God: A Biography Study Guide

God: A Biography by Jack Miles

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

God: A Biography proposes that God, as an inwardly-conflicted solitary figure, realizes himself by creating the human race and then dealing with it and discovering why he wanted a self-image in the first place, how he wants to relate to it and what he must do for it and it must do for him. As understanding grows, activity lessens, until God falls into silent obsolescence, his story and laws preserved in the book that can be said to have formed Western civilization.

Keynote

Keynote Summary

Western civilization was built on the belief that God created humankind in his own image. Many Westerners have lost belief in God, but the religiocultural legacy continues to set them apart from, for example, the Japanese. By examining the Bible as a literary biography of God, one can gain insight into the Western ideal of character without having to subscribe to the religious trappings of Judaism or Christianity. As Cervantes's protagonist, Don Quixote, gained literary immortality by blending in readers' minds with the society of his day, modern actors meld into their memorable on-screen roles today, so God through the Bible became a member of the Western family. Neil Simon took for granted that even non-believers would know what God was like to understand his play, *God's Favorite,* based on the Book of Job. Jews and Christians concede that the Bible may be appreciated as literature without blasphemy (something Muslims will not concede about the *Qur'an).* Believers adore God as the origin of all virtue and have grown accustomed to his inner anxiety in the way they are drawn to complex human beings more so than the boring, "centered" ones. Humanity reflects the multiplicity (personality) and unity (character) of its creator. The Bible without cover-up shows God as anything but a saint and his story deserves more than the selective preaching it receives.

Keynote Analysis

The Keynote, "The Image and the Original," provides the rationale for a study of God as a complex literary character. His story, previously reserved to Jewish and Christian believers, is the bedrock of Western civilization and the key to understanding Western character by non-Westerners and non-believers. It is an inescapable part of the Western heritage. References to Cervantes, Neil Simon, Oscar Wilde and the *Qur'an* suggest that this will be a wide-ranging study and it will be indeed. Miles shows a particular fondness for music. Rarely is the reader unfamiliar with his references hampered, as they are made in passing and explained in context. The references enrich the experience for those who grasp the comparison, but do not demand look-up for those who do not.

The Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) preserves information suitable to creating a "theography" - a study independent of both theology and biography. Editors, immersed in sharp polemics, organized the common material of the scriptures into two tables of contents and one or the other must be selected for study; Miles uses the Jewish canon, Tanakh (whose order he helpfully outlines in an appendix), primarily because it more clearly shows God's progression from action to words to silence. This facilitates following God's "career," through which the various strains in his personality are revealed. While systematic theologians might insist that God is the same yesterday, today and forever, this is not the evidence of the Tanakh read naively start-to-finish. Miles concludes the

Prelude by raising - but not reacting to - Carl Jung's statement "I do not believe. I know." Miles knows only that God's story can be told from the pages of the Tanakh.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Critics and scholars differ on how to approach literary characters. Critics, who dominated the early 20th century, believe in character - one must examine Hamlet's evolution throughout Shakespeare's play. Scholars, who dominated from mid-century, stress, "The play's the thing" and only Shakespeare's words (and perhaps its context in Elizabethan drama and society) matter: it is folly to talk about a person Hamlet. "New Historicism" seeks to understand the play as itself embedded in history — works of art are "the products of collective negotiation and exchange." *God: a Biography* was written on Aristotle's precept that to understand character, one must connect beginning, middle and end. Miles has no theological or historical interest in this study; he believes that the artistic suggestion of a life is inseparable from the dramatic or literary effect itself. Like Hamlet, God must have an offstage life in order for his on-stage life to be understood. The Hebrew Bible shows no beginning or end to God, but the middle life it does depict shows a progression from vigor to quiescence. It does not unfold as a continuous narrative. Rather, the story running from Genesis through 2 Kings is followed by a series of testimonies leading up to the Book of Job, after which God falls silent in the final ten books. The movement from action to speech to silence yields a "theography," neither theology nor biography, but a literary work whose protagonist cannot validly be blended into an immutable composite character as Aristotelian exegesis has done. "Later" may not apply to the timeless God, but it does to the exposition of his character in a start-to-finish reading of the Hebrew Bible. The naiveté of such a reading is matched by the author's determination generally to eschew historical criticism; if the text says the protagonist does something, it is worthy of consideration, whatever its origin in myth, legend, or history might be. Critics might scoff at the idea of understanding God in human terms, but his creation of humankind, male and female, in his own image is an implicit invitation to do just that; he does not from the start insist that he is mysterious. The biblical writers are like courtroom witnesses testifying about God. The biographer resolves the contradicting testimonies and/or recognizes the conflict.

Once it is decided that God is not beyond "interpersonal appraisal," it is necessary to decide what text to study. The Hebrew Bible and what Christians call the "Old Testament" cover the same material but in different orders; the former proceeds from action to speech to silence, while the latter proceeds from action to silence to speech. For a literary study, the difference is obviously great. The theological approach of considering every verse as simultaneous with every other has blinded critics to the important artistic considerations that led two sets of editors to arrange the common into two tables of contents. Some speculate about the difference thus: viewing Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy, Christians moved the prophets from the middle of the Old Testament to the end, for dramatic effect, while Jews left it where it always was when they finally adopted the codex as a method of preserving the contents of their ancient scrolls. Others speculate that separate canons in Palestine and Alexandria simply pre-dated Christianity. God's "youth through young adulthood," described in the first eleven

books are identical, but his middle and old age are presented differently. Miles elects to follow the Hebrew order, which he refers to as *"Tanakh,"* an acronym of its three constituent parts: *torah,* "teaching," *nebi´im,* "prophets," and *ketubim,*" writings."

Scholars, rather than critics, trained Miles and they naturally paid more attention to the religion of ancient Israel than to God himself. Historical scholars are attentive to "meaningless" details and the backgrounds of the various authors of the Tanakh, both useful considerations for literary criticism. Many technical studies deal with how the God of Israel arose as a fusion of Semitic dieties, but fail to ask, "how did all this feel to God?" - as a playgoer naturally wonders about Hamlet. The Tanakh has always been the story of God's inner conflict being resolved into monotheism. God's inconsistent behavior has always baffled readers and his multiplicity must be understood by imagining him riven in order to appreciate him as the One God. This alone allows the Tanakh to be read as a work of art rather than a defective work of history. Its plot is God's desiring to have a self-image, struggling with that self-image when it becomes a maker of self-images and reaching crisis when he tries and fails to conceal his originating motive from a single exemplar of himself. One must ask why God created the world, why he destroyed it soon afterward, why he emerged suddenly as a warrior, why he became a moralist, how he adjusted to the broken covenant with Israel and how he experienced life without parents, spouse, or children.

Inner divisions and lack of identity define human beings from conception onward. Double or multiple personalities often coexist in an immature individual and through his or her life's work fuse in a mature and dynamic identity. Sometimes the work is undermined by the inner tension that initially made for success. The Tanakh portrays this process in its protagonist, God, minus only his origin. God's war with himself is its unifying principle, rather than any rigid structure or epic theme.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter 1, the Prelude, "Can God's Life Be Written?" establishes what Jack Miles intends to accomplish in this book. The Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) preserves information suitable to creating a "theography" - a study independent of both theology and biography. Editors, immersed in sharp polemics, organized the common material of the scriptures into two tables of contents and one or the other must be selected for study; Miles will use the Jewish canon, Tanakh, primarily because it more clearly shows God's progression from action to words to silence. This facilitates following his "career," through which the various strains in his personality are revealed. While systematic theologians might insist that God is the same yesterday, today and forever, this is not the evidence of the Tanakh read naively start-to-finish. Miles concludes the Prelude by raising - but not reacting to - Carl Jung's statement "I do not believe. I know." Miles knows only that God's story can be told from the pages of the Tanakh.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

In Genesis 1:1-25, God talks to himself as he creates the world and populates it with animals in five days; there are no people to hear him and if there are other divine beings on the scene, they are bystanders, not collaborators. God does not talk about himself or his motivation for the sudden action. Readers are eavesdroppers on his purposeful work, executed by command.

Gen. 1:26-31 then portrays God musing about creating man in his image and likeness before doing so. God made the world because he wanted humankind and wants humankind because he wants an image and he orders the male and female to reproduce and manage the earth. The male and female must be able to reproduce in order to be truly his image. There is no indication that he wants a servant, lover, or worshiper, simply an image. God shows no sign of knowing how his image will complicate his life, but what kind of life is complete solitude? God speaks of "our" image, but shows no indication of being anything but entirely alone. God creates everything without exertion, yet curiously rests afterwards. The first five days' accomplishments God proclaimed "good," but it is relegated to the narrator to report God views the final product as "very good." God does not rate his image unequivocally.

Gen.2:4-23 relates a distinct second account of creation, not by *´elohim,* but by *yahweh,* whose *modus operandi* is severely limited. God creates from dust only a male, restricts him to tilling a garden and forbids him to eat from one particular tree. The male is offered no motivation not to taste fruit that offered something useful: the knowledge of good and bad. Yahweh immediately sees a flaw in the male's loneliness and creates from his rib a female, only as a last resort, after the male rejected all the animals. Without gratitude or acknowledgement of God, the male speaks the first recorded human words: "she is Woman." Immediately, she listens to the serpent, tastes the forbidden fruit and convinces Man to follow. Is this serpent God's rival or was the whole garden a set-up? The serpent told the truth: the couple does not die on the day they tasted the fruit (later theological dodges notwithstanding). The Tanakh abounds with stories of deception. This story has faint echoes of Mesopotamian creation myths, where God's opponent is far more formidable. The abandonment of polytheism forced the Hebrew editors to internalize the epic conflict to an inner regret by God over allowing one creature to bring down another. God demands blind obedience to a deceptive command and he talks conversationally with the Man and Woman, but then punishes all three in a wanton explosion of fury, heightened by its poetic form (Gen. 3:14-19). Yahweh vindictively transforms his limited gifts into perpetual punishments: childbearing and earning a living will both be hard and painful. The couple's nakedness, unimportant in Genesis 1, where reproduction is a magnanimous invitation, in Genesis 2 becomes a matter of shame: heir knowledge of good and bad includes nascent sexual desire and need. God reflects his image: dust and passion. Inexplicably, the frightful, vengeful Yahweh tenderly, quasi-parentally spares them the inconvenience of finding

clothing before barring them from the garden. This is particularly puzzling in light of the fact that the serpent told Eve the truth, they know good from bad, but why, from God's point of view, would that be a bad thing? Why would it be bad for them to live forever? It is difficult not to see regretful, equivocating Yahweh playing a double game with motives and behavior at odds with ´Elohim. The Tanakh's one God has two strikingly distinct personalities and anything predicated about him under either name is predicated to him under both.

Gen. 4-11 shows God as the Destroyer, regretting that he made human beings. Eve bears two sons after she and Adam are barred from Eden and Cain the farmer kills Abel the shepherd because Yahweh prefers Abel's unasked for sacrificial offering. Although Yahweh has given no commandment not to kill, the murderer is impetuously banished from the soil. Yahweh acts and then infers intentions from what he did. Cain's punishment is an intensification of Adam's - the land will not yield nothing and he will wander the earth, severed from any relationship with the Lord, yet his children and nephews begin to "invoke the Lord by name." ´Elohim's Adam fathers a son, Seth, at age 130, in accordance with the original plan that God's image reproduce (Gen. 5:31).

The "fault lines in the divine character" deepen in the two tellings of the Flood story. The two are structurally identical: Noah and his family are forewarned and survive in an ark to establish a new divine-human beginning. The stories differ in details (how many pairs of animals are taken aboard) and in mood. ´Elohim calmly and purposefully cleanses his originally good world and foresees a new covenant. Yahweh strikes out in bitter regret at having created the animal and human realms; he has no plan. When Noah takes the initiative in offering the world's first burnt offering, he seems surprised that it pleases him and impulsively promises never again to destroy the world - without stipulating what mankind will have to do or refrain from doing in order not to provoke his anger again. ´Elohim takes the initiative in offering the rainbow as a blessing on Noah's repopulating the world, but also imposes his first prohibition: humans may not kill one another or eat any other creature alive. God reserves sole right to kill - as he just has, abundantly. Reverence has nothing to do with it - God has not yet commanded that, nor seems to realize he might want it. The Bible differs from Babylonian flood myths by offering an ethical pretext for it and by depicting it as the action of a single God. It is not an epic battle between Marduk and Tiamat/Rahab; the serpentine, watery destroyer is wholly absorbed into God the Creator. Water is God's instrument, not his opponent. The serpent is even less independent than in Genesis 2. Majestic Marduk is ascendant in ´Elohim and brooding, vindictive Tiamat in Yahweh, each coherent quasi-human personalities. Yahweh will threaten to break his promise not to destroy the world again and will remain a permanently threatening and dangerously unpredictable presence.

Gen. 12-25:11 show the Creator/Destroyer dealing with one man: Abram/Abraham. Fertility relates to sterility as life does to death. Control of fertility becomes God's primary concern and he promises it in abundance to Abram at their first encounter. By the standards of Genesis 1, this should have been unnecessary - procreation was inherent in creation. Yahweh has decided to reduce humankind's overall reproductive autonomy, just as he has claimed the exclusive prerogative to take human life. Abram shows no sign of having heard of Adam or Noah and knows God only from what he

says and does to him. Abram twice does as he is told before resisting over God's conditions on his fertility; God appears to him a third time and Abram is silent. God is but a bystander in Abram's military rescue of his nephew Lot, but at their fourth meeting appears to take credit for the victory. Catching him in this fabrication, Abram challenges why the promise of fertility is not coming true. God repeats the promise (also predicting the sojourn in Egypt) and Abram for the first time says he believes it. This is "reckoned to his merit." Ten more years pass with children withheld and Abram's wife Sara sends him to impregnate her servant, Hagar. Jealousy then overcomes Sara and she drives Hagar into the desert to perish, but God after-the-fact tells Hagar he will prosper her son Ishmael and sends her back to Sara. Thirteen more years pass before God repeats his promise, this time changing their names to Abraham and Sarah and demanding the circumcision of the males. Abraham falls over laughing at the idea such old people could have a child, but ´El adday — the mountain deity of raw power — asserts itself in God and Abraham is awestruck. Abraham might also have found funny God's demanding his 99-year old foreskin. Abraham is skeptical and now content with his 13-year old bastard son Ishmael preserving his legacy. Nevertheless, he submits to the knife, giving God covenantal control of his sexual potency.

In Gen. 18, Yahweh again appears to Abraham in the form of three men, with whom his unique being is thoroughly interwoven in the text. Following the sixth promise of a son with Sarah, Sarah laughs and Yahweh is indignant. The conversation is sarcastic on both sides. God suggests he has not yet given Abraham children because his righteous merit was insufficient and takes him into his confidence about plans to punish the unrighteousness of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham reacts boldly, aggressively and sarcastically on behalf of a city and a nephew to whom he has little connection. Abraham less "bargains" than lashes out (hyper deferentially) against Yahweh's again breaking his promise and impugning his honor. Yahweh, now in the form of two men, visit Lot in Sodom and every man in the town converge on Lot's door, demanding that the strangers be turned over to them for sexual assault. Lot offers them his daughters as a substitute, but they refuse and are struck blind when they attempt to break in. With Lot and his daughters safely out of town, the "men" destroy the entire region. The only explanation for the scope of the vengeance can be that the Sodomites affronted God by their demand to access to his own genitals. It is not a question of morality (the men apparently had no qualms about Lot's daughters being ravaged) but of power. God reclaims a power humans sought to seize, as he did in banishing Cain. In the morning, his penis still healing, Abraham surveys the destruction, while Lot's daughters, as if avenging themselves for exposing them to gang rape, lure him into incest. Still, Abraham remains unimpressed until God intervenes with King Abimelech's attempt to take Sarah into his harem.

