



Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God

Jack Miles

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With the same passionate scholarship and analytical audacity he brought to the character of God, Jack Miles now approaches the literary and theological enigma of Jesus. In so doing, he tells the story of a broken promise—God’s ancient covenant with Israel—and of its strange, unlooked-for fulfillment. For, having abandoned his chosen people to an impending holocaust at the hands of their Roman conquerors, God, in the person of Jesus, chooses to die with them, in what is effectively an act of divine suicide.

On the basis of this shocking argument, Miles compels us to reassess Christ’s entire life and teaching: His proclivity for the powerless and disgraced. His refusal to discriminate between friends and enemies. His transformation of defeat into a victory that redeems not just Israel but the entire world. Combining a close reading of the Gospels with a range of reference that includes Donne, Nietzsche, and Elie Wiesel, **Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God** is a work of magnificent eloquence and imagination.

Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God Details

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From Reader Review Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God for online ebook

David says

Once again, the author has created a text which examines a portion of the Bible -- in this instance the New Testament -- as a work of literature rather than a sacred text. And so this time he continues his scrutiny of the "life of God", and the crisis that he -- God -- has created. Whereas the Old Testament is the story of God's covenant with his chosen people -- the Hebrews -- so the New Testament is the story of how God resolved the problem of his (apparent) inability to win a final victory on the battlefield against Israel's enemies.

God had promised Israel repeatedly that he would defeat their foes, and yet, by the conclusion of the OT they had for centuries lived under the domination of both the Assyrians and the Babylonians, with no help in sight. Thus beginneth the NT, as we see them under the rule of the Romans. The "crisis" which God faces is one which involves both defeat and victory, war and peace, good and evil. In the end it is through the Incarnation (Jesus) that he re-makes his covenant with both Israel and, more importantly, the rest of humanity. In order to ultimately win, God Incarnate must first lose (die). How this is accomplished is thoroughly examined in this book.

Once again, I think this book is worth reading if only to get a better grasp of the timeline of events in the NT. I have been studying the Bible most of my life, and admit that many times I am confused by the "flow" of events, characters, and references. Reading these two books is much like having a concordance next to your Bible on the nightstand. You may question some of the author's conclusions, but you cannot dispute his method, for it works very well to serve as another way to look "at" rather than "through" the stained-glass window.

Paula says

Disclosure: This review is written by my husband who has a MTh.
Rev. Mr. Daniel Laurita

"Three things in life are highly over rated" an old mentor once told me. Two are home cooking and a Harvard education--the third cannot be shared in a public forum. Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God suffers from both the Harvard education of its author Jack Miles and his home cooked ideas.

I really looked forward to this book. Mr. Miles had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his first book, God: A Biography The lauds that were applied to that work had piqued my curiosity. However, Jack Miles is an ex-Jesuit. An "ex" anything is a red flag that someone has an agenda to unfold. He is also an ex-Catholic, an ex-Scripture scholar, and now an ex-journalist by his own admission.

This professor of humanities begin his "literary reading" of the New Testament by invoking the philosophy of Frederich Nietzsche. Abundantly quoted, we are reminded that, for Nietzsche "Christianity was a victory-- a nobler outlook perished of it--Christianity has been the greatest misfortune of mankind so far." The nobler outlook is of course the divinity of man and his quest for power. Recall that Nietzsche's writings were later exploited by the National Socialist Party to advance their agenda.

From this start we are invited to look at the New Testament and consider it as a "stained glass window." Unfortunately the author only sees the dark shadings of the window and not the light that breaks through. Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God is in reality a revelation of the crisis of its author.

He puts aside hundreds of years of historical critical analysis of the Scripture, not to mention two millennia of religious tradition and scholarship. His first footnote is, "translations of biblical citations are my own except when otherwise indicated." This in itself allows him to do what he wants with the text. It establishes his self-proclaimed authority disregarding the body of work of various communities of scholars. These communities have given the various English translations are set aside deftly and rarely heard from again. For this author the Scripture is the revelation that God is guilty of abandoning his people and his creation. "The world is a great crime and someone must be made to pay for it," Miles says. Since God is the author of the world He must pay the price. That price is the "suicide" of God through the crucified death of Jesus--God Incarnate. "No one lacks a good reason for suicide," from the poetry of Cesare Pavese is added fodder for Miles.

