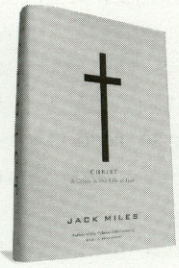
God's Story in a Different Key



Jack Miles. *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001.

Reviewed By James Walters

Consider the beautiful stained glass window in the church down the street. Jack Miles sees the Bible as such a window. It is to be looked *at* as religious art and appreciated for what it is, not peered *through* in an attempt to decipher the historical events that lay behind it. Miles's artistic or literary intent sets his book apart from most other contemporary scholarly writing on Jesus Christ. Even if key elements in the Bible lack historical validity, it stands as an authentic witness to God that should continue to guide the Christian Church.

However, that rational deduction belies the rich story that makes such a conclusion possible. Like Ellen White's *The Great Controversy*, Miles's *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God* takes a bird's-eye view—from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. Another similarity is that both authors take the story literally, not as a mere residue of certain historical and cultural curiosities. Also, Miles, like the Bible itself, has God as the protagonist in the grand story. However, a pivotal difference is that Miles, contra White, sees the founding epic of Judeo-Christianity as a thoroughly human witness.

In Miles's story, God created humankind as the apex of his creation—in his own image. But because Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, God cursed the human race with suffering and death. Miles implies that God is ever afterward a bit guilty because of this overreaction. Regardless, God chose the Hebrew people, and instituting a sacred covenant of reward/punishment, led them into nationhood. The originally calm and sure Creator then became an angry and anxious warrior who lead his people in near-genocidal warfare in Canaan.

Several centuries later, God punished Israel for unfaithfulness by using Babylon and Assyria to punish—yes, conquer—the Hebrews. However, an enfeebled but faithful remnant returned from Babylon to Jerusalem and built a modest new temple. However, says Miles, "the divine giant never came striding forth from the mountains of the south, shaking the earth and terrifying the sky as he had said he would" (106).

God repeatedly promised Israel that he would wreak spectacular havoc on their new enemies as he had against their original enemy, Egypt. Israel would again bask in Davidic glory, and God would be vindicated as his promise was fulfilled. But "somehow, mysteriously, when the time came, he couldn't go through with it. His mind had changed." God saw the "deeper consequences of his own inaugural violence" (244). Further divine military victories would be an unending punishment for the world and a silent indictment of himself. Thus, God "broke his promise" to Israel. (244)

A pervasive theme in Miles's depiction of God's life—a historical novel, really—is *change* in God. God goes from calm creator to provincial warrior to universal lover. Adam and Eve never called themselves God's children, or he their father. That came later. God had to grow into "bridegroom of the universe and husband of the human race" (245). Most importantly, he had to learn to win by losing. The Lamb of God would win the "only victory that really matters. The Good News of the Gospel is the news of how he did it" (245).

God doesn't baldly declare that he can't defeat his enemies; he declares that he has no enemies, that there's no distinction between friend and foe. However, it's one thing for God in his heaven to change, it's another to ask mere humans to love enemies. It's different unless God becomes a human and suffers the consequences of his own new covenant of love. Thus, we begin to see how Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection are vital. "Israel will be slaughtered like sheep, but God has become a lamb. He has made virtue of necessity, yes, but the virtue is real virtue. It is the heroic ideal of universal love" (109).

Jesus, God Incarnate, announces that God loves all people indiscriminately—just as the sun shines on all. Jesus teaches a new covenant, one whose law is love and acceptance. God had became a lord of universal

love; he couldn't continue to keep the old covenant's terms. On the verge of a new national catastrophe for Israel—the destruction of the Third Temple (A.D. 66-70) and accompanying human slaughter—he decided not to pretend otherwise.

The "crisis in the life of God" was his inability to fulfill his singular promise—to restore Israel to Solomonic splendor. Christ majestically resolved the crisis by instituting a new, grander promise that enveloped the older one by expanding it to all peoples of the world. Furthermore, it promised not a temporal kingdom for a few within the cycle of birth and death, but claimed the defeat of death itself. In the new chapter of God's life, "[h]uman hope and divine honor will have been redeemed together at a single transcendent stroke" (224).

Divine Self-Martyrdom

Miles's story of God's life doesn't take up the issue that continues to reverberate in Adventist circles: Was it theologically necessary that Jesus actually died to save us from final death? It is enough for Miles that God chose to die. Furthermore, Miles underscores the point that Jesus' death was a "divine suicide" (164).

Given that Jesus was God Incarnate, it follows that no one could take God's life against his will. Thus, Miles's concludes, "His suicide is, in this regard, as deeply built into the Christian story as the doctrine of the Incarnation" (169). No karma or cosmic law decreed Jesus' death. Put bluntly, God killed God.

The issue of death is central to Miles's story of God (his first sentence is, "All mankind is forgiven, but the Lord must die"), and it is central to the Gospel of John, the primary source of Miles's work. God Incarnate was planning "divine self-martyrdom," says Miles.