Isaac is finally born, in his father's hundredth year, but God (as the fearsome ´El adday) soon demands him as a burnt offering. Abraham appears to know that doing so is wrong, but goes through the motions. Whether he would have gone through with the murder is not known; God stops him and for the seventh time promises Abraham abundant offspring, choosing to be satisfied with his compliance. God appears to realize that Abraham can be pushed only so far. The covenant is a truce and their relationship changes. Sarah dies and Abraham purchases land for her burial, before turning

attention to finding Isaac a wife among his relatives in distant Aram-naharaim. God neither appears in nor speaks or acts in the purchase of Rebekkah, but Abraham refers to his behind-the-scenes activity by telling his servant what God will do. God has become for Abraham a known quantity, defined and constrained by his past activity. God is referred to in the Abraham cycle by many of the names of Canaanite polytheism, but his emergence in the Isaac cycle as El, the Canaanite's "chief executive" god, is surprising. God is expected to function like the numerous Mesopotamian personal gods, who helped their human worshipper-clients in the role of personal errand boys. Abraham's servant utters the Bible's first true prayer, telling the brimstone-throwing God of recent memory precisely what he expects him to do in finding Abraham a daughter-in-law. It is revolutionary for him to become the "God of Abraham." The status quo ante of Adam's reproductive freedom is partially restored by Abraham fathering six sons by Keturah, who become the antecedents of the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula.

During the last quarter of Genesis, God is a "friend of the family." At the end of his life, Isaac confidently blesses his two sons, rather than leaving the task to God like Abraham and is bound by the younger one's deception of the blind old man. Abraham's grandson Jacob never speaks to God and rarely about him, Jacob is granted a dream as awe-inspiring as any his grandfather received, but is unimpressed and places conditions on God before he will accept him as his own. Jacob does not bargain; he simply lays down simple terms and offers a meager consideration in return - a tithe (10%) of his earnings. God accepts the deal and stoops to teach Jacob an animal domestication trick to use on his father-in-law's flocks. Jacob keeps God on "probation" until he is brought safely home, while asking him to show kindness - something he was not yet known for. Staying behind the caravan, just in case Esau means him harm, Jacob wrestles at night with a "man," whom many have seen as an angel sent by God (like the three men to whom Abraham offered hospitality), but there are signs in the text that the opponent was Esau. God's participation in Jacob's ventures is minor, compared with the cagy man's own efforts. Jacob repays God by destroying the local idols and God resumes his fearsome guise to strike fear in the land's inhabitants. Jacob finally recognizes the "God of Israel" (as God renames him). God does not participate in Jacob's genocide against the Hivites, but does not object to Jacob's blasphemous use of the sign of the covenant, circumcision, to be misused to weaken the foe before falling upon them. God appears not to care about what is said about him. God further demonstrates his domestication by deigning to speak directly with his mother, Rebekkah, a departure from his dealings with Eve and Sarah. God manages the twelve pregnancies of Jacob's two wives, Leah and Rachel.

Genesis thereafter focuses on the youngest son, Joseph, who has even less direct interaction with God. God, like a godfather, arranges for Joseph to have a successful career after his brothers sell him into slavery in Egypt by giving him the gift of interpreting dreams, but never prays to him or asks for any message from him. There seems to be no need for direct communication. When reconciled with his brothers, he refers to "your God, the god of your father," not as his own. God makes no promise of offspring to Joseph and shows no concern for the Egyptians who suffer the famine he helped Joseph predict but did not actively send. Kind and forgiving Joseph is perhaps the only true saint in the Tanakh and this reflects God's benevolent, if inactive, nature.

There is no talk yet of the "love of God," but God is capable of showing favor where he wishes and he favors kind, loving Joseph, as he had Isaac and Jacob over their elder brothers. Joseph's oldest brother is disparaged in three ways in the text: 1) he suggested selling Joseph into slavery — not only a heartless move, but a capital crime; 2) he married a Canaanite wife and engaged in cultic prostitution; and 3) dying Jacob blesses Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, ahead of Judah's offspring. Jacob utters predictions about his first eleven sons, but blesses Joseph. Genesis ends with God appearing susceptible to being wooed by individuals.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter, 2, "Generation," examines how the Book of Genesis views God as "Creator," "Destroyer," Creator/Destroyer," and "Friend of the Family." Much of it deals with likening the personalities in God to the deities who Babylonian myths show creating the world and destroying it in a flood. The fabulous nature of the tales is played down and the divine actors are merged as conflicting personalities into the one God of Israel. God vacillates between wishing to share existence with human beings, for whom he wants only the best — reproduce and enjoy the world — and demanding they obey his capricious requirements. God seems to have no plan, but to make up rules only after the hapless humans upset him. The discussion can grow confusing and Miles admits that it will not be easy going for readers without some background in biblical studies. If this is the case, consider turning to the Postlude, where Miles devotes several pages to a brilliant musing on "Imagining the One God as Many." It may clarify matters for much of the book, although it too presupposes the reader has completed the book.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Before moving on to the Book of Exodus, where the violent God returns, Miles pauses to take stock of what in literary terms makes the unified God of Genesis godlike and what makes him different. God creates the human scene that he enters and creates his human antagonists he faces. God takes no action that does not have man as his object; he has no "adventures," no divine companions, like the gods of Greek mythology. After the opening creation soliloquy and briefly when deciding to flood the earth, God does not talk to himself; he deals with humans directively rather than analytically, expressing no appreciation. God is always supremely confident, but seems not to plan ahead; when displeased by some human action or inaction, he reacts. God's only stated goal, of molding man in his image and likeness, would be easier if he had a richer subjective life. God in Genesis is a wholly prospective character, frustrating because he lacks the kind of past that allows people to get to know one another. God discloses nothing about himself, including his needs or desires and has an air of power, but gives no clues about he might use it. Man is an indispensable tool in his self-understanding and it early appears that unchecked fertility is not what he had in mind at creation. God's first reaction is utter destruction through the flood, but he then turns to concentrating on a single individual: Abram/Abraham, whose reproduction he personally controls. As the narrative grows, more complex, poetic, legal and prophetic presentations of God begin to be worked in. By the time Exodus begins, Abraham's descendents have, indeed, become innumerable — to the point that they are a threat to Egypt, where they found refuge in the days of Joseph. God, who promised fertility to all humankind, must decide how to react to the Egyptians' attempts to control them. Again, he seems to lack a plan. God's hand is forced when Pharaoh legislates that all Israelite boys are to be killed at birth and God for the first time becomes a warrior. Finding himself the personal God of Israel, he had no other option; there was no valid god of Egypt (and later of Canaan) with whom to reach a peaceful arrangement. War will permanently transform him, bringing out in him the ferocious personality of Baal and the composite of God is complete as Creator/Destroyer/Patron/Warrior. As Israel was completing this gradual intellectual synthesis, multiple writers recorded individual tales expressing the shared idea of God and later redactors created the Tanakh. The set of inner contradictions in God was understood in common and not concealed.

In literary terms, the Bible is unique on at least three counts: 1) it is a translated classic, read by only a tiny minority in the original; 2) it exists in a variety of versions, among which the reader must choose and the ordering and ending of these differ; and 3) its concept of time and tight focus on a single protagonist set it apart from both the saga and classical epic. It is radically forward-looking and open-ended.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The brief first interlude, "What Makes God Godlike?" takes stock of God at the transition point between Genesis and Exodus. Through man, his image and likeness, he has come to understand that he wants to limit and channel the gift of procreation he gave him and by experimentation has found he is creator, cosmic destroyer and personal deity concerned intimately with a small subset of humanity: Israel. When the prospects arise that Israel's freedom to procreate will be limited by human decree, he is forced to react and turns into a fearsome warrior. Miles concedes that historical criticism will never fully unwind how Israel came to combine the Semitic deities that personified these character traits into One God, but insists that this common understanding was the prerequisite to the writing of the Tanakh, which is remarkable in not whitewashing the contradictions in its protagonist.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Having eluded the baby killers and grown to manhood in Egypt, the Israelite Moses fled to Midian and settled down as a shepherd. Then a fully-integrated Yahweh/`Elohim God appears to him in a burning bush and identifies himself as "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." Both are firsts. Baal, the dominant deity in Canaan, is the god of mountain and flame: a war god, storm god, fertility god and mountain/volcano god simultaneously, a young rebel god intent on becoming "lord of the manor." The personal God of Abraham's extended family begins exhibiting Baal-like behavior.

God commissions a reluctant Moses to return to Egypt and lead his people to freedom. When Moses asks his name (because the Israelites are sure to question his commission), God declares, "I AM WHO I AM." The Hebrew original — *`ehyeh `a er `ehyeh* — is linguisitcally complex and ambiguous and a possible variant strongly suggests God is declaring that he is what he does. God's behavior in Genesis suggests that action precedes intentions in God; here his self-knowledge has reached the point that he can reveal himself as "I Will Act." God orders Moses to confront Pharaoh and demand that he let the people depart. God warns that it will take a display of his might to convince Pharaoh and predicts Israel will depart with rich spoils. This is a departure for God, as he refrained from intervening in Abraham's war and struck Sodom only because the inhabitants offended him personally. Infanticide against the Egyptians will be his revenge and Pharaoh's mind will be hardened to make sure the drama plays out properly. Moses has to be symbolically circumcised by his wife before the campaign begins. God is poised selectively to repeat the flood.

Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh marks the first time God has used an intermediary, taken action in response to human skepticism, or manipulated a human mind. God will not allow the Egyptian ruler to act in his people's best interests; he wants to unleash horrors in order that Israel will be able to gloat over their neighbors and exalt his power. Moses tells Pharaoh coldly, "the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel." Rarely afterward will God harden human hearts in hostility, but he will increasingly become a searcher and prompter of hearts. The bloody Passover ritual is performed to set the Israelites aside from the Egyptians, the latters' first-born sons die and Israel leaves laden with plunder, as God has ordered, in order to humiliate Egypt. One last time, however, he moves a despondent Pharaoh to pursue them into the desert. Israel panics, removing any ability to boast that they had liberated themselves. God personally drowns the enemy and Israel breaks into song to exalt its victorious warrior God. Israel's mood will permeate the rest of the Tanakh. The first half (Exodus 15:1-10) reflects the scene of the burning bush and expresses wonder that a mighty personal God has turned into a warrior; the second half (Ex. 15:11-18) has them anticipating his leading a campaign against the dwellers of Philistia, Edom, Moab and Canaan who have done nothing to the Israelites. Israel exalts in coming violence that God has not promised; his

plan called for them to on his peaceful mountain abode (a la Baal). Israel's confidence in him, however, moves him to devotion towards their cause. God has a whole people on his hands, dependent on him in a new way.

In history, morality has been shown to be the price of peace and basis of civilization. Polytheism posits impersonal necessity to enforce morality on gods and humans alike. Monotheism posits it in a morally good God. In neither system has it proven guaranteed. Before the Exodus, Israel's God showed little interest in ethics. In paradise, ethics would not have been needed; only knowledge of good and bad raised the problem. After Cain murdered Abel, God forbade bloodshed and widened the perspective a bit after the flood. God seemed to be taking ethical matters up on a case-by-case basis. The Tanakh preserves some folk customs from nomadic days (Abraham takes Hittite customs for granted), but observing or breaking human norms does not affect the patriarchs' relationship with God. Only when God the warrior has triumphed, does he realize he is responsible for Israel's social order? It is a six-part action: 1) God reveals himself to Israel spectacularly; 2) he gives the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant, promises victory in Canaan and receives the people's blood ritual of submission to his new laws; 3) Moses spends forty days and nights on the mountain, receiving detailed instruction on the bloody ritual worship God expects from his people; 4) Moses returns to camp and leads the Levites in bloody and deliberately indiscriminant reprisal against those who misbehaved in his absence; for good measure, God adds a plague; 5) God takes Moses aside to reiterate the law to him and give instructions on the upcoming Canaanite campaign; and 6) Moses personally officiates at the set-up of the official cult. Two existing literary traditions are woven together in Ex. 25-40, resulting in frequent duplications. The text reveals four crescendos that affect the emerging character of God: 1) Israelite suffering in Egypt; 2) the divine militancy; 3) divine justice; and 4) Moses' intensifying relationship with God — into face-to-face, friend like conversations and the privilege of seeing his glory directly.

At Mount Sinai, God appears as a warrior who doesn't realize he had it in him until he went to war and thereafter he identifies himself as a warrior. Never has he appeared so wild and thunderous and he does so in order to set the stage for laying down a great moral code. At the end of the promulgation, God tells Moses how he is to clear Canaan of its natives: genocidal ethnic cleansing. God rejects the thought of their converting and living in harmony. This is a step up in violence over Egypt and a vast difference from the world of Genesis where ethnic mingling was taken for granted. Now God commands preemptory extermination. Bloodlust also appears in the detailed rituals God orders instituted. The actions of the Levites resemble the modern gang mentality of total loyalty demonstrated by killing family members. Then God "sends a plague to further afflict the corpse-strewn camp."

God reminds the survivors of what he has done for them, then lays down the conditions of a new covenant. God gives the terse Decalogue (Ten Commandments) and a longer Book of the Covenant, regulating life in an anticipated agrarian society. The death penalty is frequently imposed and interpersonal violence, expected to be a way of life, is regulated rather than forbidden. God imposes on himself the enforcing of the laws he imposes on Israel. Before inscribing the law on Moses' tablets, God grants his request

to see his glory, declaring himself to be "a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness." The last three words render a single Hebrew word that can also be rendered "covenant fidelity" as understood in ancient diplomacy to define the relationship between suzerain and vassal. God often insists he is free to break the covenant, but chooses not to. God goes on to declare contradictorily that he both forgives sins and visits parents' iniquities on future generations. This is intended to enforce justice in a society that does not yet envision an afterlife; it is Israel's version of transgenerational karma. God chooses the moment when Israel is struck with fear of his power to introduce the legislation that will help mold them in his image. It has to be comprehensive, lest other human criteria intervene. What today appears cruel was intended to make justice rule supreme.

God's deepening personal relationship with Moses reflects his relationship with the just Joseph. Moses is Joseph's spiritual heir. Moses stands apart from the "stiff-necked" people among whom God quickly discovers he cannot bear to dwell. Moses implores him not to abandon them and he agrees to go with them to Canaan and reveals his *kabod* to Moses - this being an ambiguous Hebrew word meaning "glory," but also referring to the genitalia. When Israel receives the law from Moses, they are not asked to acknowledge it. Henceforth, when God looks at Israel, what he sees is Moses. Exodus concludes with Moses overseeing the construction of an ark to contain the written law over which he sets a ritual "throne" for God to sit upon - notably not any of the cultic objects the Israelites would have been familiar with form the cultural milieu. God descends upon the Israelites in a cloud by day and a fire by night - volcanic imagery reminiscent of Baal.

Genesis and Exodus constitute in literary terms God's dramatic, fast-changing identity-forming childhood. One year after the flight from Egypt, God takes up residence in the tent Moses prepared for him and the desert sojourn told in Numbers begins. It takes its title from the census conducted before Israel decamped from Sinai en route to Canaan via present-day Jordan. The narrative ends as they prepare to invade. Between Exodus and Numbers is the long book of Leviticus (so named because the priests all descended from Jacob's son Levi), which expands on the Book of the Covenant to detail the liturgy that would be practiced until the Babylonians conquer Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. It was written down in Babylon and portrays the "otherness" of God and Israel, joined in covenant; the rest of humankind is excluded. It begins by ordering Israel to be holy because God is holy. Anything that might divide one Israelite from another is regulated in order that ordinary life might be sacralized. It presents an idealized, serene picture of the national life lost to the Babylonians. God is only potentially frightening. The priestly rituals are designed to guarantee the people's purity and, thereby, safety. Not originally written as divine speech, it objectifies and depersonalizes God by turning him into a being that can be controlled by reliable liturgical procedures. Curses are included (Lev. 26:14-45) as any ancient treaty would expect, but the book generally expects that Israel will deserve and receive only blessings. Surprisingly, after the bloody Exodus, it decrees that foreigners are to be treated on a par with Israelites, because the latter were "strangers in the land of Egypt." They do not enjoy freedom of religion and are subject to the kind of restrictions alien populations normally endure, but they appear to present no threat to Israel's spiritual welfare.

Numbers adds to Chapter 3's discussion of what makes God godlike, a trait that classical mythology has tended to mask beneath nobility, serenity, gravity and solemnity. The Hebrew God is whiny, irritable, as are his chosen people. Neither is possible to please and the Tanakh does not conceal this. This plants the seeds of prophecy later in the text and Western civilization's perennial search for moral reform. The Israelites forgot the God of their fathers during their long sojourn in Egypt and quickly forget how bad their oppression was there, once life in the desert grows difficult. The Israelites complain that Moses is killing them. God answers, in effect, "Keep up this talk and I'll kill you." When Israel balks at entering Canaan because scouts report it is well fortified, God is ready to disown them, but Moses talks him out of it, largely to prevent the nations from laughing at his inability to carry through his plan. God backs down, but vindictively requires they wander aimlessly until the generation of the Exodus dies out. Even Moses will not be allowed to enter the Promised Land. During one rebellion, he opens the earth to swallow 14,700 Israelites alive before a bloody atonement ritual placates him. Even this does not quell the murmuring.

