can imagine Hamlet to have a life apart from the play. A well-drawn fictional character can come alive to us. I can readily imagine Huck Finn apart from Mark Twain's fiction. Popular characters on the stage or screen can seem more real to us than living, breathing people.

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Part of the beauty of Mile's approach is that it works whether or not one believes God exists. You don't need to believe that Romeo and Juliet existed to discuss their character and motivations.

Miles is only asking us to consider the development of the character of God as revealed in the text. We can come to know Romeo and Juliet and other purely literary inventions by reading from the beginning of the text to the end. Miles proposes that we can similarly learn about the character we call God by reading from the beginning of the Jewish scripture to the end.

But how should we arrange the text? In what order should we read the books? You may not know that there is a significant difference between how the books are ordered in the Jewish and Christian traditions. The Jewish scripture can be divided into three major categories: the teachings, the prophets, and the writings. The category of teaching, which in the Jewish tradition is called the Torah, are the first five books, they also referred to as the books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The category of the prophets, which in Hebrew is called Nebiim, can be further divided into the former prophets: Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, and the latter prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, and six more. The writings, which in Hebrew are called Ketubim, includes the Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles I and II.

In general, God appears in different ways in each of these categories. In the teachings, God acts. In the prophets, God makes speeches. In the writings, however, God is silent. In the writings, he is written about, but he doesn't act or speak for himself. A useful way to think of the prophets is to imagine it as if they were telling us about letters from God.

In the Jewish tradition these categories are arranged in the following order: Teaching, Prophets, and Writings. If we use the first letter of the Hebrew word for each of these categories, Torah, Nebiim, and Ketubim, T, N, K, we can see the origin of the Jewish term for the scriptures, the "Tanakh." In the Christian tradition, though, the order is different. It's not Teaching, Prophets, and Writings, it's Teaching, Writings, and Prophets. Since Christians believe the coming of their messiah was prophesied, they like to place the prophets at the end of the Jewish scriptures, which Christians refer to as the Old Testament, so the prophecies about Jesus will come just before their "New Testament." As you might imagine, even though the books are the same in both traditions, changing the order in which they are read makes a significant difference in the "biography" that emerges. The trajectory of the character of God in the Hebrew Bible is from action to speech to silence. In the Old Testament of the Christians, though, the movement is from action to silence to speech.

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It is generally imagined that God is unchanging, but, if we read the text, it is quite clear that God changes. Here are some of the most significant "developments."

One development is in requirements for worship. God doesn't require worship explicitly until Moses is in the desert.

Some other interesting developments include:

God didn't refer to himself as father until the book of Samuel

God didn't refer to himself as Lord until the first part of the book of Isaiah.

God himself as comforter or show any concern for the poor or widowed until the second part of Isaiah.

God didn't refer to himself as hidden in any way until the 45th chapter of Isaiah 45.

One of the most significant developments over the course of the Tanakh, the Jewish scriptures, is the increasing silence of God. Miles writes, "It is as if God's Bible is replacing the Bible's God." God not only speaks less but does less. Moses not only spoke to God but God helped him in many miraculous ways. When the Jews were captives in Babylon, Esther saved them from complete annihilation all by herself. God isn't even mentioned.

The God of the Jewish scriptures is an uneasy unity of characters. There is El, the sky God. El is remote and doesn't converse directly with his creation. El is the God of the first creation story of Genesis. Yahweh, on the other hand, is the God in the second creation story. Both El and Yahweh are present in the story of the flood. In addition, a destroyer God, similar to the ancient Mesopotamian God called Tiamat, a God of chaos and destruction, is present in the story of the flood.

The God of Abraham is a much more benign God. He is a personal God, the God of a particular person or family, much like someone's guardian angel.

The God of Exodus is a warrior God who is similar to the Canaanite God Baal. Like Baal he is associated with fire and storm, mountaintops, and blood. He is a frightening presence. Unlike Baal, however, he is an asexual God, a God without desires, even though, like Baal, he is intensely concerned with fertility and reproduction.

Part of what makes God Godlike is his lack of any past. He doesn't have a history. But unless he has a past how can we know what he will do in the future? It seems that God doesn't know what to expect either.