Keep in mind that Nietzsche died a madman and Pavese died by his own hand. Miles' home cooked reading of the New Testament is the end result of reading the Sacred Scripture as literature only. Totally disregarding the vision of faith Jack Miles is lost to his own musings. He reads the poetry of the John's prologue as narrative and the narrative as historical. He has forgotten that the Scripture is the product of man's encounter with God. It is an attempt to explain the unexplainable "mystery of God."

Professor Miles wants us to accept that God's purpose is to redeem himself rather than to redeem mankind. God has fallen, not man. We are the victims, not of our choice or actions, but of the failure of God. Miles' epilogue draws us further away from the purpose of Scripture, "To reveal that which is necessary for our salvation" (Dei Verbum, a document produced by the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church).

He reminds us that in both his books, "god has been taken neither as the object of religious belief nor as a topic in ancient history but as the central character in a work of literature." If you must read this book keep this in mind. Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God is more fictional than scholarly, more dark than light, more pedantic than wisdom.

Daniel Headrick says

A literary analysis of the Gospels from a first rate thinker and writer. Changed my way of thinking about the development of theological reflection of the Messiah.

George Mills says

It lives up to 'God, A Biography.' with a highly creative thesis that is quite consistent with his analysis of the "character" God in the first book. In both books, the author provides the reader with a view of the character "God" that strives to be a strictly literary character analysis rather than religious or theological analysis. In other words, he has approached the character "God" in both the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament as if he were analyzing the character Ahab in "Moby Dick." Anyone, atheist, agnostic, or committed Christian will benefit from this book. As this literary analysis is not intended to justify questions of faith and religious thought, it gives its readers many truly surprising insights about "what it means" to be God and then Jesus

Christ in the piece of literature we call "The Bible."

Therese says

Jack Miles, author of the Pulitzer Prize - winning *God -a Biogaphy* has written an excellent literary analysis of Christ in the New Testament.

What is the "crisis" referred to in the title? The crisis is that God has not delivered his Chosen People from 500 years of oppression. How does God solve this problem? Answer: God/Christ commits sacred suicide. This is Miles' provocative conclusion from his strictly literary analysis the Christian Bible. How does Miles arrive at the conclusion? You, dear reader, should read the book in order to appreciate how he develops his plot and arrives at his conclusion. And believe me, there is a plot!

A caution is in order. Miles writes and studies Christ from a strictly literary point of view. He is not interested in the historical Jesus. If one reads this only to learn about the fundamentalist Jesus, the traditional Christian Jesus, or the historical Jesus, then this book will not satisfy! If on the other hand, you want to experience a great Biblical reading adventure, then buy and read this book!

I also would recommend that a reader, who is unfamiliar with literary criticism and postmodernism, study and read Miles' appendices. "Appendix I" deals with the biblical canon and "Appendix II" deals with the history of critical analysis of the Bible (e.g. historical criticism, canonical criticism, literary criticism) and how to appreciate the Bible as art.

I did not always agree with the author, but I enjoyed how he told the story of Christ. As a postmodern Christian, I will not privilege my reading over his.

Have fun reading *Christ: a Crisis in the Life of God*!

lp says

I have read about four kabillion books about Jesus, so it was nice to read one with a little bit of a twist -- it wasn't about the historical Jesus, but it approached Christ from a literary, philosophical perspective. I think it's super important to consider Christianity in this way, because ... that's what Christianity is. The Bible is not a literal account of our history, it is a *reflection* of our history. This book tries to answer the question: why did this part of the story, this Jesus stuff, need to happen? What purpose did it serve the first Christians to have God Incarnate come to earth as man and die for our sins? Miles has an interesting idea -- that God needed to act because he could not fulfill his covenant promise, and to do this he needed to punish himself with death. I liked it. He does a good job explaining it. Although I do think his writing is a bit wordy and overly complicated.