Israel is at best a grudging accomplice in the divine plan and God is a harsh character to whom it would be difficult to submit willingly. God's favorite reference to them is "stiff-necked," referring to the forceful methods needed to yoke an ox. The Israelites join in the orgiastic worship of Baal in Peor and were massacred by a divinely sent plague; they disobey orders by sparing non-virgin Midianite women and are ordered to finish the ruthless extermination. Word of this act fills the other people of Canaan with fear. In the written law, God has shown himself obsessed with all details of reproductive fertility, so the fertility rites of Baal are a direct threat. The writers of the Torah were careful to insulate the Hebrew God from any syncretistic tendencies, depicting him carefully as male in demeanor but sexually inactive. God cannot be considered begotten or begetting and also somehow at this point seems barred from love. God's irritable relationship with Israel indicates, however, some degree of intimacy, because strangers do not complain about each other as Israel and God do. The God who can kill thousands when disgruntled prefers to deal with Moses.

Deuteronomy means "Second Law" in Greek, the designation of the fifth book of the Hebrew Torah in the second century B.C.E. translation, the Septuagint. Virtually everything in it has been previously introduced and its structure is a three-part speech by Moses shortly before his death and it is the first full-blown oratory in the Bible. The seventh-century B.C.E. Deuteronomist creates an emotionally resonant character for Moses to serve as the mouthpiece for God's meticulous code of behavior. Structured like a treaty, the book 1) reviews the shared history of the two parties; 2) lays down the terms; and 3) attaches blessings and curses to sanction it. Moses harmonizes the Torah's comments about God's various personality traits. The "Lord your God" is not part of any world pantheon of national gods, but a lethal fire. God's relationship with Israel is renewed in every succeeding generation and he is an inevitable reality - precisely the God whom modern atheists reject. The literary unity of Deuteronomy far exceeds the earlier books' and retells their stories with greater artistry. Moses' last speech resembles those of Greco-Roman generals to troops gathered for battle. It includes the frequent theme of love and family as a motif for bravery and unity in arms. A portion of Moses' speech became the central sacred text of Judaism, "Hear, O Israel!

The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." It calls on Israel to love him and take his instructions to heart. Immediately afterward, Moses says they are to fear or revere them. Both verbs express the same reality — Israel is to "stick with" the covenant. Clearly, it had failed at this, so Moses adds a new image: they are to "circumcise the foreskin of their hearts." This is far more demanding than giving up a portion of one's penis; it requires the surrender of mental autonomy to God. If they obey - by utterly exterminating the inhabitants - they are assured a rich plunder in Canaan. If they do not, they face a list of blood-chilling curses four times longer than the blessings and unmatched in ghastly detail until Dante. The text betrays signs of firsthand experience as Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and does not content itself with threatening slavery. It threatens to revoke the promise to Abraham of descendants forever. God demands love by coercion. This begs the question of why God established a covenant in the first place. Why does he do the good he does?

The Israelites perform a ritual reading of the blessings and curses in Shechem, from two opposing mountains. God has twice been refrained by Moses from canceling the covenant; Moses, at the point of death, is perhaps hoping to move God to love Israel as he requires Israel to love him. Moses' final words are blessings on the twelve tribes, particularly Joseph. Joseph's blessing contains Moses' only reference to his vision of "I Will Act" in the burning bush.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Chapter 4, "Exhilaration," examines select texts from the remaining four books of the Torah (also called the Penateuch, because it is divided into five books). "Liberator" deals with Ex. 1:1-15:21, the escape from Egyptian bondage. "Lawgiver" deals with Ex. 15:22-40:38, the laying down of the law to Moses and the Israelites at Mount Sinai. "Liege" looks at Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, as God regulates the social life of his stiff-necked and rebellious chosen people.

Miles never pretends that he does not deal in speculation and is forthcoming in admitting this in interpreting the cryptic *`ehyeh `a er `ehyeh.* Most significantly, it provides the folk etymology for the name Yahweh.

Western civilization does not consider God grumpy, but Miles insists that this is how he and Israel relate to one another consistently. Moses assumes the role of intermediary between them, repeatedly talking God out of abandoning Israel and urging Israel to surrender its intellectual autonomy to him in order to avoid national disaster. Many rebels fell victim to the wrath of God (and his lieutenants, the Levites), but it is their descendants who alone grant them a form of immortality upon whom a horrible fate will fall if any generation remains "stiff-necked."

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Will Israel meet the covenant conditions that God imposed at Sinai? This hangs over the long narrative that runs from the conquest of Canaan to the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. God remains the liege to increasingly disobedient vassals, whom he eventually abandons to their enemies. Divine self-discovery has three aspects: 1) Conqueror continues the "liberator" identity. God promised in Ex. 23:27 that he would send his terror before Israel in Canaan and in the Book of Joshua keeps his word. God did not seem to foresee that his promise of superhuman fertility to Abraham would require him to become a warrior, but having bloodied himself in Egypt, he anticipated a second war. The new enemy has done nothing like Pharaoh to deserve their fate. This time God does not care that they understand why they are being exterminated or expelled. The brutality begun in Egypt will extend through the Book of Judges, when relations among the twelve tribes of Israel are affected. 2) Father continues the "friend of the family" identity. Following the savagery that concludes Judges, the two books of Samuel begin with a strikingly tender prayer to the "Lord of Hosts," begging him to befriend the oppressed. The books also contain God's first tentative reference to himself as father is to David's son Solomon, a theme that will eventually be canonized as the deepest truth about God in the Book of Chronicles. 3) Arbiter continues the "lawgiver" identity, as the deliverer of Israel from Egypt finds himself thrust into the position of world judge in the two books of Kings.

The plot from Joshua to 2 Kings moves from conquest to defeat, from fidelity-and-blessings to apostasy-and-curses. God becomes part of the setting rather than one of the actors. Historical critics refer to these books as the "Deuteronomistic History" of Israel. Deuteronomy pulled God together and clarified his clarity of purpose, overwhelming vitality and unique blend of ruthlessness and warmth. Jewish tradition calls Joshua through 2 Kings "the former prophets," which addresses the question: Will Israel keep the covenant or not?

Under Joshua, Moses' lieutenant and successor, Israel inflicts thorough genocidal slaughter on 31 Canaanite cities. The conquest both begins and ends at Shechem, the historic town where Abraham first visited when he entered The Land, where Jacob bought property, where Israel's first sacred genocide was performed to avenge the rape of Dinah, where Joseph was kidnapped to Egypt and where the ritual blessings and curses were read at Moses' command. At the end of Joshua's spectacularly successful career, he delivers his final speech in Shechem and Israel responds at a pitch of enthusiasm never again reached. Joshua reminds them that they are witnesses against themselves if they fail to serve the Lord and they accept this responsibility. Joshua dies and is buried there, as are Joseph's bones, which were carried out of Egypt in the territory allotted to the descendants of God's favorite. God's plan appears to have been come to a perfect consummation.

Early in the Book of Judges, however, it is clear that not all Canaanites were eliminated and an angel warns Israel that the survivors will become their oppressors and their gods a snare. Joshua's army splinters into local guerrilla bands or militias led by zealous but uninspired chieftains ("judges") engaged in endless combat. Localized apostasies accumulate into total, mass apostasy, which makes Israel liable to the final curse of Deuteronomy 28: siege, conquest and exile. The Minor Prophets are thus framed, front and back, by genocide performed by God. The downward spiral begins with pretensions to monarchy by a renegade, Abimelech, in a move somehow connected with a Baal cult in Shechem. The town is razed before Abimelech's murder and the Ark of the Covenant is relocated to Shiloh. The tribe of Dan attacks peaceful and unsuspecting Laish in the far north simply for territorial aggrandizement. The worst case of brutality in a brutal era occurs in the territory of Benjamin, where a traveling Levite (a religious functionary) is mistreated like the visitors to Sodom in Genesis. The Benjaminites rape his concubine to death and he cuts her corpse into pieces to send to the tribes as a call for reprisal. The virgin daughters of one Israelite town that does not answer the call to massacre the Benjaminites are allowed to be raped by the survivors, in order to preserve the tribe's existence among the twelve.

1 Samuel opens some time later with dignity and calm in Shiloh, which has become the cult center of the twelve-tribe alliance. Elkanah's childless wife, Hannah, begs the Lord of Hosts for a male child whom she promises to dedicate to him as a "nazirite," a kind of monk or sanctuary minister. Hannah addresses him as a god of war rather than one of fertility, the joint role of Baal and she gives birth to Samuel and her long prayer of gratitude includes the first characterization of God's concern for the poor, the feeble and the needy as well as the barren.

Entire sections of the Deuteronomistic History have God out of sight and mind. This is particularly true of 1 Sam. 8-2 Sam. 1, the story of the power struggle between Saul and David, Israel's first two kings and Jonathan, Saul's son and David's best friend. Saul's downfall comes as close as the Tanakh does to true tragedy - things "just happening" to a protagonist. Saul fails to exterminate Amalek completely and God disowns him and Jonathan with disproportionate harshness. David, who has been fighting against Israel as a mercenary, mourns their deaths without reference to God, but resorts to divination before deciding whether to return to Israel. God for the first time is reduced to the consultative role he will play through the end of 2 Kings. This is the mid-point between creation and the post-exilic history preserved in the Book of Ezra, where God is an object of belief but no longer a purposeful subject. In the story of Saul and David, one sees God as a historical character in a mixture of history, myth and legend. God no longer dominates history and this section of the Tanakh creates the kind of impatience that merely entertaining sermons, overly historical novels and histories that read too much like novels do today. That kind of cross-genre writing was acceptable at the time the Tanakh was composed.

Moses was cautiously neutral on the subject of monarchy, demanding only that a king be subject to the covenant no less than other Israelites. God could easily have characterized himself as King of Israel in Deut. 4:39, but did not. Samuel first raises the question, but in a way that suggests Israel had done well enough defeating earthly kings

while lacking one itself. Through the end of 2 Kings, God is never referred to as a king. Instead, God speaks of himself as a father, beginning in a passage of high emotion tinged with eroticism, when David dances wildly and scantily clad before the ark. One of his wives rebukes him for his unseemly behavior, but through the prophet Nathan, God indicates he was pleased by the unprecedented (and never to be repeated) act of exuberance: "I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to Me." David's house and kingship are secure forevermore. This passage is part of what historical critics call the "Court History" of the Davidic dynasty and functions partly as propaganda for the dynasty, but also to explain why Solomon, rather than his father David, was allowed to build God's temple in Jerusalem and to provide some theological rationale for hope that the Jewish exiles in Babylonia would some day return home. It shows that David has endeared himself to God. Having declared his fatherhood of David, however, God opened himself to the wider application of one of the richest natural symbols in human experience. God did not father the world, he spoke it into existence, deliberately asexually in sharp contrast to mythological versions. Now he speaks in figurative language. The Israelites understood that when Moses spoke of God as a Rock (Deut. 32:4), it was not to be taken literally in the way that creation, flood, the parting of the Red Sea, manna, the display at Mount Sinai and the covenant were to be taken literally. In announcing fatherhood to David and his heirs, God changes his relationship to a specific family. In the father/son relationship, Solomon will be the son to God in a way less metaphorical than the original/copy of God/mankind, which Solomon already enjoys. God cannot change the covenant he established with Israel, but he can change himself. God is bound by covenant to punish Israel for apostasy, but he can choose merely to act as a strict father towards Solomon and his descendents. Fatherhood can never be revoked in the way covenant can. Why should God fall in love with David? Everyone else does. Why, then, adopt Solomon rather than David? Nathan's oracle suggests God wants to comfort Solomon at his father's death; David accepts the arrangement completely. There follows a scene in which the nature of paternal tenderness is illustrated. When David's rebellious son Absalom is slain rather than taken captive and David mourns. Whether God will prove such a father is held in reserve.

Another oracle by Nathan, in 2 Sam. 12, shows five ways in which David's behavior towards Bathsheba, whom he seduces and her murdered husband, whom he arranged to have killed, indict him under the Deuteronomic law: 1) cowardice, 2) adultery, 3) blasphemy, 4) treachery and 5) gluttony. Nathan tells David a parable about a poor man defrauded of his lone sheep by a rich landowner and David flies into a rage. Nathan reveals that the story is about him and announces that the "sword shall never depart from your House." God shows concern for the intimacy of human family life. David might have anticipated being called to task for adultery and murder, but not for avarice and gluttony. God never before indicated that the poor and weak have a prior claim on his protection, but in this scene takes it for granted.

This provides the bridge to the story of the great prophet Elijah and his successor Elisha at the beginning of the two books of Kings. Queen Jezebel arranges the judicial murder of a poor man, Naboth, whose lands she covets. God sends Elijah to tell her she will die as Naboth did. Jezebel, Sidonian by birth, was an active propagandist for Baal-worship and persecutor of God's followers. When her husband, King Ahab of Judah and rival

King Jehoshaphat (who reigns over the remaining eleven tribes — the original confederation split after Solomon's death) ally against Aram (Syria), they seek the counsel of the prophets, all of whom are mere sycophants. Micaiah, however, tells the truth with sarcasm. From his throne in heaven, God will involve himself in the war as emperor, kingmaker and plenipotentiary international arbiter - even though this will mean defeating his clients, Israel and Judah.

The last quarter of the Deuteronomistic History stands in the shadow of a second theophany on Mount Sinai, here called Mount Horeb. Having bested and slain 450 Baalist prophets, Elijah flees for his life into the desert. Mourning in a cave that he alone is left and about to be killed, God passes before him as he did before Moses, appearing as a mighty wind, an earthquake, fire and a soft murmuring sound. Elijah goes as commanded to Damascus to anoint Hazael as king of Aram, Jehu as king of Israel and Elisha as his own successor. Together, as tools of the divine will, they will make sure that only those who never worshipped Baal survive in Israel. The skepticism expressed here about whether this can be seen as proof God's power is omitted in the later retelling in the religiopolitical correct books of Chronicles. Jacob, Moses, Joshua and David all delivered stately final testaments before dying, but Elijah is taken to heaven alive aboard a flaming chariot and his return to earth became the lively subject of Jewish mysticism depicted in the Christian gospels. The earlier Israelite leaders had all accomplished their missions; Elijah's is interrupted. Elijah felt himself to be the last champion of the covenant, restraining God's terrifying curses in Deut. 28. Elisha, rather than Elijah, commissions Hazael, after assuring the ailing King Ben-hadad and Hazael that he would recover from illness. Hazael suffocates the old man. Elisha knows the future but seems not to see it as something God controls or directs. At his own death, Elisha was oppressed by the same thought and prophesied to King Joash the fate that awaited him at the hands of Hazael. The English poet John Milton applied this feeling of panic in the face of impending doom to his own society. This feeling of doubt in the future is removed by the prophet Isaiah in 2 Kg. 19:23-25, when he confidently announces that when the Assyrian invader Sennacherib destroys Jerusalem, it will be nothing but what God intends. God, however, will by then be the soft murmuring sound Elijah recognized on Mount Horeb, not the wind, earthquake and fire of earlier days. Skepticism will continue to build in Israel.