He seems surprised that Cain killed Abel. It's as if it had never occurred to him that his creatures might murder one another. He becomes angry, but why? He hadn't told them not to kill each other. Is it because he wants to reserve the power of life and death for himself?

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Soon he regrets his creations. They are too violent, perhaps too prolific, so he wipes them all out with a monumental flood with the sole exception of Noah and his ark of creatures.

He singles out Abraham and promises him he will be fertile beyond his dreams. In exchange, though, he wants the foreskin of every male's penis, a significant symbol of control over the power of reproduction.

After many years of waiting, Abraham finally has children. Eventually his descendants are so successful and fertile that the Egyptians feel they must subdue them and eventually enslave them. God comes to the rescue of his people. This a Warrior God, a very different aspect of God.

The warrior God appears on mountaintops and is heralded by a pillar of fire by night and storm clouds by day. He gives ethical Commandments and the rest of the Law to his people. Worship requirements are now spelled out explicitly for the first time and involve lots and lots of blood. He is a frightening God, who kills without regret or remorse. Yet he speaks with Moses like a friend.

Joshua arrives at the promised land, fights the battle of Jericho, and displaces the Canaanites.

The promises the people made to God, the commandment to not put any other Gods before God and not to make any graven images of him, though, are soon betrayed.

Joshua's successors turn away from the God who delivered them from Egypt and turn instead to Baal. Baal is also a fertility God, very similar to the warrior God except Baal's rituals involved sex with priestesses in the temple. Both Gods promised fertility, but the asexual God of Abraham, though very concerned with all matters involving reproduction, was deeply opposed to the ritualistic sex associated with Baal. Finally, King Manasseh goes too far when he displays an image of the female Goddess Ashara in God's holy temple. Israel is severely punished. God first directs Assyria, then Babylon, to punish his chosen people for breaking their agreement. The elite, from the King on down, are forced to leave their homes and are imprisoned in Babylon. It was in Babylon that most of the Jewish scriptures were first written.

After Israel has been severely punished we start to get "letters" from God. We begin to receive messages from God delivered through the Prophets. For the first time, we encounter God the comforter, God the mysterious, God the compassionate.

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Finally, after years of exile to Babylon, it appears that Israel has been punished enough. But instead of being a God only of Israel, God now states that he is available to all nations who will promise to be faithful to his commandments and requirements. All nations can come to God through Israel. This is quite a change from the God who believed that his people must kill all foreigners lest his people be tempted to worship the foreigner's Gods.

An important part of the prophecies is the promise that Israel will be free from oppression. But these prophecies fail to come true. Israel continues to suffer under the control of foreign powers. Although they have returned to their homeland and are free to worship in the temple in Jerusalem, the Jews continue to be dominated by foreign powers. They are ruled first by Persia, then by Greece, and finally by Rome, which eventually totally destroys the temple.

It appears that God doesn't realize the consequences of his actions. It as if God discovers himself through humankind's actions. At first he tells his people only not to murder one another and to multiply. Then he is so deeply disappointed by what he has wrought that he destroys almost everything.

Sounds like a mistake to me.

Later, he makes an unbreakable covenant with his people, which is then broken. He punishes them as promised, but can God be God without his people? How can the drama continue if his people are no longer in relationship to him? It seems the drama can continue only if God relents from his promise to punish his people eternally for being unfaithful.

Over the course of the story, this destroyer God, the God of the flood, the God who annihilated Sodom and Gomorrah, the God who turned Lot's wife into a pillar of salt for looking back, the God who will annihilate his own chosen people if they are unfaithful, gradually recedes into the background and is replaced by a God of comfort and mercy.

In place of the destroyer God comes the God of forgiveness, as we hear in Isaiah 40:1-2:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

It is important to realize that, until this point in the saga, God had **never** promised comfort.

The God of Moses never hinted that other nations might come to worship him. It seems the God of Moses was so insecure that he believed the only way he could keep his people faithful was by destroying all traces of competing religions. That is why God insisted that Moses and Joshua destroy every last man, woman, and child in Canaan. Apparently if any Canaanites were allowed to live, he feared they would inevitably lure his people into their blasphemies.

