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# Is this your idea of a good time, God: discovering yourself in biblical stories

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Göttingen, had renounced the Christian faith (606). In some ways that announcement seemed to underscore the concern that Childs, McGrath, and the others addressed in this little book, that is, that we of the church are the ones who interpret the Bible, not necessarily the academics, whose faith commitment may at times be in short supply. Many years ago, from researching my own STM thesis, I recall the comment of Ivan Engnell of the Uppsala School of Old Testament research that it is better to go with tradition than against it. How true this is!

To do justice to this little book with its several essays is impossible. One essay I should mention in addition to McGrath's is by one of its editors, Robert Jenson. As one might expect from Jenson there is a good sense of the importance of liturgy, preaching, and devotion in coming to understand the Scriptures. Jenson also stressed that it is at the parish level, not the academic, where ultimately the authority of Scripture will be maintained or undercut.

While not agreeing with all the negative comments the authors made about others and their views, I found this a stimulating and informative book, one well worth reading and having in one's own or in a church's library.

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## **Is This Your Idea of a Good Time, God?: Discovering Yourself in Biblical Stories**

Ralph Milton

Illustrated by Richard Caemmerer, Jr.

Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books, 1995

192 pages, \$22.50 Softcover

One of the strengths of biblical interpretation and preaching in the folk tradition, especially among the heirs of the African folk tradition, is the ability to move in and out of the biblical narratives, freely identifying with the characters and situations therein, without pausing to worry about the various distances of time and space. A folk preacher can talk about Jeremiah as though the prophet were preaching in the next county, and about Noah so as to make you peek out to check the sky. Ralph Milton's book is an attempt, by a mainline Protestant author, to model and encourage such folk-style biblical interpretation. Milton re-imagines the stories, or the stories behind the stories, of 23 biblical characters in order, as the subtitle puts it, to help us find ourselves in those stories by finding the characters to be our brothers

and sisters.

What makes this program necessary, in Milton's estimation, is that the Bible, at least in mainline Protestantism, has been purloined from the laity by two villains (he freely admits that they are straw villains). The one is the historical critical method whose intricacies and demands crush the enthusiasm of all but the most persistent rationalists; the other is fundamentalism whose insistence on literal readings and orthodox interpretations leaves us having to believe things "we know ain't so". If the historical critical method represents the "rational" approach, and worst-case fundamentalism represents the "irrational" approach, then Milton advocates the "nonrational" approach wherein anyone can pick up the Bible, read, and make sense of the characters and narratives by filtering them through the lens of one's own life experience. Milton encourages readers to stop worrying about "getting it wrong", enter into the text with imagination; use the right side of the brain; and reflect on what is true for you. The historical precedent for this approach Milton finds in *aggadah*; the playful expositions and imaginings of Jewish teachers who imagined and created the circumstances, frames of mind, untold stories behind the stories, and the motives of the characters in the biblical narratives.

The format is simple. After a brief introduction of the character, there is a paraphrase of a short portion of the biblical text that sets the scene for the author's creative meditation. Milton then explains what motivated his musings, then follows some form of creative exploration of the character — sometimes a creative re-telling, sometimes a poem, sometimes a fictional event which lies behind the story. I would prefer that Milton give his explanations after the creative pieces; as it is they cast too broad a shadow over his work. They are helpful though in helping the reader understand how it is that he or she might enter "nonrationally" into the biblical stories.

In some ways it violates the nature of the book to critique Milton's own creative imaginings. He admits that sometimes even he cannot see how he got from the biblical narrative to the creative piece. In general, however, I found that his retellings failed to touch deeply the pain and experience of my life. He often backs off, or settles for safety (e.g., he chooses a dialect for Jeremiah which takes the edge off his despair and anger). He also uses a few of his pieces to press political agendas (e.g., sexual orientation in the story of Jonathan; domestic violence in the story of Tamar) in a way that seems forced. He also, in his introduction, flirts with questions of an open canon, and a hermeneutic that could accept that even if the Bible is totally "fictional" it might yet be totally "true".

Milton does model an appropriate use of humor, and is sometimes quite daring. For example he suggests that the Old Testament Joseph does not

really believe or mean that "God meant it for good". In retelling the story of Moses and the burning bush, he imagines that it is Zipporah who plants the concept of monotheism in Moses' head. We should also appreciate that Milton models for us the importance of painting vivid pictures, or, as Paul S. Wilson puts it, of "making movies". We need more such invitations and modeling of making biblical stories come alive.

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### **Newman and Conversion**

Ian Ker, editor

University of Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 1997  
153 pages, \$18.00 US Paperback

Celebrating the 150th anniversary of Newman's reception into the Roman Catholic faith in 1845, this volume consists of papers by the experts: Ian Ker, Sheridan Gilley, Avery Dulles, Ronald Begley, John Macquarrie, Cyril Barrett, Aidan Nichols and Terrence Merrigan. The papers were given August 1995 at an International Conference at Newman's own Oxford college, Oriel. They are not for everyone. Newman's ideas do not meet and convince us readily. We have to meet them. To do so, we must bridge the distance from unfaith to faith, and from Protestantism to Catholicism. The distance is greater for those reared in anti-Roman prejudices.

Newman, too, once travelled that distance. His crossing over took time, commitment, education and personal influence. "Great acts take time," he said. Most of us think of conversion as an important moment in an individual's life; and Newman experienced such a moment as an adolescent. Later he challenged such a *momentous* conversion as only a "notional assent" to religious truth, a contemplation of a personal experience. His first "real" conversion took twelve years to mature, and when it came it involved his whole person. It demanded commitment and a regulation of his life to new principles (95).

Newman emphasized the element of "time" in the conversion experience. Conversion was the result of the mind ever seeking and gradually becoming educated in religious knowledge. In *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, he spoke of "cumulative reasoning" involved in religious knowledge. Accumulating "informal inferences", the mind gathers knowledge about God whom it is actively and positively seeking. Also, "true