Solomon marks the high point of the Deuteronomistic History in terms of wealth and power, but his huge harem leads him into the worship of foreign gods and his Jeroboam leads a revolt of the northern tribes against Rehoboam, heir to the Davidic throne. The rest of Kings shows idolatry and foreign worship spread. Jeroboam and Rehoboam become the benchmarks for evaluating all later monarchs. Hezekiah and Josiah attempt reforms and loyalist prophets combat corruption, but the outcome is never in doubt. The Assyrians capture Samaria, capital of Israel, in 722 B.C.E. and the Babylonians violently sack Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Chapter 5, "Tribulation" considers how God appears in the books of Joshua and Judges ("Conqueror"), Samuel ("Father") and Kings ("Arbiter"). These books continue the spirit of the last book of the Torah and are referred to collectively by critics as the Deuteronomistic History. The Jewish tradition calls them the Former Prophets. A number of independent story cycles were edited into the final compilation, including the politico religious Court History of the Davidic dynasty and the Elijah/Elisha cycles that are blended together in the final redacting. These books scribe an arch from the Israelites' conquest of Canaan to the Assyrians' and Babylonians' conquest of the holy land. Solomon's reign marks the high point politically, geographically and economically, but his penchant for many wives- which far surpasses his father's - holds the seeds of downfall. God's offer of fatherhood as a less-easily broken arrangement than covenant is rejected and God uses foreigners as his tool to destroy the people he redeemed from Egypt, with none of the active participation he showed during Exodus and conquest.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

How does the catastrophic failure of the covenant with Abraham affect God? Recalling that he has no social life and no self-exploratory intellectual life, what can he to do next? Allow humankind to return to the pre-flood unconditional and universal command and bear with the consequences? Or break the promise he made at the flood and destroy humankind again because the Israel experiment failed? Twice he stopped just short of destroying Israel and starting over with Moses. With whom could he now start over? God will make good on his promise in Deut. 28 to use foreign nations as instruments to punish his erstwhile covenant partner, which opens the potential for a wider relationship with distinct nations through "definition-by-action." Judges 11:24 holds a clear echo of the polytheistic view that every nation had its protecting God, but no nation had the support of the highest, most remote God until Israel acquired its war god cum lawgiver. The Baalist element remained dominant in God through the end of 2 Samuel, but in the books of Kings, El's traits come to the fore: supreme in power but peaceful. The El dimension is militarized and internationalized as Canaan is overrun by world empires and God is satisfied with manipulating nations like chess pieces rather than engaging in combat personally. The Tanakh turns the religious experience of the Israelites into a developing character and plot as history encased in prophecy. Moses' prophetic shadow lies across Israel's national life throughout the Deuteronomistic History. By its end, the curtain comes down as God declared it would, but he finds a way to continue contact with Israel in exile. The horrible destruction threatened in Deut. 28 had to take place, lest God make a fool of himself by endlessly granting Israel stays, but then, in Deut. 29:21-24, he indicates his sense of mercy might outweigh his sense of justice by allowing the generation *after* the destruction to have an opportunity to return to him and be restored. God reserves to himself "secret things" that give him an out from the broken covenant, things he does not reveal even to Moses.

Chapter 6 Analysis

A second interlude, "Does God Fail?" performs a status check on how God has been characterized in the first eleven primarily historical books of the Tanakh, before turning to the prophets great and minor and other literary forms. Israel has broken the covenant it accepted with God and has been punished as he threatened. God's announced plan - of establishing a nation peacefully obedient to the detailed moral code he promulgated - has failed. God cannot continue letting them off the hook without appearing a fool and his law could not change the stiff-necked Israelites. If he wishes to maintain contact with the remnant that survives destruction, he has to change himself to accept them as they are. That alone will modify the answer to the question "Does God fail?" into "Yes, but ..."

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Prophesy combines preaching, politics and poetry; in this book, it will be examined as the self-characterization of God in a non-narrative form. Most often the prophets speak God's words rather than their own or "the Word," quasi-personified. The various prophetic messages frequently contradict each other and commentators get around this by dealing with each prophet as an autonomous author, which contradicts the basic premise that all of the messages in the Tanakh come from the One God. The contradictions reveal God as a character in distress. Without the prophets, God would have no outlet for his ongoing thoughts; he and they intimately shape one another. The threats and predictions are all memoirs written and read after-the-fact. The predictions and threats show God struggling to mine his history with Israel for some way to keep his and its life going, some way to draw together the disparate elements in his personality in order to create a new version of the original-to-image relationship he created in Adam and tried to restrict in the line of Abraham. God's fusion of personalities is inherently unstable, but not, necessarily, explosive; he could simply cool down into inertness. The prophets function as collaborators in keeping God close to critical mass. The three Major Prophets — Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel present, respectively, the manic, depressive and psychotic articulation of the message. Sanity and calmness find no place in prophecy; they are the stuff of the wisdom literature, which will be discussed later. The prophets "play" the themes of Israelite history and theology in a crazed and driven new way, presenting God's options for finding something that might work, in order to begin afresh.

The three major prophets and two of the twelve minor prophets (Haggai and Zechariah) include enough historical narrative to place them in the continuous narrative of the Tanakh that is interrupted after 2 Kings and not taken up until 25 books later in the Book of Ezra. Jeremiah in particular clarifies how only the tribe of Judah survives the exile as an intact entity, becoming *hayyehudim,* best translated as "the Judeans" until 538 B.C.E., when Babylon is defeated by Persia; thereafter, "the Jews" becomes applicable. Clearly, the Babylonian conquest was a process: first, the elite were deported, then Jerusalem was savaged, but the peasantry was left in place to tend the land under a governor. Jeremiah predicted a 70 year exile for the elite, which came true in 538 B.C.E., when Cyrus, King of Persia, sent a delegation of Judeans to rebuild the temple to the deity he called "the God of Heaven." Jerusalem was restored as the spiritual center of the Jewish Diaspora, but Babylon was their cultural, intellectual and financial center. The Babylonians spoke and wrote in Aramaic, the lingua franca of the Babylonian and Persian empires and they adapted the prevailing literary myths, stripped of polytheistic practices, as they sharpened the distinction between their God and the made-up gods of their conquerors. Six centuries later, the Romans would scatter the Western Jewish community, but leave the Eastern portion intact and creative through the 12th century C.E. A third major Judean community, the unsubdued military forces allied with the Ammonites in a failed uprising, then (against Jeremiah's fierce warnings)

fled to Egypt, where they reconciled Jewish religious thought with Greek philosophical thought in Alexandria. Jewish theology was founded there by Philo, whose thought, combined with Gnosticism, joined to create Christianity.

Isaiah, the "manic" prophet, is a single mind bursting with concepts and signs. The speaker shifts constantly between God and Isaiah while touching nearly every image that appears in any of the other prophets. In Isaiah, God appears to be straining every nerve, as confident as when he spoke to Moses, but his various interpretations of the fall of Jerusalem disagree radically with each other. The two dominant options are 1) to accept that Israel got what it deserved and God must let the matter rest; and 2) Israel was over-punished and God must come to the rescue. Will God's relationship to other nations change and if so, how? Jeremiah, who alone advised the Israelites to marry, procreate and prosper in Babylon until God would bring them home, became the "official" prophet of the priestly establishment, but it is Isaiah who brings out the reckless eloquence of God in time of crisis and he will be studied here.

The Book of Isaiah provides a repertory of responses to the supreme crisis in the life of Israel and God. God expands his tentative self-depiction as father into lover, husband, mother, shepherd, gardener, king, redeemer and "Holy One of Israel." Very little is ruled out completely. In the opening vision, God addresses the kings of Judah, shockingly, as the "rulers of Sodom," and asks rhetorically who demanded the religious rituals they perform. Clearly at Sinai, God did, but by the time of the later kings, he had come to prefer social justice as a basis for establishing a covenant. For the first time, he indicates that punishment is discipline rather than retribution and that the disciplined Israel will become the teacher of other nations who will flock to the mountain of the Lord's house - not the violent venue of Baal and Yahweh, but a place of instruction in making peace. First, God will have to rage as a holy warrior once more, in the definitive "day of the Lord," but then he will allow all of mankind to worship him - a radically new notion. Isaiah 3:14-15 is ambiguous over who will become God's people - Israel, Israel's poor, or the poor of all nations - but clearly the days when wealth indicated God's blessing are gone. Haughty, overindulged women are subjected to some of the most scathing language in the Bible in Isaiah 3-5. As a radical anti-capitalist (Is. 5:8-9), God begins calling himself "the Holy One of Israel" and sends Babylon against Israel like an attack dog. God is next portrayed, for the first time, seated on a lofty throne, attended by a host of six-winged "seraphs." Isaiah, having seen something no one has seen before, is overwhelmed and fears for his life, but God personally provides a ritual action to preserve him for the mission of speaking a message to the people whose hearts he intends to harden like Pharaoh's. Israel will not be allowed to understand Isaiah's message until the nations have accomplished God's work and then Isaiah's words will sink in. God has become unknowable. Swiftly, however, the blinding God is presented as providing a ruler to lead them from darkness to light. Isaiah 9:2, 6-7 talks about an exalted messianic earthly king to come. The experience of empire has expanded the Israelite concept and it is now expressed in "theophoric" (God-bearing) names never before encountered. It proves dangerous to be used as God's scourge without realizing the truth of the situation; God is offended by the Assyrian king and will teach him a lesson by striking him with "the rod of his mouth" - the means he will also use to a new world empire centered on Zion, which is also the way he originally created the world. In

fact, he is thinking about having a new creation sprout from the burnt-out stump of Jesse (David's father), a "peaceable kingdom" of a sort never before suggested. Speaking with Isaiah, God seemingly remembers his ability to create out of nothingness. In his wrath, he tells Isaiah, he must reduce Israel to a jarringly tiny remnant. Wrath is the monotonous subject of the next eleven chapters (13-23).

God has no basis for punishing any nations other than (possibly) Assyria, Babylon and Israel. The covenant with Noah forbade only murder and spoke of no sanctions. Earlier, Canaan was ethnically cleansed to make way for Israel and the Amalekites were exterminated to prevent religious syncretism, but now a panorama of nations find themselves indicted and, more astonishingly, the prospect of conversion is opened to them. Even Egypt will be God's people and Assyria the work of his hands, just as Israel is his heritage (Is. 19:23-24). It cannot be determined what course God intends to take vis-à-vis Israel and the nations, but all of his options are express with equal, uncompromising rigor. Then, suddenly, the Bible's first apocalypse is recorded (Is. 24:17-23), a vision of the whole world's final doom. Israel and its destiny are superfluous; God is again the universal destroyer and he gathers witnesses to watch and hail his glory. Then, as suddenly, God announces the resurrection of the dead. Neither eschatology (speculation about the end of time) nor apocalypticism (visions of the end) has played a part in the Bible, but suddenly comes to dominate it. The mind that contains such contradictions is hardly at peace with itself.

A brief prose interlude about the almost-good King Hezekiah divides the Book of Isaiah roughly in half. "Second Isaiah," as chapters 40-66 are often called, is marked by peace and simplicity. First Isaiah defies summary, but Second Isaiah invites it. Israel has been punished enough and God is eager to comfort his people; they will return to Jerusalem in a triumphal march and there, the "servant of the Lord" will gather a chosen and redeemed people from the entire human race in a new order. God shows a "tender, almost maternal solicitude" and emphasizes that he is the only god who is not sheer fabrication. Oracles of destruction stop. Israel is no more castigated; Moses and the law disappear. Babylonian idolatry is mocked - with no prior indication that the exiled Jews were ever tempted by it; if they were all is forgiven. God establishes his reliability and invincibility as redeemer. Mystery rather than power is emphasized as the source of God's holiness, which in Second Isaiah becomes a dialectic with humankind of God is holy because he is *other* than man and unknowable. The new covenant will be based on this mystery rather than the clarity of law. This new emphasis on radical monotheism and its polemics against Babylonian idolatry is not entirely expected. Canaanite religion prior to the conquest was not particularly idolatrous; Baalism was an offensive orgiastic cult. Babylon's ziggurat temple to Marduk came close to being taken as literal divinity, which helped the exiled Jews sharpen their understanding of literal monotheism. The non-gods are swept away in Isaiah 46:5-7's worship me or nothing attitude, which is a radical departure from Middle Eastern attitudes at large and nearly acknowledged in Deuteronomy.

Second Isaiah develops the theme of Israel serving as a "light to the nations," sharing its monotheism with all. God will extend the covenant with Abraham and drop its fertility emphasis. The law will no longer be the instrument for Israel prospering in Canaan; it

will become a good in itself, enlightening the nations. God ordains Israel to a universally acknowledged religious vocation. Foreigners will be invited to observe the Sabbath and make offerings in the temple, but without threatening the priority of Israel. God declares that his inherent unknowability alone accounts for why he at this point opens up to the nations. God sets himself free from the all-too-imprisoning clarity of Deuteronomy. Mystery becomes God's answer to the question underlying all the prophets: Can we begin again? A non-predictable God allows history to begin again. The intoxicating convergence of two ideas in Second Isaiah: 1) Israel's God is the only true god and 2) Cyrus and the Persians were tools for overthrowing Babylon - brought the Jews back from the brink.

Most of the marvels predicted by Isaiah and the other products of a restored Israel failed, but through Judaism's offspring, Christianity and Islam, monotheism spread worldwide. In dealing with the prophets, however, God has come to understand who he has come to be at roughly the mid-point in what would be his human psychosexual development (were he not asexual). Discussion of development in God can leave both religious and secular readers uncomfortable. From Genesis through 2 Kings, God was quite knowable; it is only in Isaiah that he seemingly becomes unknowable for no clear reason. The Tanakh portrays the human-like temporality of experience in God and learning as the minimum necessary condition for a discussion of any character in literature. In Isaiah, God first claims a past-and-future simultaneity that edges towards omniscience and has the blind self-confidence of a sleepwalker. As he begins speaking to the prophets about his unknowability, God begins thinking about how bafflingly different he is from the rival non-gods and from humankind. In Second Isaiah, God discovers he loves humans and immediately cloaks himself in mystery. God speaks for the first time in Isaiah 40:1-2 of comfort his suffering people, suggesting he is vicariously experiencing human pain. God knows all human secrets and ceases waiting to be told what people like Moses or Hannah need or fear. Second Isaiah is responsible for the combination of divine access to the human heart and divine omnipotence and mystery that stands at the core of word "God" in the vernacular languages of the West. Becoming mysterious opens God to tender emotions and lets him take an interest in imagination rather than the foreskin, the person over the collective.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Chapter 7, "Transformation," examines two views of God as portrayed in the Book of Isaiah, "Executioner," and "Holy One." Miles selects Isaiah as the major prophet he will discuss, because this manic touches upon virtually every image that the prophetic brotherhood will ever use. The Book is roughly divided into two halves, the first jumping from vision to vision, violence to peace and one passage frequently contradicts the previous in a way that defies summary. Second Isaiah, by contrast is calm, serene and peaceful. God has discovered through the terrors he allowed his stiff-necked people to endure that he is utterly "other" than the non-gods and humankind. God develops empathy for what he hears while eavesdropping on the human heart and looks to deal with individuals rather than collectives. The Babylonian exile gave the Jews the understandings necessary to put this into words.

Miles observes that if it were music, the Book of Isaiah would be less like Handel's *Messiah* than the second and third movements of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony - "shot through with sudden halts, changes of fait, boltings forward and veerings off than first meet the ear." For the musically literate, this is a useful characterization.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The description of the peaceable kingdom in Isaiah 11 declares "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord / as the waters cover the sea" - referring to a flood of personal knowledge, not theological scholarship. Hebrew verbs of perception lend themselves to emotive force more than their English renderings (know, remember, hear, etc.). *Yd`* ("to know") implies love, even to the extent of sexual intimacy. God is allowing himself to be emotionally transformed from his wrathful, vengeful, remorseful past. Love was not his motive in creating humankind, making a covenant with Abraham, delivering Israel from Egypt, or driving the Canaanites from the land before them. God's "steadfast love" in the Mosaic covenant was a fierce mutual loyalty between liege and vassal rather than any gentler emotion. Even in answering Hannah's prayer, God reveals kind feelings. God took notice of problems and acted, but never reveals knowing what love is until Isaiah 39. Nor did he as a rule take pleasure in anything or anybody. God did find the odor of Noah's burnt sacrifice pleasing (Gen. 8:21); he said he would delight in either blessing or destroying Israel, depending on its behavior (Deut. 28:63 and 30:9) and he was pleased when Solomon asked him for wisdom (1 Kg. 3:10), but the Tanakh prior to Isaiah is otherwise silent on divine joy, happiness, or pleasure. God demands that Israel rejoice before him, but never reciprocates. Even the goodness he saw in his own work at the end of each day of creation brought him no joy. From there to the fall of Jerusalem, there were numerous occasions for him to rejoice, but he took none of them. Joseph, Moses and David showed flickers of possibility for God to break out of his impassivity in something other than flights of rage. The earlier Hebrew writers were careful not to sexualize God as their neighbors would have, although they rather freely anthropomorphized him, they seemed to realized that there was no danger of Israelites misinterpreting references to God's arm, hand, finger, etc. Any reference to sexual desire, however, would derogate him; one yields control to lust. Grief is the wreckage of desire. Joy is always a surprise. Compassion is involuntary. Except perhaps at Sinai, God never loses his temper when moved (frequently) to anger and displeasure.