The word *martyr* comes from the Greek word meaning to witness or testify. The human martyr witnesses to others his faithfulness to God. But when God sacrifices his own life, to whom is he faithful? How does divine martyrdom help others? Why not rescue others, rather than kill oneself? "A martyr proves, after all, not just his devotion but also his trust that the divine power for which he dies will ultimately prevail. What is to be made of a martyrdom in which divinity seems to demonstrate only its weakness?" (163).

Thus, in the Good Shepherd story, Jesus introduces pacifism, a core trait of God's new identity. Precisely because of God's new indiscriminate love—and its corollary of pacifism—Jesus died on the cross. God Incarnate refused to use force, so central to his earlier identify, to contend for even his own legitimate rights.

Miles contends that the most illuminating incident in the Gospels is Jesus' illustration of Moses uplifting a serpent for Israel's healing.

> As Moses lifted up the snake in the desert,
> so must the Son of Man be lifted up
> so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.
> (John 3:14, 15)

Moses lifted up the snake so that Israel could be cured of fatal snakebites. Christ would be lifted up "so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (49). It's a shocking equation. For no more than complaining of bad food, God sent killer snakes. Yes, a look at the snake cured them, but it also reminded them of why they had to fear their god.

As Miles points out, the snakes were not the cause of their dying. God himself sent the plague. What then does Jesus intend people to think when they see him lifted up on the cross?

> How can we avoid saying that they will look upon the cause as well as the cure of their distress? To the objection that this comparison is far-fetched, I would reply that it is Jesus himself who has fetched the comparison from afar. The bronze serpent is a detail from an obscure episode in Israelite history. The comparison is so arcane, so recherché, that it can only be fully, provocatively intended. (50)

This illustration powerfully juxtaposes God's punitive and loving natures, and points to their resolution. By viewing the graven snake, Israelites could gain a few more years of life; but by accepting God's death and resurrection, the world gains eternal life. Everybody wins. God acknowledges his complicity in human death, and he as God Incarnate suffers that death in demonstration of his new nature: pacifistic love.

Method

Just as John Milton retold key elements of the Bible story three centuries ago in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, so Miles has artfully told the story again for a sophisticated, contemporary audience. In an appendix he explains his method and appeals for greater openness to new methods of studying the Bible.

Miles laments that for the last two hundred years the most serious biblical scholars have been obsessed

with history. Far beyond the ways that Shakespeare scholars study the English master's work, biblical scholars endlessly search for the scantiest evidence to confirm—or disconfirm—an event or reference.

Why can't we treat the Bible more like admirers of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, or devotees of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling? The value of a piece of art is realized by viewing the work as a whole, not in dissecting its parts or history, as valid as these activities are. Thus reasons Miles, who views the Bible as an imaginative work that points beyond itself—to God.

Miles is not critical of historical study of the Bible; indeed, he has benefited from it. But he does criticize our modern penchant to be hung up on external correspondences, with scant attention to internal correspondences that make the Bible such rich artistry. Again, his appeal is to look *at* the rose window, not just *through* it.

Miles claims that in regard to ultimate truth, historical fact has no necessary priority over imagined truth. All discrete facts are meaningful only as they are viewed within a larger secular or religious context. Accordingly, religious art is that art produced in service to a received collective vision. Secular art is produced in service to some artist's individual vision—or whim. Secular history is not a mere neutral recording of "facts" without any idea of how they fit together; inevitably, it is interpretative.

Reflection

Adventists are increasingly open to new movements that attempt to make sense of faith and science: intelligent design of the universe, process theology's panentheism, divine/human co-creation. Miles's

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ten-year project—his work on the Pulitzer Prize-winning *God: A Biography* (1995) and now the present book—is a similar attempt to reconcile ancient faith and contemporary knowledge.

Miles, a former Jesuit with a Harvard doctorate in Near Eastern languages, personifies today's modern, or postmodern, Christian grappling with personal faith. Is Miles's view of God's life the "correct" view? It is no more "right" than Michelangelo's portrayal of God creating Adam. Indeed, this sort of question not only misses the point, it also obscures the issue. The most basic value of a piece of imaginative literature is its appeal to us, individual by individual.

Of course, in a historically based book of imaginative literature—such as the Bible—there must be a general adherence to verified history. However, when the topic is God, a certain freedom of expression must be given to the writer. Similarly, freedom is appropriately given to a literary scholar like Jack Miles, who looks at the Bible (formed over hundreds of years by scores of original authors and artistic editors) as a whole and holy religious gem.

Personally, I am fascinated by Miles's insight that the God of the New Testament died because of his pacifistic, "indiscriminate love" (108)—a reversal from his earlier warrior persona (though biblical studies show this stark contrast as artistic hyperbole). But this motive for Jesus' death makes more sense than other theories, such as satisfaction of cosmic justice or mere moral influence.

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is larger than any theory, and God is not captured in any story. Through God's grace, every honest grappling with the divine is a vector that points toward the Holy Other.

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