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But the God revealed in Isaiah is much less insecure. Consider this passage:

The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all those who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast to my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifice will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

A house of prayer for all peoples. What a change from the God of Moses who believed that all people but his people should be killed. Now God believes that others might be tempted to worship him.

Miles writes of this extraordinary transformation:

"As the Lord God comes to full consciousness of his literal uniqueness and thereby of his extraordinary power, we may say that the trauma of Israel's defeat and the crisis of the shattered covenant have shown him who he is. When we say such a thing of a human being, we mean that trauma and crisis have shown him who he has come to be—that is, what his history and his personality have combined to make of him. And so it is, to an extent, of the Lord God. He began without a history, but he has now acquired a tumultuous history; and he knows himself better as a result of it."

You may reasonably object to thinking of God in this way, but I find it makes sense. God does change over the course of the Tanakh. God does seem surprised by the results of his directions. God does seem, if only as a plot device, to need humankind to realize himself.

You may think that God doesn't exist, that God as portrayed in the scriptures is only the projection of the hopes and fears of an ancient people onto the mystery of life. But even if the character we call God is only such a projection, it has, nonetheless, profoundly shaped our character. In the West, we have tried for centuries to **introject** God into ourselves. For thousands of years, we in the Jewish and Christian traditions have done our best consciously and purposefully to be holy as we understood God to be holy.

In the story of Don Quixote, the silly old man who charged at windmills, the Don was moved by the popular stories of his day. Inspired to emulate the fictional characters portrayed, Don Quixote imagined that he was a noble Knight, courageous in battle, chivalrous and courtly in his relationships.

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We are like Don Quixote, are we not? Doomed to dream the impossible dream? Imagining that we can be just as God is just, loving as God is loving, and compassionate as God is compassionate. Though, like Don Quixote, we may seem ridiculous to everyone but Sancho Panza, his trusted sidekick, such sincere attempts to be noble and glorious promise a sense of meaning and significance in a world that too often seems completely indifferent to our existence.

God is no saint. Neither am I. Neither are you. Part of the Western heritage that arises from this complicated, anxious, insecure, yet strangely confident character we call God is our own acceptance of inner conflict and strife. We take it as a given that we must struggle to be whole.

Miles puts it this way in a remarkable passage in the introduction.

Jews and Christians have adored God as the origin of all virtue, a wellspring of justice, wisdom, mercy, patience, strength, and love. But peripherally and implicitly, they have also grown accustomed and then attached to what we may call God's anxiety. God is an amalgam of several personalities in one character. Tension among these personalities makes God difficult, but it also makes him compelling, even addictive. While consciously emulating his virtues, the West has unconsciously assimilated the anxiety-inducing tension between his unity and his multiplicity. In the end, despite the longing Westerners sometimes feel for a simpler, less anxious, more "centered" human ideal, the only people whom we find satisfying real are people whose identity binds several incompatible sub-identities together. As Westerners get to know one another personally, this is what we seek to learn about one another. Incongruity and inner conflict are not just permitted in Western culture; they are all but required. People who are merely clever about playing various roles fall short of this ideal. They have personality--but lack character. Uncomplicated, simple people, who know who they are without ado and embrace an assigned role without struggle, also fall short of the ideal. We may admire their inner peace, but in the West we are unlikely to imitate them. Centered and all too centered, they have character but little personality. They bore us as we would bore ourselves.

I have often felt torn apart by my own inner conflicts and contradictions. I am suspicious of those who claim to have no such inner divisions. I find it difficult to trust someone with the secrets of my inner torments if they claim to have never suffered any conflicts and contradictions, any dark nights of the soul.

My struggles to unify my competing desires have shaped my character and my personality. My efforts to overcome my imperfections, my contradictory desires and aspirations, have shaped my character.

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So perhaps, too, has God been shaped. God the warrior, the destroyer, the personal protector, the remote God of the heavens far removed. God's struggle to make one melody out of these many disparate, contradictory, and discordant notes makes him the compelling character that he is. It is no wonder that we have trouble reconciling his many parts. So, too, does he.

¹ God, A Biography. 1995. Jack Miles. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. New York.