Had God again wiped out all animals and humans, he would still be the God of the fourth day of creation and as godlike as ever. Only in Second Isaiah does God feel the pain of a man who has beaten his whoring wife and thrown her out of the house. The man's first impulse might be to close his heart and not care what the neighbors say or what becomes of her, but he discovers, after she is gone, how he loved her without realizing it. The man changes unmistakably and invites her back, whether she has changed or not. Their relationship, after the reconciliation, is drastically different. It is no longer a cold arranged marriage; loving pity (or pitying love) has, unexpectedly and surprisingly, entered it. Pity introduces to black-and-white good-and-bad the suspicion of mistake. In Isaiah 40:2, God comes close to admitting that his punishment went too far; In 51:22-23, he suggests that he did not control events sufficiently to prevent unmerited suffering. In Isaiah 54, he vows to make it up to Israel, to make amends. Four solutions to the "problem of evil" are possible: 1) admit the world is immoral, ruled by a fiend; 2)

admit the world is amoral and meaningless, ruled by chance; 3) admit the world is moral, ruled by a just judge; and 4) admit that the suffering of the innocent is neither evil nor meaningless, nor compensated for somehow, but meritorious. God most often speaks of the third option - future recompense or punishment in a future place and time. The Book of Job will explore the fourth option at length. In Isaiah 52, God predicts a suffering servant whose horrible sufferings will redeem the sins of many. The pain that Israel's destruction causes God surprised him into this new formulation just as past experiences with mankind resulted in outcomes he had not intended. In Isaiah 55:8-11, he appears still to be boasting of the inscrutable power of his word, but throughout the Tanakh, God has shown himself very imperfectly self-conscious and in control of the consequences of his words and actions, living his life one stage at a time, unable to foresee his end in his beginning.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The last of three interludes examines the question, "Does God Love?" It develops Miles' arguments on what makes God godlike and whether he can fail. The human authors of the Tanakh after Babylon found it safe to ascribe love to God and the writer of Second Isaiah in particular examines the divine crisis occasioned by the failure of the covenant. Only by dismissing his whoring wife did God realize their arranged marriage had been based on more than rules and regulations. God had loved her, without realizing it and invites her back, changed or not. God sees room for accepting mistakes and, declaring his thoughts to lie beyond the ability of the human mind to understand them, sets out to turn suffering into something positive. For Westerners whose concept of God is largely formed by Second Isaiah, the question of whether God loves seems foolish. Notwithstanding the testimony of evangelical Christians, displaying John 3:16 ("for God so loved the world...") at every televised event, God was not inspired by love prior to Second Isaiah, nor significantly touched by any tender emotion. Nor did his bloody dealings with humankind stem from a lost temper. God created and destroyed impersonally. In talking with Isaiah, he realizes, yes he can and does love.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Dramatists from Shakespeare to Samuel Beckett have used missing or absent characters to hold attention. God opens the curtain himself on the Tanakh and is never completely offstage thus far, but in the Psalms there is a growing sense that Israel is bravely and patiently waiting for God to resume his leading role. There is a continuum: presence, absent presence, present absence and absence. God was an absent presence in the Book of Isaiah — his voice and scent still linger. God becomes a present absence - quite gone and missed - in Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and the Psalms and moves towards complete absence in the Book of Proverbs. God is simply absent - hard even to recall having been there - from Song of Songs and above all Esther. The books considered here and in Chapter 10 are like familiar music mixed with noise. In Psalms, God is spoken of rather than a speaker; in Proverbs, there is so much irrelevant talk that it is largely noise; in Job, one hears divine silence. Each of these books are like witnesses at a trial; one wonders "what will happen next?" The last three Minor Prophets set the stage for the change, by affording God a last chance to express himself directly.

Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi cannot be situated in the Deuteronomic History, but each includes enough context-setting prose to keep them from having the incomprehensible character of an overhead conversation. Haggai is set in the second year of King Darius and he deals with repatriated Judeans who have kept hope in a fuller restoration. Haggai upbraids them for building homes for themselves before rebuilding God's temple. The return to Jerusalem was inglorious; they are barely getting by. God showed indifference to architecture in Samuel, but once Solomon's temple was dedicated, he grew attached to it. God allowed it to be destroyed and now demands it be rebuilt in short order, telling Haggai he will withhold rain until it is complete. Haggai correctly prophesies it that will be grander than the former one, but the interim one put up by the exiles is fairly shabby. Because temple and king are so intimately related, God sends Haggai to the Persian-appointed governor Zerubbabel, to prepare to be anointed, but then decides to have the prophet Zechariah crown the high priest Joshua instead. Zerubbabel and the Davidic line disappear into history. The thrilling prospect of a glorious return to Zion appears hollow.

The Israelites had never gone through the charade of feeding their God; the priests and Levites ate the animals sacrificed to him. At the end of the Book of Malachi, God complains sarcastically about the quality of the animals sacrificed to him (resuming a sentiment in Isaiah 1:11). The requirement of cultic sacrifice was a late development at any rate, from the time of Moses, as a means of policing the covenant, keeping Israel a nation apart. Now, at the end of prophecy as an institution, God and the Judeans both appear hard up. God complains the people are robbing him and for the first time unmistakably refers to himself as female: God is the wife of Israel's youth - the opposite of the imagery in Isaiah. Thus far the Tanakh has accepted as natural the subordination

and disparagement of women; Isaiah used the materialistic daughters of Zion as a sign of judgment to come and condemned the idea of having women rule over the people (Isaiah 3:12). Abimelech asked to be stabbed to death rather than suffer the indignity of being slain by a woman (Judges 9:54). There are a few examples of valiant and benign women, but they are the exception. This begs the question of why El's legendary consort, Asherah and a feminine component in God's character is played down. Deut. 32:18 speaks of the Rock that begot Israel and the God who gave them birth. This makes more sense if it is "the tree" that gives birth (on analogy with Jer. 17:1-2), but this would have been too close to the way god and goddess were portrayed in Canaanite literature - threatening Yahweh's celibacy. Stone, the masculine Canaanite cult object, was acceptable for altars; the pole *(asherah)* was always proscribed, but keeps cropping up alongside. The worst such occasion, King Manasseh's placing a sculpted image of Ashera in the Jerusalem Temple, horrified God and set his determination to Jerusalem (Kg. 21:7-14). Nevertheless, God, after an inward dialog in Gen. 1 about making man "in *our* image," created male and female - a duality. The feminine component was systematically excluded - subtracted - from God as he became the warrior/lawgiver (not that ancient Near Eastern goddesses were particularly tender and gentle). After the Exile, God will become more androgynous, but from Second Isaiah until then, he remains characterologically male, not female, even when speaking of himself metaphorically as wife and mother.

Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi set the stage for Psalms, Proverbs and Job and show a nation disappointed and dejected and a God narrow in perspective and shrill of tone. Both of their identities have been sharply modified by history. Zechariah (particularly 9-14) introduces another phenomenon to come - the apocalypse. An apocalypse is a cryptic revelation of imminent destruction to be followed by a definitive divine intervention at the end of time. The discouraging failure of clear prophecy led to a mysterious coding of predictions. The predictions allow the newly-picky God to issue grander promises and threats that cannot easily be refuted. Isaiah and Ezekiel also encode visions, but God generally felt no need to equivocate through allegory. When he did so, he often decoded it immediately (as in Isaiah 5). In Zechariah, he hides behind his words from a people tired of being let down; prophecy was a mistake that God will not repeat. God also feels free, through apocalypticism, to unleash his destructive side and he remains as disappointed in his people as they are in him.

The 150 prayers that make up the Psalter recapitulate many of the events and issues raised in the preceding 26 books of the Tanakh. The prayers are all spoken in the present tense, suggesting that the sentiments to which they allude are still valid. Many are carefully set in history, but many others are free in time and space. While they refer to many historical moments, they are read at the same literary moment: the present. The prayres are like interviews that evaluate a leader by what obscure people say to him and they reflect a time of peace a century after Malachi, the last prophet and two centuries before Alexander the Great would usher in a new period of extreme violence. The prayers appear to have been sung in the rebuilt Temple. The Psalms concentrate on personal innocence and guilt rather than the collective worldview before the Exile. God is asked for legal relief, as in a courtroom. The Psalmists never apologize for addressing God directly and do not fear to do so - even when guilty (as in Ps. 130); God

is the intimate friend first identified in Second Isaiah, but the knowledge of him is presumed possible - and is prized beyond comparison. God has lost his private thoughts and he makes no long, thoughtful speeches. The Torah does God's speaking for him and it is now a reward rather than a means to obtaining reward. The frequent refrain, "for his steadfast love is forever," reclaims the covenant and extols the law. After the first two psalms, each has a heading that describes the circumstances of its writing, its melody or instrumental accompaniment. The first two serve as a heading for the entire collection. Psalms 1 sings of the law as the individual Jew's vehicle for a personal relationship with God through an intimate, sensuous communing with the text through its sound. Where prophecy had failed, the Mosaic promises and threats had come true; there is no need to talk about prophecy any more. Circumcision, which had fallen out of favor in the prophets, is never mentioned in the Psalms. Psalm 2 envisions nothing short of a world empire led by God's anointed king/messiah. It makes clear that the Psalmists have not abandoned the dream, despite the near-ideal world they inhabit. Nothing that once appeared in God's personality quite disappears and he is capable of thirst for revenged (Ps. 137:8-9). On balance, though, the Psalm reflects a people trusting God and the romance of the law. Law, longevity and stability are linked motifs. A reasonably prosperous family life is the goal of righteousness. God appears to have come to prefer the pious commoner over the Davidic royal. The Jews are now taking delight in the law earlier imposed on them and morality as an idea in the making. The Psalter's division into five parts mirrors the Torah.

God's accommodation to the Gentiles made through the prophets appears to have tamed him somewhat. God never mentions the universal covenant with Noah in speaking to the prophets about the Gentiles. Instead, he looks to extending the Mosaic covenant to them, which will materially enrich Israel alone. The failure of prophecy of a full, glorious return from Exile appears to have made the Jews choose between embracing the Torah as a good in itself, or having no Torah at all. The Psalms celebrate their choice. The fall of impregnable Jerusalem had occasioned a ghastly panic and a near madness over the prospect of the innocent being punished alongside the guilty. This theme, taken up in Jeremiah, is echoed in the Ps. 44 - why would God hide his face from their distress? "Rouse yourself," they plead, echoing Second Isaiah. The sea monster - the dread demonic persona still latent in God - still mixes with his precious thoughts.

In the Book of Proverbs, the accessible God of the Psalms reverts to mystery that works through an allegorical combination of goddess, prophetess and angel named "Lady Wisdom." Proverbs is representative of a wider corpus of secular wisdom literature. God is honored as the creator of a world in which things are expected to go right; when things go wrong, he provides the explanation for the exception to the rule. God is not expected to guarantee the moral order. Humankind's ongoing, common sense efforts to bring life under control are commendable and "the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord." The gist of Proverbs' outlook is: God has his purpose in allowing evil to exist; learn to live with it. God cannot be figured out and life itself is a mystery and not just a mess. There is little scope for God's newfound tenderness. Proverbs broadens and brightens the Torah by discussing such moral issues as character formation and

prudence. It revives the prophetic tradition in the corner-preaching Lady Wisdom, whose message goes little beyond, "If you make a fool of yourself, don't say I didn't warn you."

Lady Wisdom, "the largest eruption of the feminine into the relationship of mankind and God," speaks in her own name about her relationship with God. Despite echoes of Asherah, Wisdom is not a goddess, but the personification of newly autonomous human wisdom, God's metaphorical partner and mankind's mother. Wisdom is as characteristically female as God's is male and they cohabit with no suggestion of a genital relationship. Wisdom claims (8:22-9:6) to be God's first creation, confidant and source of delight, which ancient Near Easterners would easily have accepted. The Bible's only description of the ideal wife occurs in Proverbs (31:10-31) and Wisdom fits the bill as delight-giver and self-reliant manager. Doubtless, marriage to foreign wives who did not threaten the Jewish religion during the Exile introduced to Jewish culture much material expertise of the world. The sexual morality of young men is a frequent topic; in Proverbs 7, the scene is set for a mother observing her erring son through the latticed window of the women's enclosure. Even the loose woman is seen as a fellow human being rather than as a wild beast in heat, as in Jeremiah 2:24. Gone is the Baal/Asherah fertility cult threat that enraged the prophets. Gone too is the power-based commandments of virtuous behavior; the hard-working Wisdom (Pr. 6:6-11) invites the lazy to "go to the ant" for correction. Proverbs 3:18 describes her as "a tree of life" - the ancient imagery of Asherah, but also the symbol of the knowledge of good and bad at the very beginning of time, an event she attended. God wanted humankind to reproduce and provide for their children in an unspoken covenant that he later narrowed in scope to Abraham's family. Lady Wisdom remains the representative of collective humanity, reclaiming the original promise.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Chapter 9, "Restoration," looks at God in the roles of "Wife" (in Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi), "Counselor" (in the Psalms) and "Guarantor" (in Proverbs). Miles opens with a discussion of Samuel Becket's play, *Waiting on Godot,* where the title character never arrives. Its action consists of endless waiting, which is an infallible audience-holding mechanism. Miles observes that Godot is a compound of the English name God and the French diminutive ending, *-ot:* the bilingual Becket shows that the modern human condition is a tragicomic waiting for "Goddie" to show up. God began the Tanakh with a great display of power, but by the time he allowed the nations to sweep away his errant people, he is at best waiting quietly in the wings.

Miles considers these books in terms of "aleatory" music. Usually it is of minor importance whether the reader fully grasps Miles' references to the arts. In this case, however, it is fairly central to the presentation. Aleatory music began in Europe in the early 1950s, as a reaction to the tight compositional demands expected of them. Europeans introduced chance *(alea* means "dice" in Latin) into the order and repetition parts of a composition's performance. The French composer Pierre Boulez used the term to distinguish his work from the indeterminate, chance operations practiced by the American John Cage. Other aleatory composers include the German Karlheinz

Stockhausen and the Poles Witold Lutoslawski and Krzysztof Penderecki. Streaming clips of their music can be found on the Internet, but the power of the image felt by Miles will not be appreciated by anyone for whom this is an unfamiliar genre. Fortunately, Miles continues his argument by referring to "noise" - the electronic static with which most of us are familiar. The "melody" we have come to expect in the Tanakh grows unfamiliar, broken, troubling. One could never know for sure if and when God would explode in violence, but he was reliably present and spoke in an expected way. In different ways, Psalms and Proverbs are radical departures in voice and expectation.

Less crucial to understanding in Chapter 9, are passing references to Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (likening the consideration of a Persian political appointee as messiah to the Don's thinking a peasant maid was the grand lady who inspired his quest); "karma without samsara" (likening Psalms' novel view that God grants justice to the individual rather than through is descendents and without any need for Eastern reincarnation); and a variety of modern thinkers who passed comment on the these books of the Bible.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

The Book of Job has long been a favorite in literary circles and skeptics have often found in it reason for repudiating the Judeo-Christian tradition. Here, it will be examined as the Tanakh's most conscious confrontation with God's destructive or demonic side and its disturbing impression will never be dissipated in the books that follow. Job is a culmination of the Bible's examination of the dark side of God rather than an inauguration of the topic. The main character is not the first dissident in the Bible and his plight does not go beyond the expression of Ps. 44 (and ignores the theological reflections of Second Isaiah). Its solution to the problem of evil does not go beyond Proverbs 16:4. Nothing in Job's speeches, often held to be subversive, has not in one form or another been raised previously in the Tanakh. Job is a Gentile and he has never heard of Moses - indeed, no one in the book even alludes to the history of Israel. Job holds by the sunny folk wisdom of the Book of Proverbs: a good God would not create a world in which an innocent man could suffer for not good reason. Neither he nor his interlocutors appear to have heard the Torah-inspired proviso: unless God mysteriously decrees otherwise. During the long debate, God is `Elohim, the friendly, well-meaning deity; when he rebukes Job from the whirlwind, he is Yahweh, the angry, imperious, specifically-Israelite deity. A Creator/Destroyer God baffles Job initially and then strikes him almost dumb. Not content with Proverbs' statement that when things go wrong, God must have a good reason, the Job-writer demand an explanation and composes a truly blasphemous story about God.