Another problem is how he approached Jesus' life story. He wrote about it as if there were 1 Gospel, and there are not. He refers to 4. And that in fact is very important! The changes that those Gospels went through contributed to our history, the story, perhaps more than the actual Gospels, because they showed us the thought paths of the first Christians. So to ignore that is pretty simplistic. It's also distracting.

He also made basically no difference between Jesus and God, which was different... and sometimes confusing. I almost felt as if it was a cop-out. Like he was trying to draw in the stuff from his other book, *God*, while trying to make it directly relevant to Jesus. There was a LOT about God. I was thinking while reading, 'I want more Jesus stuff. I'll read his other book to learn about God.'

I probably *will* read his other book, because this one was pretty good.

Alex says

Loved Jack Miles' first book. You know, I really have no idea what's in the New Testament. Is it just Jesus? I don't even know how long it is.

Ron Charles says

Jack Miles likes big celebrities. Six years ago, he wrote a biography of God. His analysis of the Great Protagonist in the Hebrew Bible won a Pulitzer Prize. Now, he's back. And this time, it's personal.

"Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God" reminds us that the story of Christianity reaches its climax with a lynching, an "improbable and appalling conjunction" of native Jewish ideas.

In the ancient story of Abraham and Isaac, animal sacrifice had dramatically replaced human sacrifice as a demonstration of devotion and repentance. But on Golgotha, the long anticipated son of David, the Messiah, plays the role of the sacrificial animal, the Lamb of God, in a radical revision of prophesy that must have struck early Jewish hearers as "not just outrageous but blasphemous."

This is a provocative study of the Gospels, particularly the book of John, lined with thorny claims that will prick anyone's comfortable sense of "the greatest story ever told."

Miles wants to approach the Bible as a literary critic, looking at it as a single story about God. At the heart of his analysis is the premise that the Gospels describe God when he took human form and allowed himself to be murdered.

In a mingling of orthodox and creative interpretations that light this book, Miles claims that God took this suicidal step for two reasons: (1) to repent for his primal sin, his ruthless curse on Adam and Eve that brought death into the world, and (2) to escape from an embarrassing scandal, his failure to save the Jews from oppression.

As you can see, Miles is an equal-opportunity offender. Textual critics will object to his conflation of the various biblical texts into a single story. Historical critics will point out that particular situations and cultures produced an assortment of myths and histories that cannot be considered as a unified whole. Fundamentalists will start collecting dry sticks.

Miles knows all these objections, but because he knows that answering them would consume his entire book, he addresses them only in the appendix. "The interpretation of the New Testament offered in this book," he claims, "is literary, rather than historical or theological."

But his insistence that Jesus is God in human form seems predetermined by his Jesuit background instead of by literary analysis. Any critic who posits that a character is, in fact, something remarkably different than he appears must not only prove that claim but effectively disarm passages that seem to contradict it. Oddly, Miles admits, "Passages that assert or strongly suggest the divinity of Christ are undeniably less frequent in

the New Testament than those asserting or strongly suggesting his humanity. However, the divinity passages tint all the others the way a drop of dye tints a glass of clear water." Imagine insisting that the whale in "Moby Dick" is actually a ghost because, though it seems like a whale most of the time, its elusiveness and its whiteness suggest it's really an apparition.

As Miles sees it, the great crisis in God's life is his inability to save the Jews from Roman genocide. "The Lord, now incarnate as Jesus, knows that the Temple will soon be destroyed, with consequences worse than anything he prophesied through Jeremiah, and that he will not intervene to stop it." Several decades after Jesus' career, in AD 66-70 and 132-135, the Romans brutally quelled Jewish revolts, cutting whole forests to crucify thousands.

To explain the startling shift from an Old Testament God of violence, discrimination, and justice to a New Testament God of submission, forgiveness, and love, Miles speculates on the motive of the anxious Gospel writers, composing in the ashes of Jerusalem: "What the radical reversal in the divine identity implied by the pacifist preaching of Jesus suggests is that a Jewish writer of powerful imagination projected this crisis of faith into the mind of God, transforming it into a crisis of conscience."

