

Jordan Peterson Wrestles With God

Wall Street Journal, Page A15, HOUSES OF WORSHIP By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, Dec. 6, 2024

“Wrestling With God,” Jordan Peterson’s latest book, is an unusual best seller: It is a tome dedicated to the study of Scripture. In a wide-ranging interview last week, Mr. Peterson told me, “The book that you have is one-third of what I wrote.” When I laughed and said I was envisioning his editor receiving a 1,500-page draft, he responded: “That’s actually what happened.”

More striking than the book’s success is the intellectual journey of its author. Mr. Peterson, a Canadian psychologist, tells me he was a “casual attendee” at a church whose denomination has since been “absolutely laid waste” by the trends of postmodernity. When he was unimpressed as a teenager with a clergyman’s inability to reconcile Scripture and science, he stopped going to services.

Having left religion behind, Mr. Peterson studied psychology thanks to his “obsession with totalitarianism and malevolence.” In a striking way, his interest in the nature of evil led him back to faith. As an adult, he “stopped believing in God but . . . started to believe in Satan.” “The problem with believing in Satan,” he says, is that “you end up stuck with God again.” His horror at evil provided a mirror that revealed the deep truths of Scripture, whose celebration of man as created in God’s image, Mr. Peterson writes, is “perhaps the greatest idea ever revealed.” He adds that a “lack of that belief or faith” destroys relationships and political societies, leaving us with “the true hell that they far too often become.”

Mr. Peterson’s understanding of the Bible isn’t the same as mine, which considers every word in the stories of Abraham and Moses to be a divinely dictated description of what happened. He casts the Exodus story as a combination of poetic and mythological elements, as well as descriptions of events that “likely” occurred. At the same time, he sees “no reason to disbelieve” in its central figures and asserted that their stories “delt into the essence of people who actually lived.”

Our discussion of Abraham raised one of my disagreements with the book—Mr. Peterson’s description of the patriarch’s starting out his journey as a morally flawed “everyman.” There is no question that to learn from biblical figures, they must in some way be like us. But surely a flawed everyman doesn’t give up wealth and status in the Fertile Crescent and move to a relative backwater to proclaim the word of God at his command.

Mr. Peterson conceded the point but stressed that he wished to emphasize the grandeur of Abraham’s story, the “archetypal individual who is on the right path,” a father whose life offers the ultimate rejoinder to Richard Dawkins’s notion of “the selfish gene.” In Abraham

we find someone who wished to transform fatherhood into a source of generous love and moral achievement.

This is surely right. “For I have known him,” God says of Abraham, “so that he will command his children and household after him, . . . to do righteousness and justice.” Much of contemporary culture denies the unique dignity of man and the grandeur of fatherhood. Large families have been denounced as enemies of conservation, the implications of which many haven’t grappled with seriously.

One of Mr. Peterson’s most creative chapters concerns Jo nah, who is scolded by God when he hopes for the destruction of the sinful city of Nineveh even as he loves the tree that offers him shade. For Mr. Peterson, this reveals a temptation that was found in the ancient world, as well as our own. “To put the natural world above mankind in the hierarchy of ultimate value,” he writes, “is to regress to the worship of Baal.” Such an approach denigrates “both the God Who stands outside nature, and humanity itself.”

The moral implications are dire when we forget that humans are endowed with divine like dignity. “How,” Mr. Peterson reflects in the book, “could hell not appear, and prevail, when the cart is thus put before the horse?” The Bible, he insists, offers a vision that “is more real than power; more real than impulse, desire, wish or whim.” It remains the central offer “of redemption and atonement to those who are lost, the foundation of the rights that make free countries both free and desirable, and the spirit of all voluntary and productive relationship.”

We live in an age of profound biblical ignorance. Last year, an episode of “Jeopardy!” featured a clue that only decades ago nearly everyone could have answered: “This Bible book gives us the line ‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.’ ” All three contestants stared blankly until the buzzer sounded.

Mr. Peterson thus offers an important insight: A culture that forgets biblical teaching not only loses its own identity; it is in danger of becoming a hell. As such, whatever disagreements the biblically learned might have with his insightful work, all can agree that it is an unalloyed good that a book about the Bible could be so widely read.

Rabbi Soloveichik is director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University and rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York.