Divine beings attend God's court and one of them, the Adversary *(satan* in Hebrew - the mirror image of Lady Wisdom) wagers he can turn righteous Job against God. God takes the bet and Job loses everyone dear to him; the fiend will not admit defeat and God allows the bet to escalate until Job is reduced to miserable suffering. Three friends then come to "console and comfort" him for seven days and accomplish nothing. Notably, Satan tempts God into demanding a higher morality than that of the Torah or Proverbs: virtue practiced for virtue's sake, without reward. The God of Adam, Noah and Abraham demanded no worship and only minimal obedience; the God of Moses demanded both, but took for granted that these had to be rewarded. Here, God allows the devil to change his thinking and punish Job for no better reason than to prove Job will indeed "fear God for naught." Job's friends defend the orthodox premise that God is just. In his furious rebuttal, God never claims to be just - only to be almighty. Job learns that the Jewish God does not play by human rules and that his unknowability comes perilously close to being an anything goes kind of escape clause; when he turns out to be a gambler, all bets are off. If God can be a deceiver or subject to deceit as in Job, can any of the actions in the Tanakh safely be said to be his actions? If so, his biography must be abandoned as impossible. It is noteworthy that the original wager is simply dropped after two stages; the third stage traditional in fables would have demanded that God boast to Satan about having won (as in Zech. 3:1-5).

Instead, Satan simply vanishes and God rebukes Job from the whirlwind, contending he has nothing to apologize for to Job. In giving Job double compensation, however, it is clear that he recognized he had gone to far (as in Second Isaiah) and implicitly repents. Even God is not spared rebuke for wrong in the Tanakh. Job refuses to repent for offenses he did not commit, as his friends demand; therefore, God must repent. According to the common interpretation of the Book of Job, Job 1) insists on his own righteousness, 2) demands that God explain why he must suffer, 3) consistently trusts that God will vindicate him and 4) *repents of what he has said.* In fact, a close reading of the Hebrew text shows that Job refuses to accept mere physical power as the criterion of moral integrity. God's two-part speech to Job - the last words he will speak in the Tanakh - has ignored a crucial factor and Job uses irony to respond to God's sarcasm. Only when this is not seen can the rhetorical standoff be interpreted as a lopsided victory by God - and then, because God acts as the devil's gaming partner, he is in fact the loser. God brags of his own amoral power with withering sarcasm and towering bravado (a pose never struck elsewhere in the Tanakh); he could have invoked unknowable justice as in Ps. 36 and 98 and accomplished his goal as fully. God does not bother, because his ways have already been too clearly shown and he has something to hide and hides by blustering. God changes the subject and waits to see if his naked, agonized creature will be taken in. The voice from the whirlwind suggests that it is God who speaks, but never states so clearly as he preserves deniability. God demands that Job answer questions not about justice but about power. Even in the flood, God never stooped to wanton personal torture. To get off the hook, he uses unanswerable rhetorical questions to get Job to recant. After 123 verses of divine bluster, Job issues seven brief verses of response. In the first, he defiantly evades the thunderer's demand that he comment on the thunder. Job concedes nothing: How can I answer you when you have the upper hand? In the second statement, Job is defiant and deferential, responding just enough to make it clear he is refusing to respond. The Septuagint translation reads Job 42:26 as an outright recantation and exegetes have generally accepted that conclusion, but in fact Job simply rests his case and wins. The standard Hebrew text read in synagogues includes *ketib* and *qere* marginal notes; the note on Job 42:2 suggests that "thou knowest" be read as "I know," allowing the passage to be understood as an act of contrition by Job. In fact, Job coolly quotes from God's tirades (a faintly insulting thing to do) and then comments ambiguously. Job had consistently demanded that God either vindicate him or convict him of sin; otherwise, God was guilty of injustice. Cornered, God made Job the issue. By refusing to identify himself while speaking from the whirlwind, God might want Job to think it is the devil; he might also be testing him as he did Abraham and we must recall that Abraham never said he was willing to kill Isaac and God called his own bluff rather than seeing the outcome. Job does as Abraham did: goes along with what he must and withholding everything he can. The linchpin of the traditional interpretation reads in the RSV translation: "therefore I despise myself, / and repent in dust and ashes." The Septuagint, the *ketib/qere* annotations and the Christian tradition of contrition all suggest Job caves in, but God has said nothing to change Job's mind and despite his physical agony he has shown himself an orator too great to end the battle so briefly. A better, linguistically valid, translation would be: "Now that my eyes have seen you, / I shudder with sorrow for mortal clay." This brief comment concedes only that human beings die and Job is

ready to die victorious in justice. Job cannot be convinced that "the Lord will do nothing, good or bad" (Zech. 1:12) - the contention of only scoffers, fools and false prophets in the Tanakh. Once God accepts failure in shouting Job down, he atones by doubling Job's original fortune. God is never again the same however: the Devil is a permanent part of his reality and a human being has humbled him successfully. God knows unmistakably that good and bad scandalously coexist within himself. After the Book of Job, God understands his ambiguity and he cannot consider himself innocent, because Job's first family cannot be brought back to life.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Chapter 10, "Confrontation," examines the Book of Job as the climax of the Tanakh. Miles departs from the nearly universal interpretation that Job folds before God's withering argument that no creature can understand his purposes in creation. Synthesizing and expanding upon works by Stephen Mitchell and Edwin M. Good, Miles proposes a translation of the linchpin verses that allows Job to emerge a defiant victor. This chapter is uncharacteristically technical, breezing through the influence of the ancient Greek translation of the Bible, the Septuagint and the *ketib/qere* marginal notations in the Massoritic (received) text that influenced interpretation. Miles insulates the reader from the most technical material by relegating it to an endnote. Nevertheless, the argument requires close and repeated reading, because Miles' conclusion accounts for God's subsequent silence. Throughout the book, Miles offers variant English translations when subtleties in the Hebrew original need to be brought out, but nowhere does he do this with the frequency of Chapter 10. It is essential that the mood and intent are fully appreciated. Compare the King James Version of Job 3:3 ("Let the day perish wherein I was born and the night in which it was laid, there is a man-child conceived") with Stephen Mitchell's rendition, which Miles approvingly quotes: "God damn the day I was born and the night that forced me from the womb."

Miles clarifies the shift between `Elohim and Yahweh in Job by offering an analogy of a discussion about the historical figure of Jesus suddenly shifting to references to Our Lord, a designation restricted to Christian believers. Job and his "friends" - well-meaning, no doubt, but hardly friendly - discuss `Elohim, but then Yahweh steps in, from the midst of the whirlwind, to dash their arguments with the brute power we have seen him exercise before. The gentile Job, who believes in `Elohim as a good and just God, is taken by surprise by Israel's God, with whom he shows no prior acquaintance. Job bests him by refusing to acknowledge that might makes right, refusing to admit he has in any sense merited the terrible punishments inflicted on him. Miles will return to this argument in the Postlude and further clarify his thinking.

Artists and philosophers have been so drawn to the Book of Job and its theme of wanton power and Miles mentions an array of them, including Shakespeare (referring to the pagan King Lear), Rene Descartes, Søren Kierkegaard, Igor Stravinsky (whose *Rite of Spring* he feels captures the whirlwind's surging, crashing power), Archibald MacLeish ("If God is God He is not good. / If God is good He is not God") and Bertrand Russell's contention that creation must be "muddle and accident" or the purpose of a

"fiend." Readers unfamiliar with the references are not held back from understanding Miles' train of thought.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Commentators on the Book of Job remark that God reduced Job to silence, but miss the fact that Job silences God thereafter: the whirlwind speech is the last time God speaks in the Tanakh. The two books of Chronicles will quote some of his earlier speeches; he will be mentioned and even prayed to fervently in Nehemiah, but will never again himself speak. God rebukes Job's erstwhile friends and refrains from treating them vilely only after Job intercedes for them as God asks. Then he restores Job's wealth and falls silent, continuing to be I Am Who I Am. The big loser is Israel, which certainly does not want God to remain silent. Already in Ezekiel 20, God refused to answer the "elders of Israel," and claims that he gave them "laws that were not good and rules by which they could not live" to prove that he is the Lord. The context is child sacrifice to Moloch, condemned in Leviticus (18:21) and seen frequently in 2 Kings as a form of religious apostasy, but how different is that from God's own demand for the sacrifice of Isaac? That taught the lesson that an ethical man must occasionally disobey God in order to pass his demonic test. God acknowledges in Ezekiel 20 that the recessive demonic strand cannot be excised from his character. God seduced Israel into the sins for which he punished them. How can he return to action in the life of Israel?

The Song of Songs, a cycle of poems about young lovers attributed to King Solomon, break the mood of Job. This book never mentions God and alludes to no religious traditions of any kind. Clearly secular in nature, they entered the Hebrew canon as an allegory of the love between the Lord and Israel and on the strength of its royal attribution. The only other love lyrics in the Tanakh are Is. 54:6-8 and Hosea 2:14-15, which both picture God and Israel as a grievously estranged older couple finding their way back to the love of their youth - a far cry from these young lovers. Love is never mentioned in the Book of Job, but why would God not simply dispense with Job rather than argue with him unless he loved him? Instead, he recites a bill of particulars against Job that any jury would regard as grounds for divorce and then Job divorces him - by choosing justice over God - and God agrees he is correct. No tenderness or pleasure is involved in their love story, any more than in the ongoing marriage of God and Israel. Love poetry can accommodate pain, but the Song of Songs has no need to. The young lovers may someday face old age and pain, but are free of it at present. The standard biblical imagery of sleep and awakening is missing from the Song of Songs and Jerusalem's depressed situation is the opposite of its idyllic setting. It cannot be an allegory and in fact, God is absent from the text, having retired without announcement. Where is he? What happened?

The Book of Ruth is also about love and marriage. God is alluded to piously, but is not consulted before the widowed Israelite Naomi advises her daughters-in-law to return to their homeland in Moab. The story is ostensibly set in the days of the judges, so a return home would have required Ruth and Orpah to worship Chemosh after having worshipped the Lord. This is the only instance in the Tanakh where an honest Israelite

makes such a suggestion. Would it offend God? In fact, the Book of Ruth was written after the return from Exile and the Moabites are accepted as a closely related people and the question of divine wrath is moot. The story continues with Ruth and Naomi moving to Bethlehem, where Naomi tells Ruth how to seduce a wealthy male relative, Boaz, into marriage. King David is one of their descendants. The Book of Ruth does not gloss over the difficulties of marriage as Song of Songs does and it shares the shrewdness about the reliability of men found in Proverb's (probably female) author. Men in the Book of Ruth mostly die, leaving the women to fend for themselves. Ruth's seduction of Boaz recalls the action of Lot's two daughters after the destruction of Sodom (resulting in the ancestors of both the Moabites and the Ammonites) but on a much higher moral plane. Its rectitude helps restore the image of Moabite women and remove the onus of intermarriage (still seen in the last prophet, Malachi. In celebrating Boaz's and Ruth's wedding, the people of Bethlehem recall Tamar, another widowed non-Israelite woman who seduced her father-in-law Judah, rather than remain childless. One cannot tell from the bystander status God takes in the Book of Ruth whether his attitudes have also changed on intermarriage or even the universal benignity of human fertility. God is given pro forma credit for good outcomes, but is shown doing nothing.

Newspaper writers experience the transition from absent presence to present absence that occurs when a newsmaker fails to keep an appointment for a press conference. The six books from Song of Songs to Daniel share the reaction of various types of reporters. Lamentations can be imagined as the serious reporter sad that no one is concerned that the president's important message won't be heard. Lamentations is a mini-Psalter lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem. The author, the Elegist, pleads guilty on Israel's behalf. It draws together the imagery of the Suffering Servant in Second Isaiah and the complaint-language of Job. The Elegist juxtaposes an extraordinary sense of loss with an unflinching admission that the loss was merited and a trusting plea for vindication against those whom God used as instruments of the punishment. The Elegist insists on suffering as a Jew, with belief in restoration, but unable to bear God's silence. The Elegist waits, ready to write.

Ecclesiastes draws its name from the Greek translation of *qohelet* "assemblyman" or "assembler" - presumably of human beings or sayings into a book. Ecclesiastes contains sayings on both sides of any number of issues, unsystematically and self-contradictorily. Ecclesiastes is a protophilosopher, a seeker after wisdom turning skeptical about life and traditional wisdom - everything is futile. This seeker has begun challenging the hidden premises of Jewish monotheism, turning towards a quasi-Platonic notion of total divine foreknowledge of an endlessly recurring cycle of events and abandons the Tanakh's intergenerational perspective. Some of his language is reminiscent of Job, but he neither blesses nor curses God; he finds him incomprehensible and hedges his bets. Most exegetes agree that Ecclesiastes ought not to have found its way into the Hebrew canon, even more than Job, it inverts all that has gone before. Ecclesiastes is thoroughly secular and God says nothing to object.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Chapter 11, "Occultation," examines God as "Sleeper" in the Song of Songs, "Bystander" in Ruth, "Recluse" in Lamentations and "Puzzle" in Ecclesiastes. The days of whirlwind bluster are over - as earlier the banner waving charge into battle and the fire-and-cloud legislating at Sinai passed away. Miles mentions Robert Frost's "A Masque of Reason," a ruminative reunion between God and Job as a sequel to the story. Many have followed the impulse to continue and complete the book, but Miles concludes Tanakh was wise to follow John Keats, the English poet of "negative capability," who preferred maintaining "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." Shakespeare, Keats appreciated, could let his characters take the play with them as they go, imposing on the play no more coherence than the characters allow. Through Job, God realizes Satan's devices can take him in and that brute power is his only defense. Not liking what he sees, he retreats into silence, opening the way for the humans he created and tried to teach to flex their intellectual muscles in secular literature. In the Postlude, Miles will show how this in fact saved God's life.

Miles suggests reading the Book of Job, which shows little connection with Israel, as a haggadic midrash on Ezekiel 20. This is a literary form, much practiced in post-biblical Judaism, which uses legend rather than discursive commentary to bring out the meaning of texts.

Continuing his penchant for invoking music and literature to deepen the reader's appreciation for the themes he is developing, Miles mentions composer Arnold Schoenberg's "Transfigured Night," based on verse by a minor German poet, Richard Dehmel. Never does he hang his argument on such references to the extent that those unfamiliar with the reference are stumped.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

The Book of Job is the climax of the Tanakh. All that follows is *dénouement,* the untangling required before a drama can be satisfactorily concluded. The books that follow merely mark time and lull. The biography of God had several beginnings: `Elohim created the world one-way and Yahweh another. The story could have simply begun with Noah, or skipped the flood and begun with Abraham, or even with Moses. There are also multiple endings to the Tanakh and in none of them does God die. God subsides and is incorporated (not incarnated) into the Jewish nation. The Jews take actions and make statements that earlier God would have done. God is still God - and the only God - and they are still mere human beings, but their roles are reversed.

Neither Esther nor Daniel records historical events, but both demonstrate a changing national consciousness in the context of world empires. Esther is portrayed as queen of the Persian Empire and Daniel a courtier to the king of Babylon. Both books take empire for granted and the Jews as an identifiable, vulnerable minority, hated but talented. Their survival depends on willingness to take risks for one another and gain important patrons. Fidelity to the Jewish religion need not always be an element in either Jewish identity or Jewish self-defense.

It is surprising that the Book of Esther entered the canon. God is never mentioned and the Jews' religion is not even a secondary feature of their identity. The Jews are merely an ethnic group. Esther is a Jewish orphan whom the king of Persia, Ahasuerus, decides to marry, replacing his displeasing queen. Esther accepts without compunction, makes no effort to practice her religion even in secret and conceals her origins as a possible handicap. Esther's cousin Mordecai, however, is observant and offends Haman, the new prime minister. Haman convinces the king to annihilate the Jews, who refuse to obey his laws. Mordecai reacts to word of the plot by performing familiar mourning rituals, but not praying to God for his life. In fact, none of the Jews in Persia cry out like their ancestors in Egypt, nor do they seem to expect that he might deliver them. Instead, they rescue themselves by courage and resourcefulness. Mordecai talks Esther into risking her life by interceding with the king and the gamble pays off. The gallows Haman planned for Mordecai claim his life and the Jews are given one-day immunity to wreak vengeance on their enemies. Extended a second day, it claimed 75,000 lives and has been celebrated ever since as the two-day feast of Purim as a kind of Jewish bacchanalia. The Book of Esther is Ecclesiastes put into practice. The Book of Ruth marks the point in the Tanakh, where "Jew" completely replaces "Israel" as the self-designation of a people who still speak Hebrew, are still distinct from other people, but amazingly are without their God. It closely mimics the foundation myth of the nation - genocide averted - so God's absence cannot be incidental.