In other words, the new covenant of love for all mankind announced by Jesus is a clever rhetorical strategy, a way for God to escape from the burden of all his now vain-sounding boasts in the Old Testament. Since he can't beat his enemies, he announces that he has no enemies. "The covenant had to be changed because God could not keep his terms and because, on the eve of a new national catastrophe for Israel, he chose to stop pretending that he could."

If that sounds cynical, Miles emphasizes that this decision carried extraordinary costs for God, who suffers brutally on the cross in order to dramatize - as only God's death could - the sincerity of his changed heart.

More importantly, this new doctrine of pacifism, acted out by Jesus during his life and death, is far more powerful than it first appears. Miles sees an active, subversive impulse behind Jesus' advice to "turn the other cheek," "go with him twain," and "let him have thy cloak also." Jesus isn't admonishing his followers to be human doormats; he's describing passive resistance, a risky plan for victims to shame their oppressors into reform with "paradoxical hyperagreement."

"In the Gospels," Miles writes, "moral resistance entirely replaces military resistance." The oppression of Rome is replaced by the oppression of sin, and the battlefield moves from physical space to spiritual space. "John distracts his Jewish readers' attention," Miles continues, "from God's traditional obligations and Israel's traditional expectations and redirects it to a new set of obligations and expectations that reflect a profound transformation in the identity of God."

At its best, "Christ" is jarringly provocative, and reading it is a chance to test one's own understanding of God and the Gospels against a daring critic who can provide his own translations of Hebrew and Greek. Miles is particularly brilliant when he traces echoes in the Gospel stories to their Old Testament sources, recovering reverberations that early Christians would have resonated with. Regardless of our agreement or disagreement with him, he prods us to read these familiar stories afresh, with all their original suspense and drama, his analysis serving as an invitation for our own.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2001/1129/p1...>

Steven Williams says

In this book Jack Miles does what he did with god in his book *God: A Biography* on god and the Old Testament for god, focusing on Christ, in the New Testament. He describe the life of god as going through a crisis, involving guilt over how he dealt with his people in the Old Testament. His approach throughout the book is one of literary analysis. In other words he is not interested in the historicalness of the Bible per se, or does he take a theological perspective.

I have a few remarks on parts of the text that I would like to comment on. Page numbers are in brackets [] from the Alfred A. Knopf hardback edition of 2001.

[11] Miles quotes John 12:24: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains but a single grain. Yet if it dies, it yields a rich harvest." (presented in verse in the text) Jesus certainly did not know his biology. If the seed dies, it will not grow into a damn thing. Seeds are inert, but not dead.

[39] I like his metaphorical expression in response to Jesus saying at the Temple "*Destroy this Temple.*" (his italics) He says, "A lamb who taunts the butcher?"

[124] I could not help thinking in response to the women who "began to bathe his [Jesus] feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. She covered his feet with kisses and anointed them with the fragrant oil," that the woman in the story had a foot fetish. The quoted portion comes from Miles' quote of the story in Luke 7:36-50.

[310] After describing Yitzhak Rabin's assassination as a case of Jew on Jew violence he claims "that the Jews did not get along in Jesus' day any more than they do today." I do not think Christians get along with Jews all that well either, then or now.

I thought the book was good overall. I like Miles' literary approach; it allowed me to read the book without having the feeling that I needed to criticize the religious content. I also liked his line that Christ was the way that Yahweh could make amends for his bad behavior in the Old Testament.

If you are interested in a literary approach to the Bible, where the text is used to build a coherent story, you should like this book. If you are looking for a book on the legitimacy of the Bible, you maybe disappointed.