In the Book of Daniel, God and Israel through intermediaries are together again. God is the acknowledged source of success at the imperial court of Babylon when, the hero

thwarts a genocidal plot. The antagonists in Daniel and Esther receive the punishment they intended for the Jews, but in Daniel is the royal decree that specifically requires the Jews to apostatize and King Nebuchadnezzar confesses that they were saved through the efforts of God. Daniel opens with a scene akin to Joseph's rise to power in Genesis. Daniel and his three friends are more astute than the other attendants at the royal court. Daniel interprets dreams and exalts the again active God extravagantly for the gift (unlike the silent Joseph). God is merely predicting however, with no great purpose in mind as in Egypt. The last six chapters of Daniel have no parallel in Esther. The Jews realize that they are subject to persecution precisely because they are faithful to God under a succession of foreign rulers and seek consolation in apocalyptic writings of the disasters that will face those nations at the end of time. Daniel 7 depicts a succession of inhuman beasts representing temporal gentile empires, then a human - the Jews - whose rule will be eternal. The heavenly court has been fleetingly shown in creation, Isaiah, Micaiah and Job, but rarely has a member of the court taken any action. Daniel 8 introduces the angel Gabriel as the attendant to the Ancient of Days who explains the meaning of the vision, which Daniel is told to keep secret. Daniel reads Jeremiah's predictions about Nebuchadnezzar, makes penance before God for Israel's disobedience and Gabriel flies over to tell Daniel that he is precious to God. Post-exilic Jews reading the Book of Daniel knew, of course, that Jeremiah's prophecies of a "seventy year" exile had failed, so Gabriel reinterprets it to seventy weeks of years - putting it again into the future. It is notable that scripture has taken on a divinatory importance, while God remains inactive and silent. God's Bible is replacing the Bible's God. Gabriel next introduces Michael, who has been appointed to protect the Jews in the coming war in heaven. Gabriel knows the outcome in advance, but claims no control over events, even in God's name, until the very end. Gabriel and Michael are presumably only two of many national princes involved in the war, developing the theme begun by Satan in Job. God goes into retirement as what Daniel calls the "Ancient of Days," old and weary, but not dead. Others will carry on his work.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah resume the narrative broken off at the end of 2 Kings and tell about reconciliation between God and his chosen people. There are striking differences, however: 1) Israel takes the initiative in rebuilding the temple; 2) Judea reemerges as a distinct political unit, supplemented by a wide diaspora; and 3) foreign domination is fully accepted in Jerusalem and socioreligious self-segregation is enforced through endogamy, Sabbath rest and messianic calling. The people God created are now preserving him.

The Book of Ezra opens promisingly when King Cyrus of Persia is inspired by God to authorize a delegation of Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the destroyed temple. God demands no demonstration of his power in this bland exodus. Zerubabbel, Cyrus's appointed governor and Jeshua the priest institute regular sacrifice even before building begins and local opposition swiftly brings work to a halt. Non-Israelite Samaritans, who grew used to worshipping the Lord in the land after the northern conquest in 722 B.C.E., demand to take part, but are rebuffed in terms reminiscent of Joshua's day. The Samaritans take revenge by sending word to Cyrus's successor that the Jews intend sedition and he orders work stopped. Later, prompted by Haggai and Zechariah, the leaders resume work without authorization and the temple's dedication is celebrated

with joy. God has done nothing after rousing Cyrus's spirit in the first place and he also seems to have backed of his ambition to be worshipped by the nations in his temple in Jerusalem. Persia decides the issue. Ezra, "a scribe expert in the Teaching of Moses," is sent to administer the province of Judea. The Torah or the Book of Deuteronomy were most likely written documents by this time, reviewed by King Artaxerxes and subsumed to the law of his empire. God continues to count, but is no longer expected to act. Ezra's long prayer in 9:6-15 is addressed to God, but actually directed past him to Israel as a rhetorical exhortation to action. It includes the demand that the remnant divorce their non-Jewish wives and expel their children. Unquestionably immoral, the punishment is also surprisingly mild by earlier standards. There are no genocidal swords and plagues - nor any suggestion that there should be. Ezra tells the people what benefits they can expect, but raises no punishments for non-compliance as Moses did in Deuteronomy. The people themselves accept this as correction rather than punishment. God is simply referred to deferentially as a silent party. Ezra's edict kept the Jews from being swamped demographically; otherwise monotheism might have spread 500 years before Christianity, but the Jews as a nation would have disappeared. Later Jewish tradition hailed Ezra as a second Moses.

Nehemiah, the last book in the Tanakh that carries the narrative forward, is the only book written almost entirely as a first-person historical narrative. Not even David controlled the flow of event like Nehemiah, who pitches to the King of Persia a limited, short-term project to repair damage done to the walls of Jerusalem. There, he surveys the situation, but does not share his plans with local authorities. Nehemiah drafts a labor force from across the regional and quickly turns the city into a regional citadel. This raises suspicion in the King's local governor, Sanballat, but Nehemiah disclaims any intention of rebellion. Nehemiah 3 reads like the paperwork from a real construction project and when Sanballat puts together a local coalition to slow work, Nehemiah establishes protocols for mustering a quick defense without compromising work. Nehemiah is a natural leader and for all his verbal piety, stands far from the Deuteronomist, Isaiah and Psalmist in putting hope in God rather than his own valor and skill. Nehemiah is happy to attribute success to the Lord and knows the temple rules well enough not to be tricked into an act of sacrilege. Once national security is secured, Nehemiah orders a census to begin regulating domestic affairs in Jerusalem. Nehemiah had no royal commission to govern Judea, but pays no more attention to Persia. Nehemiah orders Ezra to read the "scroll of the Teaching of Moses" from a wooden tower and provided Aramaic translators for those who had lost their Hebrew. The text frightens the people and they celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles for the first time since the days of Joshua. Levites recite a long prayer reciting the national history and ratifying the text just read in the people's name. The common folk then swear an oral oath to observe endogamy, weekly Sabbath, sabbatical year and support for the temple. When the covenant was accepted at Mount Sinai, God demanded massive amounts of sacrificial blood and hovered menacingly over the mountain in cloud and fire. Now he has no response. The written text has become the objectification of his mind; the people prostrate themselves before the scroll with which Ezra blesses them. God no longer needs to speak - and doesn't. In the end, Nehemiah becomes despotic with the people, scalping and flogging transgressors and expects that God will remember that to his credit.

Nehemiah's sermon resurrected the theme of King Solomon as the paradigmatic sinner and his book is followed by the two books of Chronicles. The books begin with nine chapters of genealogies from Adam to the exiles, followed by a recapitulation of Israelite history from the rise of David to the fall of Jerusalem. Chronicles ends - and with them ends the Tanakh - a virtually verbatim quote from the opening words of the Book of Ezra about the return of the Jewish exiles. This suggests that Chronicles, which deals with material earlier than Ezra/Nehemiah, was moved to the end of the canon for an editorial reason: to create the equivalent of a musical round - a composition that can go on forever (like "Three Blind Mice"). Every time the end of the Tanakh is reached, it loops back to Adam at the beginning, David in the middle and Ezra/Nehemiah ad infinitum. However far-fetched this might seem, there must be some explanation for the odd placement of Chronicles, retelling the middle of Israel's story at the end. Through its cycle of religious holidays, Judaism endlessly rehearses its history: the liturgical "next year in Jerusalem" is consistent with this explanation of Tanakh's ending. John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" speaks of an eternally frustrated kiss in the youthful lover's portrait. Where is the "kiss" in Chronicles that keeps God and Israel's frozen story an endlessly recurring one? In King David's last words as he relinquishes his throne to Solomon, he explains that God will not allow a bloody David to build a temple to his name. God then recalls the context of 2 Sam. 7, where God for the first time speaks of himself as a father and adopts Solomon and his dynasty. Although David has drawn up the plans and gathered the building materials, he bows to God's will and paternally entrusts the task to Solomon. It is a moment of familial love, a peaceful abdication remarkably different from the bloody accession story in the books of Kings, where Bathsheba plays the pivotal role. Chronicles then quotes almost verbatim Solomon's dedicatory prayers. The "kiss" is David's parting prayer to God (1 Chron. 29:10-19), which Kings does not record: a portrait of the Israelite nation at the height of its perfection, rather than Daniel's portrayal of a speechless, impassive Ancient of Days, whose final words were spoken to Job from the whirlwind. David's last prayer is God's farewell speech, expressing the desire of the eternal God to be great, powerful, glorious, victorious and majestic, possessing everything in heaven and on earth.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Chapter 12, "Incorporation," looks at God as "Absence" in Esther, "Ancient of Days" in Daniel, "Scroll" in Ezra and Nehemiah and "Perpetual Round" in Chronicles. These books are the Tanakh's denouement, the untangling of the story after its climax in Job. Each of the books could be an end, but the inclusion of Chronicles transforms the Tanakh into a "perpetual round" by referring back to Adam's genealogy and the high point of the saga of Israel, when David turned over power to Solomon, whom God had adopted as his son. Miles calls the last verses of 2 Chronicles a "coda," a musical term designating a concluding section that is formally distinct from the main structure.

Miles breaks the continuity of his discussion of Esther by the aside that The Septuagint translation of Esther refers to God and includes prayers; the difference could be attributed to Greek-speaking Jews in the Western diaspora adding materials or working with a Hebrew original from which references to God were not purged. Miles also notes

that Esther is sometimes joined literarily to the books of Judith and Tobit, which never made it into the Jewish canon, despite their greater piety. Jews and Christians both raised objections to including Esther in their canons, but it was ultimately accepted. The other two books, through the Septuagint, entered the Catholic and Orthodox canons, but were rejected along with the other "apocrypha" by the Reformers.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

The classic Greek tragedies are all versions of the same tragedy, suggesting all human lives are variations of foreordained, determined by a "tragic flaw." We grieve for ourselves through the cathartic spectacle on stage. *Hamlet* is a different kind of tragedy; never does the outcome appear inevitable. Hamlet's flaw would remain a flaw in a variety of other circumstances. The Tanakh is closer in spirit to *Hamlet* than to *Oedipus Rex,* because of its lack of autonomous fate; even silent and inactive, God does not abdicate to Fate, Nature, Cosmos, or Ground of All Being. The Tanakh is entirely character-dominated, as can be seen by parsing out the several personalities fused into God's character. It can be summarized in terms of the "ordinary" myth of calm, benign Eloh, the creator of the physical world; Yah, his impulsive brother and creator of the human race with different motives; the reptilian goddess Mot, who leads the human rebellion and brings down Yah's wrath on them and unites Eloh and Yah to foil Mot's plot to drown everyone.

Generations later, a childless, struggling nomad named Abram offers hospitality to a mysterious, but kindly Magen who promises him help in becoming a mighty nation; Abram goes along and is almost fooled when Mot disguises herself as Eloh to demand the sacrifice of his only son Isaac. When Abram's numerous descendents - calling themselves Israel - find themselves in Egypt, Mot turns Pharaoh against them, enslaves them and threatens to kill their newborn boys. Eloh and Yah hear their groans of oppression and they send the ferocious Sab to the rescue. Sab cuts Mot's watery body in two in order to drown Pharaoh's army. Sab demands Israel's grateful and fear filled service in perpetuity and he leads them back to the land Magen gave to Abram and commands them to exterminate the inhabitants lest they tempt Israel into worshiping another god. Sab promises wealth and power if they obey him and threatens hideous sufferings if they don't. The people try, under Kings David and Solomon, but fail and Sab enlists Babylon and Assyria to destroy them and cast them into exile and slavery. Eloh, Yah, not-quite dead Mot and Sab compete in offering grandiose visions of what will happen next. In the end, Eloh prevails and the king of Persia allows a modest restoration of Israel to Jerusalem.

Sab's law is rediscovered and celebrated as the precious thoughts of a god. Sherah, a goddess of creativity, wisdom and skill makes a brief appearance. Mot disrupts the stability by staging a last desperate attack, tempting Yah to impose great suffering on Job, to see if he is as devout as he seems. Job stands the test by exposing the game and after restoring Job's fortune, Yah retreats into silence. Only Eloh ever shows himself again, briefly, as a silent, distant monarch. The Israelites take control of their own lives, honoring Eloh and Yah in heaven but expecting nothing from them on earth. Sab's laws are codified and entrusted to human custody. They celebrate annually a religious drama centering on the high point of Yah's promise to adopt Solomon as his son and David's

promise to build a temple honoring all the gods and preserving the peace achieved among them.

This polytheistic retelling makes up for the Tanakh's lack of clarity and sense of relative inevitability, but lacks a single, central protagonist. Events dominate, as in the Greek myths and suggest what will be will be. By contrast, in the Tanakh, because of the frighteningly unpredictable God, what is may not be as the Psalmist cries, "Why do you sleep, O Lord?" Religious anxiety fuels literary suspense, particularly in the last third of the Tanakh, where God is not massively or even residually active.

Why does Tanakh begin with its climax and descend from there? Confidence at the time of creation seems to blind God to the consequences of his action and he grows quieter the better he comes to understand the course of history. God begins utterly untransparent to himself, wanting an image because he needs an image, because he has no divine social life. The "God of Heaven" wants also to be God of Earth. No place is *not* his, but no place is *uniquely* his, until Solomon builds him a temple, but even that cannot contain him. Omnipresence is another word for solitude. Self-ignorance has something to do with God's desire to create. God has the power to do so, but does not consider whether he wants the creature to know, love, or serve him. By interaction with the creature, he discovers he wants all three. After creating a self-image, God becomes a sleepwalker who has set in motion the chain of actions described in this book. Once God understands what motivated him at the start, his motivation to continue is undercut and he subsides.

The desire for a self-image carries the potential for tragedy, but the Tanakh is not a tragedy and God does not end in despair. It is more a divine comedy that barely escapes tragedy, because the protagonist ends up alive. Pure, innocent, adoring Job nearly destroys God by turning out to be too perfect an image. Job shows that God amounts to nothing more than raw power and loses interest in him. God never regains interest in himself and he almost cannot go on, but is rescued by the feminine aspect he has worked so hard to suppress. In the Song of Songs, he allows secular humankind to reenter the story, breaking the fatal intensity through physical exuberance and joy. The mood is changed, the subject changed and God's life saved. Ruth solidifies the new mood. God's "precious thoughts" are enshrined in the Psalms and his still-remembered actions are objectified in a written constitution to which the people swear allegiance. Israel is succeeded by world Jewry, still confessing that there is no god but the One God. Nehemiah, who has about him a spark of Lady Wisdom, acts first and reflects later, like God at his most vigorous. Nehemiah is God's comprehensive self-image, a quasi-incarnation of the young Yahweh-`Elohim.

The authors of the latter portions of the Tanakh were chronological contemporaries with the earliest Greek tragedians and their societies had marked material and social commonalities. Nevertheless, the Tanakh resonates more with *Hamlet* than *Oedipus Rex,* because Elizabethan society read the Bible more than it did the Greeks and descended form a medieval society for whom the Bible was its only literature. Unlike non-Western religions, Europe could not pick and choose among many deities; it had only one God to whose credit or blame everything redounded. Like Hamlet, God is

trapped within a contradictory character. God is the divided original whose divided image Western man remains and his restless breathing we still hear in our sleep.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Chapter 13, a postlude entitled "Does God Lose Interest?" reviews the theme that God was unprepared for the outcome of his impulse to create a self-image and withdrew as he came to understand himself through interaction with humankind. Miles frames the discussion in a comparison between the Tanakh and *Oedipus Rex* on the one hand and *Hamlet* on the other. The two great tragedies differ in the inevitability of their protagonists' downfall, in the presence or absence of blind fate. The Tanakh is a tragic comedy because its protagonist, God, survives, albeit reduced to silence. The Bible informed the Western character by filling it with the restless breathing of that God, to whom all credit and blame redound.

As mentioned earlier, the polytheistic summary of the Tanakh offered in the section "Imagining the One God as Many," offers brilliant clarity to the plot of Tanakh by allowing events to take priority over the character of the conflicted divine protagonist.

Characters

God

The protagonist of the Tanakh and the subject of Miles' biography (better: theography) is a complex character redolent with the traits and temperaments of the Semitic deities that monotheistic Judaism could no longer name. The texts sometimes refer to him as `Elohim, a generic referent to godhead but also a personal name. God creates the world and humankind as his self-image, male and female, with no strings attached; he wants only that they reproduce and prosper. God destroys the first defective attempt with a clear purpose to enter a covenant with the remnant he allows to survive. Yahweh, by contrast, creates a single male whom he restricts from knowledge of good and bad; he curses him (and the woman he creates as an afterthought from Adam's rib) and eventually grows so angry at his descendants that he wishes he had never created them and wipes them out in the flood. Yahweh's overwhelming concern is controlling human reproduction. The characters of `Elohim and Yahweh merge into the single figure of God: an enormous power whose actions and moods cannot be reliably anticipated. God retains traits of Baal and Asherah, manifesting them from time to time and studiously battling those who choose to follow the two false-gods directly. By dealing with humankind, this God gradually comes to understand what he intended in creating a self-image and the repercussions of claiming a portion of humankind as a special covenant partner. God must care for and organize them (Israel) and refrain from destroying them when they prove stiff-necked and rebellious. God discovers he wants to be loved, served and worshipped and he subdues his feminine side (seen in the initial inner dialog contemplating creation), only late allowing glimpses to emerge in loving tenderness and celebration of secular life. God is gradually domesticated and pacified, but remains always a lethal threat. Meeting his self-image fully in Job, he retreats to silence and inaction, allowing the processes he set in motion - law, psalmody and liturgy - to keep him alive as the Jews' one God.

Abraham

The nomad whom God chose to be the father of many nations and of Israel in particular. God repeats his promise six times before making good, gradually revealing his intentions and conditions for establishing a covenant (circumcision). Abraham plays silently along with God's demand that he sacrifice his young son Isaac, but is spared having to decide whether or not to obey God's immoral order.

Moses

The stuttering Israelite who escapes Pharaoh's order to kill all newborn Hebrew babies, is raised in the Egyptian court and flees to the desert when it is discovered he killed an Egyptian who was maltreating a fellow Hebrew. At the foot of Mount Sinai, God appears

to him in a burning bush and commissions him to return to Egypt and lead Israel out after humiliating Pharaoh, whom God will not allow to act in his people's best interests and let the foreigners go. Again, at Mount Sinai, Moses receives God's law, punishes rebels and establishes a cult and priesthood. Abraham is not allowed to enter Canaan because of a minor verbal slip-up in the desert. Abraham twice prevents God from destroying the people in his anger and becomes the face of Israel before God, God's face-to-face friend. Abraham's picture emerges most fully in the Book of Deuteronomy.

Asherah

The warlike consort of the Canaanite god Baal. Asherah's cult, signified in trees and poles, was sharply opposed in Israel, limiting the ability of God to express the feminine aspect in his character.

Baal

The Canaanite god of war and fertility, a mountain/volcano deity of raw power, who can be seen in God's actions on Mount Sinai. Baal's cultic symbol was the rock, which posed little enough threat that stone altars were allowable in Israel. The orgiastic cult however, was persecuted systematically, but ended up attracting enough followers that Israel had to be destroyed as Deut. 28 demanded.

Daniel

A Jewish exile who rises to importance in the Babylonian court and uses his Joseph-like gift of dream interpretation to foil a plot to exterminate his people. The second half of the Book of Daniel contains visions of a silent, withdrawn Ancient of Days, who delegates to Gabriel and Michael power to wage the war in heaven that will inaugurate the last days.

David

The rebellious, adventuresome young Israelite whom God chooses over Saul to serve as monarch. God is attracted to David's wild, scantily clad dance before his sacred ark and for the first time expresses love for a human. David's hands are too bloody to be allowed to build a temple in Jerusalem for God and the task is given to his son Solomon, whom God announces he will adopt as his own. David's tale is most blighted by his seduction of Bathsheba and the murder of her soldier husband.

Elijah

The prophet who stood up for God against Queen Jezebel and the prophets of Baal. Forced to flee for his life to Mount Horeb (Sinai), he perceives God in a light breeze and is sent to inaugurate God's international plans. Elijah's mission is never completed, as

he is taken up bodily into heaven aboard a flaming chariot. Elijah's annointed assistant, Elisha, succeeds him.

Esther

A Jewish exile who becomes Queen of Babylon and uses her position to foil plans to destroy her people. The Book of Esther contains no references to God or religion.

Ezra

The post-exilic priest charged with organizing the community that returns to Jerusalem, rebuilds the temple and recommences liturgical worship. Ezra reads the written Law and blesses the people with the scrolls. Ezra's demands that Jews abandon their foreign wives and children prevents their ethnic dilution and postpones the spread of monotheism by 500 years and he is hailed by the Jews as a Second Moses.

Isaiah

The manic prophet during the time of the kings of Israel and Judah who first proposed that God might not delight in the sacrifices he had commanded and wanted to incorporate the nations into his covenant with Israel. Isaiah's ministry is inaugurated by a vision of God enthroned amidst cherubs and attended by a seraph who purifies the prophet. The first half of the Book of Isaiah is self-contradicting and wild with imagery and defies summary. Second Isaiah, by comparison, looks to a tranquil reign of justice, inaugurated by a Suffering Servant.

Jacob

Abraham's grandson, twin brother of Esau and father of the twelve tribes of Israel - the new name that God gave him. Jacob was the favorite of his mother Rebekkah, who helped him through trickery twice outmaneuver his brother to obtain the birthright and blessing that by right belonged to Esau.

Joseph

Abraham's great grandson, with whom God forms his first strong personal attachment. The favorite and youngest son of Jacob (also known as Israel), Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt by his eleven jealous brothers and there prospers through his God-given ability to divine dreams, becoming the Pharaoh's trusted right-hand man. Jacob saves his family from starvation during a great famine and reveals a depth of compassion and forgiveness. Jacob believes in God but never calls upon him for help. After Joseph's death, the Israelites multiply more rapidly than the Egyptians and, becoming a threat, are enslaved and maltreated.

Joshua

Moses' zealous lieutenant during the Exodus and successor as warlord leading Israel during the invasion and subjection of Canaan.

Nathan

The prophet whom God sent to guide David and, in particular, to subtly reprimand him for his behavior toward Bathsheba and her husband Uriah.

Nehemiah

The self-appointed governor of Judea, who obtains a permit from the King of Persia to repair the walls of Jerusalem, but as a born leader, transforms the project into a fortification of the citadel. In old age he becomes fanatic and cruel, while remaining foremost a doer - a perfect image of the young God.

Noah

The righteous man whom God chose to save representatives of the animal kingdom and his family from the flood.

Ruth

A pious Moabite woman who chose to remain with her widowed mother-in-law, moves to Bethlehem, marries and becomes an ancestor of King David. Ruth helps restore the dark image of Moabite women and justify mixed marriages.

Samuel

The early prophet whose mother dedicated him to the service of God from birth. God sent him to anoint David king of Israel as a replacement for Saul.

Saul

The moody, troubled first king of Israel whom God chose to replace by David. Saul's son Jonathan was David's best friend. The battlefield deaths were mourned by David without reference to God.

Solomon

David's son and chosen successor as king of united Israel and the builder of the first temple in Jerusalem. Solomon's reign is the high-point of Israel's prosperity and power. God adopts him as his own son and demands that this relationship be renewed in every generation. Solomon maintains an enormous harem and his foreign wives lead him in temptation to worship their gods. Solomon and his sons - and their rivals for monarchy after eleven tribes rebel against Judah - apostatize to the point that God can bear it no longer and allows Assyria and Babylon to lay waste to the land and carry off the people into exile. Solomon is alleged to have written the Song of Songs, a secular love poem which entered the Tanakh partly on his presumed authorship.

Objects/Places

Jerusalem

The Jebusite fortress that David conquered and turned into the capital of his united monarchy. It occupied a strategic position in the highlands and was easily fortified and defended. There, David's son Solomon built a magnificent permanent temple to the Lord, which was torn down by the Babylonians in 632 B.C.E. after a long and bloody siege. The Persians allowed a less grand replacement to be built and Nehemiah fortified the city walls to form a defensible citadel. "Next year in Jerusalem" became the hope of the Jews. The city later became sacred to Christians and Muslims as well and remains far from realizing its etymology as a place of "salem" — peace.

Mount Sinai

The mountain in western Egypt (otherwise known as Mount Horeb) where God first appeared to Moses in a burning bush and where he revealed to him and the freed people of Israel the Law of the Covenant. Later, the prophet Elijah sought refuge there and recognized God not in any violent manifestations of nature, but in a small breeze.

Shechem

The historic town where Abraham first visited when he entered The Land, where Jacob bought property, where Israel's first sacred genocide was performed to avenge the rape of Dinah, where Joseph was kidnapped to Egypt and where the ritual blessings and curses were read at Moses' command.

Themes

Covenant

A covenant is a legal binding of two parties, not necessarily equals and a description of the blessings and curses that attend it. God created no explicit covenant with Adam at creation, asking only that he be fruitful and multiply. After the flood, God covenanted with Noah on behalf of his future offspring never to destroy the earth again and requiring that humankind refrain from blood. God covenanted again with Abraham in a lengthy process, promising him heirs uncountable; the sign of the covenant was circumcision - an acknowledgement that God controls reproduction. God's final covenant in the Tanakh is with Moses on behalf of the people of Israel. It is contracted in a fiery cloud and requires that Israel obey not only the universally applicable Ten Commandments, but also the highly detailed laws in the Book of the Covenant, ritually channeled through the blood sacrifices mediated by the priesthood and Levites. Deut. 28 lists the blessings Israel can expect for covenant loyalty and a much longer, more horrifying list of curses it can expect if it apostatizes. God is cornered by the covenant that he cannot change and has to find other means of maintaining contact with the remnants of Israel and mankind at large.

Image

God's motivation for creating humankind was to have the relief from the radical isolation that monotheism imposes on him. The image necessarily includes the ability to make further copies through biological reproduction. This grants a degree of autonomy that was not comfortable for the original creator and much of the covenant with Abraham and, through the Law of Moses, the Israelites, deals with controlling this natural process.

Suffering

God is a destroyer. After the fall, he decrees that males will earn their bread by suffering and women bear children in agony. God sends a flood to wipe out virtually everything that breathes. God collectively punishes an entire region for the sins of a few in Sodom and he withholds from Abraham the fruits of his oft-repeated promise of a son and then demands he be sacrificed to him. God is pleased by the odor of massive animal sacrifices in the desert tent and Jerusalem temple. God not only allows, but leads genocide in Egypt and Canaan. God not only allows, but orders Assyria and Babylon to fall upon Israel, reduce it to starvation and cannibalism, then drag off the survivors to a life of slavery. Talking with the prophet Isaiah, God understands the injustice of collective punishment and proposes that there will come a Suffering Servant who will take away the people's sins and reconcile them to him. This theme of retribution spreads in Exile and beyond and is put to the extreme test in the case of Job, whom

God allows to be viciously punished on a wager with Satan. Job cannot believe that a good God would allow this and refuses to be shouted down. After the Exile, the Jews would look upon suffering as meritorious.

Style

Point of View

God: a Biography is written in the third-person as befits an analysis of the Bible as literature.

Setting

God: a Biography is set in the ancient Middle East, covering the sweep of history and myth covered in the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh), from the creation of the world through roughly 500 B.C.E.

Language and Meaning

God: a Biography is a passionate, erudite scholarly study of the Hebrew scriptures as a literary biography of God. It selects for discussion passages that show God developing self-awareness through the outcome of his interaction with the creatures he created in his image and likeness and the one nation he chose for a special relationship - Israel. Miles brings in historical criticism and theological scholarship only tangentially, to help ground his unique point of view. After early establishing his basic themes, he refers back to them frequently, which helps solidify them in the reader's mind and a gradual deepening of their meaning. Miles includes numerous short and extended quotations from the Hebrew scriptures as the basis for ongoing narration (neither commentary or criticism in the traditional sense), usually from the Jewish Publication Society's translation, but frequently comparing other English versions to bring out complexity of obtuse Hebrew passages.

Structure

God: a Biography is divided into thirteen sections that examine how God understands himself and behaves from the moment he creates the world until he retires to his heavenly throne as the Ancient of Days, leaving Judaism to make do with the legacy he has given them in the scriptures and annual liturgical celebrations. It begins with a Keynote, "The Image and the Original" and a Prelude that asks "Can God's Life Be Written" - obviously answered, yes, then proceeds to follow the order of the Hebrew canon of scripture (outlined, conveniently on pgs. 411-412): *Torah:* the Five Books of Moses; Nebi´im: the Prophets and *Ketubim:* the Writings. Jews refer to their scriptures as "Tanakh" from the three divisions' acronym. Miles selects key passages from each book for discussion, with several interludes raising philosophical questions critical to the next major division of the canon. The Postlude, "Does God Lose Interest?" recapitulates his argument by reference to polytheism, Greek tragedy and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Quotes

"The servant's instruction to his master's God are remarkably detailed. No one, to this point in the Lord God's story, has come remotely this close to bossing the Lord around. The servant is polite in his dealings with the Lord, yet he does not blush to give him instructions. It is as if he imagines himself to be dealing with a different kind of being than the august and imperious one we have seen in action with Abraham, the one who deals in vast territories and aeons of time and who, when offended, sends down fire and brimstone from the sky." Chapter 2, pg. 62.

"Fatherhood as a metaphor extends God's language about himself and enables him to escape from the dilemma in which his covenant with Israel has placed him. He cannot do otherwise than inflict the punishments he has sworn to inflict. But then what? Fatherhood is the beginning of an answer to that question. God cannot change the covenant, but he can change himself." Chapter 5, pg. 172.

"What makes the Tanakh a work of literary art is precisely the way it turns the religious experience of a people into a character, the Lord God and its historical experience into a plot. Such a transformation could never come about as a purely unconscious process, some kind of involuntary abreaction. It requires the exercise of an aggressively creative intelligence." Chapter 6, pg. 190.

"In the synthesis of biblical conceptions of God that defines the word God and its equivalents in all the Western languages, a miraculous benignity of this sort may seem to have been eternally in place, but it was not: It has a beginning and this is the point where it begins." Chapter 7, pg. 213.

"Some readers may feel uncomfortable with talk of development in God. Religious readers may object that the categories of human psychosexual development are blasphemous when applied to him: God is eternal, unchanging, beyond all human knowing; don't try to shrink him to the size of a therapist's couch! And even secular readers may wonder whether the categories of literary character analysis are not straining past the breaking point when they are applied to him." Chapter 7, pg. 232.

"The alternative path to coherence, not to minimize the difficulty, is to proceed on the assumption that these messages do all come from the same character but then to infer from the contradictions that the character must be in distress." Chapter 7, pgs. 195-196.

"Classical Hebrew has abundant resources for the expression of emotion and this passage declines to draw on them. It is no exaggeration to say that, to judge from the entire text of the Bible from Genesis I through Isaiah 39, the Lord does not know what love is. Equally striking, if not more so, God takes no pleasure in anything or anybody." Chapter 8,

"We may perhaps distinguish a spectrum: presence, absent presence, present absence, absence. Very roughly, presence is what a man senses when he is in a room with a

woman and directly aware of her. Absent presence is what he senses when she has just left but the sound of her voice, the scent of her body, still linger in the air. Present absence is what he senses when she is gone, quite gone, but he misses her. Absence is what he senses when he must struggle to recall if he ever knew her." Chapter 9, pg. 253.

"Prophecy is a mistake the Lord will not make twice.

"Of equal importance, however, alongside God's tendency to conceal his intentions is his tendency to linger over the destructive rather than the restorative aspects of the great events to come." Chapter 9, pg. 271.

"Secular, contemporary reformulations tend to make impersonal what Proverbs makes personal. Thus, for example, 'Into each life some rain must fall' or such uglier, more recent versions as 'Life's a bitch and then you die' or 'Shit happens.' But these actually fall short as reformulations of Proverbs 16:4 because they are in no way confessions that life exceeds the speaker's understanding." Chapter 9, pg. 292.

Topics for Discussion

How difficult do you find setting aside your prejudices to go along with Miles' proposal to write a biography of God?

How do `Elohim and Yahweh differ? How are they the same?

How do Baal and Yahweh differ? How are they the same?

How does the serpent figure in the Tanahkh's telling of creation and flood? How does this differ from Babylonian versions?

Could God have killed off stiff-necked Israel and started afresh with Moses? What might have then happened?

Why was circumcision so important to God?

How did God's views on sacrifice change over time?

How does Joseph compare with and differ from Daniel?

Why was Asherah so much more of a threat to Israel (and God) than Baal?

How does Elijah's vision of God differ from Moses? What does the difference mean?

How does Lady Wisdom save God's life?

How do the Psalms and Proverbs differ?

Does Miles convince you that Job wins out over God? How?

Does Miles convince you that Chronicles sets up a round? How?

Does Miles's polytheistic summary of the Tanakh help clarify this book?