Kelly says

This is the "sequel," if you will, to the book "God: A Biography." I actually read this one first, and it really doesn't matter. He briefly lays out his hypotheses from the first book at the beginning of this one. This is again a literary reading of the Bible. It just deals with the New Testament. Or more accurately, the changeover from the Old Testament and the New Testament, and all the contradictions that Jack Miles finds there. In short, his conclusion is that God changed his mind. He realized that he could not keep his promise to the Jews, and so the sacrifice of Christ was in some measure his apology for that. It was also his acknowledgement that things had to change and be different. It has to be, for many reasons that Jack Miles lays out here. It's been awhile since I read it, but many of them are still crystal clear in my mind. God's overpowering, thundering voice of the Old Testament is contradicted by his near silence in the New Testament. The jealous, warlike, angry, vengeful God of the Old Testament all but disappears in the New. Or

at least is made much more subtle. Why? That's what Jack Miles answers. I almost don't want to give anything else away because that would detract from the reading experience. It's frankly amazing to think about, and once again left me with more questions than answers.

I'm thinking if you'd read something like this in the first place that you don't mind a little dryness, and that's good. Honestly, I found it very readable and read it in a week. Mostly because I was so fascinated by everything that he's saying. The opening of this one and *God: A Biography* are not dry at all. The majority of it isn't. There's just some times where he's bringing in a lot of evidence, is all. Which I find interesting, but some people might find a bit hard to push through. But really, it's worth it. If you have any interest in the Bible, this is really worth it.

The only caution I would really give is that you need to have some basic knowledge of the Bible to read it, obviously. The more the better, because Jack Miles was an incredibly learned Jesuit before he left the order. And it shows.

Joseph says

A fantastic sequel (if it can be called that) to Miles' *God: A Biography*. His basic premise is that Christ, or God Incarnate, has been born in crisis, which crisis is the broken covenant Miles discusses so well in his first book. In order to resolve this crisis, Christ must humiliate himself (which is, as those of us who've read the New Testament, exactly what he does). For the believer, I feel like this book can do much to build faith; for the non-believer, this book can go far to explain (?) the irrationality that is Christianity.

This book also includes an epilogue where Miles discusses literary criticism and how its approach differs from historical criticism, which really helps to bring the two books together. Though I'm not sure Miles intended for this to be a sequel, I think having read his *Biography* prior to this made it a lot more meaningful, and would encourage anyone considering this book to begin there first.

Henry Sturcke says

A continuation of the author's project of taking the Bible rigorously as literature. In his first book, *God: A Biography*, he treated the God of the Hebrew scriptures as the protagonist of a single account. This book is in a way a sequel, recounting how one group, who came to be known as Christians, responded to the crisis referred to in the subtitle: the seeming non-fulfillment of God's promise to deliver Israel. They did so by acclaiming Jesus as the Son of God and viewing the crucifixion as a divine suicide, in Miles's opinion. Miles presents his work as a response to a second crisis, that of modern biblical studies. It is one of two possible responses, the other being the attempt to uncover the history behind the story. Since the results of higher criticism leave the scholar with ever-less that can confidently be called historical, many universities have reconfigured their programs from "New Testament" to Christian Origins. In this way, all texts become once again relevant, since all, even those that might not reflect historical events, have what scholars call "Wirkungsgeschichte". But Miles's sympathies are not with this approach, but with the other possible response, which might be called "Bible as Literature". His image for contrasting the two is that one approach strains to see through the stained-glass window to see what's on the other side, while the other approach seeks to appreciate the glass itself. There have been several proponents of this second approach, but none before Miles to apply it not to individual books of the Bible, or even smaller units, but to read the entirety as

a vast novel.

The result might offend those committed to a more traditional reading of scripture, while at the same time seeming uninteresting to those who have concluded that scripture is somehow irrelevant. But for those willing to engage the author on his own terms, the result is worthwhile.

Richard says

It's my good fortune to have spent about a year in India over the course of the last three years, and I've often hosted first time visitors. Conversations invariably move to an overview of Hinduism, a religion that is quite foreign to Westerners. Almost without fail my guests have voiced the belief that Hinduism is all myth, and not to be taken very seriously. I've taken to asking these folks what makes Hinduism more a myth, or fiction, or literary construct than Christianity, and, to no surprise, they've failed to come up with an answer. I'm sure if any of these folks had been dyed in the wool Christians I would have heard something about the revealed word of God, etc., etc., but they've been open-minded enough to ponder the questions and the implications of judging another's belief system based on their own.

With both, "God, a Biography," and "Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God," Jack Miles has opened the field of discourse by presenting the Primogenitor as a literary character rather than a factual being; and Christ as the same, regardless of his historical reality. He has asked Christians to look at their God in much the same way we look at "foreign" Gods. Was Krishna born on July 19, 3228 BCE, in Gokula, India? Will he return at the end of the current age to usher in a time of peacefulness? Was Jesus born on December 25th, 1 CE. Will he return to judge the living and the dead? To Hindu's Krishna walked, talked, made love, performed miracles. To Christians Christ did the same (except, perhaps, made love.) How much credence we give to any story depends on our orientation, but regardless of belief, the stories themselves are wonderful.

One reason they're wonderful is they are rich in metaphor, and it's the metaphor that Mr. Miles explores to great effect. Who can deny the beauty of an infant, and the idea of an infant knowingly giving love? Who can deny the power in the story of God admitting an error and sacrificing himself in an attempt at rectification?

Mr. Miles's success is that he opens the metaphor, and forces us to think.

Although I'm not a huge fan of Mr. Miles literary style - in fact, I find it a bit stilted - what he has to say more than adequately compensates for the difficulty style presents.

Highly Recommended.

Nathaniel says

I think my opinion of this book could be best summarized by simply taking the first word of the title and adding an ellipsis.

Books like this are the reason why nobody takes academia seriously anymore. It's a very, very dense, pedantic, and breathless interpretation of what the author thinks of the Bible, presented in a way that makes it obvious that Miles thinks his interpretation of disjointed, rapid-fire Bible passages is unique when in reality he's mostly stating the obvious to any halfway-observant Christian. The author also uses the word

"ironically" way too often, (e.g. a chapter entitled "The Messiah, Ironically"), in a way that was overdone in 2002 and in 2014 really just makes me very unironically think of the image of Jesus wearing hipster glasses sipping a PBR. The author makes some very good points along the way, but they're too packed together into a dense blur of self-importance for me to be able to remember what they are, and the whole exercise rings of so much self-important falsehood that I can't really be bothered to care.

In that sense, this book, ironically, (there's that word again!) reminds me of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Even though their arguments are more or less opposite, they both share the characteristic of having been produced by a certain type of nigh-unreadable egomaniac who thinks himself God's gift to philosophy even though he's really just rehashing commonly accepted knowledge as his own shiny "new" contribution. In the meantime, I personally can't take seriously anyone who claims to be an authority on Christianity, yet who says in his introduction - apparently completely *without* irony - "The world is a crime and someone must be punished for it", then goes on to imply on a regular basis that his own Catholic interpretation of Christianity is the only valid one as a matter of course. In a religion based so heavily on the concept of forgiveness and tolerance of others, the fact that Miles is so unable to even conceive that his personal provincialism needs to be questioned when writing broadly on such an important topic makes him uniquely unqualified to write a book on it, and makes me entirely indifferent to the idea of spending any more time acknowledging that book.

Jeremy says

I'm really not sure what to make of this book and I don't have a lot to say about it. It's the stories of the gospel in a narrative format with some (perhaps?) controversial twists. For example, in the story of the talk Jesus has with the Samaritan woman at the water well, the author suggests that there is some provocative wordplay going on that may even have been scandalous in its historical context (a single man talking to married woman).

It seems that the author's basic thesis is that God had a change of mind (or heart) about how to "save" people. Instead of just saving "his" people by restoring Israel to earthly prominence through battle, he decided to save all people by offering them the Kingdom of Heaven, not of this world, through sacrifice rather than triumph.

In a way, this sidesteps the problem of having to reconcile the "God of the Old Testament" with the "God of the New Testament," as if they are different entities. The author reframes the problem by taking the position that it's the same God who underwent a radical change of strategy.
