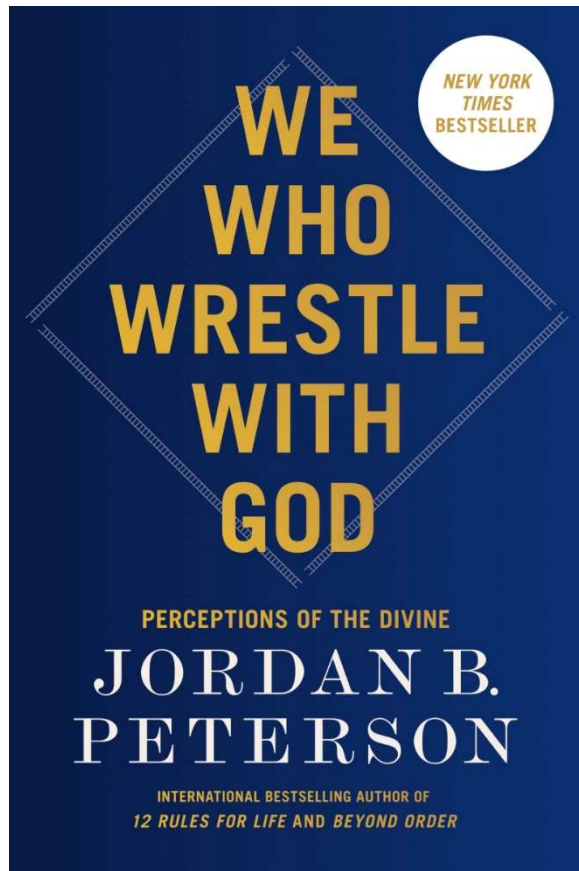


‘We Who Wrestle with God’ interesting for those in philosophy, religion, creative writing

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“We Who Wrestle with God: Perceptions of the Divine” by Jordan B. Peterson. New York, NY: Portfolio: An Imprint of Penguin Random House, 2024, 576 pages, \$35.00 (hardcover).



“The landscape of the fictional is the world of good and evil – the world of value, with its pinnacle ever receding into the promised land itself, and the eternal pit of abysmal and infinite suffering occupying the lowest of possible places,” Jordan B. Peterson opines near the beginning of “We Who Wrestle with God: Perceptions of the Divine,” his latest New York Times bestseller that delves into an aspect of our lives many identify as the core of their existence. “The biblical stories illuminate the eternal path forward up the holy mountain to the heavenly city, while simultaneously warning of the apocalyptic dangers lurking in the deviant, the marginal, the monstrous, the sinful, the unholy, the serpentine, and the positively demonic.”

“God, in this formulation, is the spirit that leads up,” he continues. “Man is the being who struggles with that spirit with every decision, because a decision is a matter of prioritization; with every glance, as every glance is a sacrifice of possibility toward some destination and away from all others. At every moment of consciousness, we are fated to wrestle with God.”

So begins a sprawling – and sometimes rambling – re-imagining of the story of the still-evolving relationship

between God and humanity. What I found fascinating, as well as oddly compelling, in Peterson’s version was the realization after the first few pages that, despite its somewhat suggestive title, this is not a “religious” book, at least not in the traditional sense. The author does not seem interested in the conventional, chronological interpretation of Scripture that characterizes most efforts in this particular genre. Even though I was familiar with most of the characters that populate this tome (I have my upbringing and parents to thank for that), they often seemed vaguely unfamiliar; occupants of an alternate universe that had been specifically created to fulfill Peterson’s overarching yet obscure philosophical and literary goals. Although his prose held my attention, it was often more a matter of trying to figure out where he was going as opposed to what he was saying, if that makes any sense.

Although “We Who Wrestle with God” was obviously intended for a general audience, those familiar with Peterson’s views on the major issues of the modern era will perhaps be better equipped to translate the words on the page into a more coherent thesis about how we should define and evaluate the relationship each of us has with the Creator. Biblical scholars will no doubt be better able to dissect the more subtle points he continually makes throughout the narrative. For example, in various passages he quotes from the King James Version, the Literal Standard Version, the New International Version and the Amplified Bible. But I didn’t get the impression he is trying to engage in serious academic scholarship. Instead of being enlightened, the reader is often left with more questions than answers at the conclusion of each major section.

Peterson has two bachelor's degrees, one in political science (1982) and one in psychology (1984) from the University of Alberta; he later earned his PhD in clinical psychology from McGill University (1991). After researching and teaching at Harvard University, he returned to Canada in 1998 and became a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto. In 1999, he published his first book, "Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief," which became the basis for many of his subsequent lectures. His other books include "12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos," in 2018; "Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life," in 2021, and "An ABC of Childhood Tragedy," in 2022. Those who follow social media know that he is a frequent contributor to many platforms.

"We Who Wrestle with God" is one of the more extensively researched books I have had occasion to read in recent memory, with 37 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the foreshadowing, nine formal chapters and conclusion that form the main text. Each chapter begins with thought-provoking artwork intended to capture the spirit of what the reader is about to confront. You can get a pretty good sense of the flavor of the manuscript by reflecting upon the names of the various chapters: "In the Beginning," "Adam, Eve, Pride, Self-Consciousness, and the Fall," "Cain, Abel, and Sacrifice," "Noah: God as the Call to Prepare," "The Tower of Babel: God Versus Tyranny and Pride," "Abraham: God as Spirited Call to Adventure," "Moses I: God as Dreadful Spirit of Freedom," "Moses II: Hedonism and Infantile Temptation," and "Jonah and the Eternal Abyss."

There were times, as I made my way through the deceptively complex book, that I found myself agreeing with the author on some key point, although most of the time this occurred when Peterson deviated from his usual quasi-religious themes. For instance, consider the following from "Inability to understand one another," one of the five major subsections in the fifth chapter:

"Our capacity to communicate is mysterious. Why can we understand one another at all, even in principle, given that we are separate, autonomous, and independent creatures? It is partly because we are very similar in our material natures, biologically and developmentally speaking. Our fundamental or basic psychophysiological structures are nearly identical, on a person-to-person basis. The similarity extends far down the phylogenetic, or evolutionary, hierarchy. We also share much in common with the nonhuman creatures with whom we share the garden. The fact of the very axioms that God does not allow human beings to question when he warns against incorporation of the final "knowledge" of good and evil, represented by the forbidden fruit, is a consequence not least of this shared psychophysiological identity.

Ruminate on that for a while.

Robert Barron, Bishop of the Diocese of Winona-Rochester (Minnesota) and founder of Word on Fire Catholic Ministries had this to say about Peterson's treatise: "At a time when so many of the mainstream Christian churches are either drifting along with the culture or turning inward to bicker about who has power, it is perhaps not surprising that the most compelling interpretation of the Scriptures is coming from a layman, a psychologist, someone outside the ecclesiastical structures. Jordan Peterson makes no claim to give an adequate theological account of the Bible, but he is indeed shedding light on what the Church Fathers called the 'moral sense' of the sacred text. It is practically impossible to imagine anyone who would not find illumination and inspiration in the pages of this book."

I would tend to agree, but – to be completely transparent – after finally finishing this dense yet strangely lighthearted interpretation of many of the stories I thought I knew by heart from my days in Sunday school, I could not say with certainty that Peterson even believes God exists in the way most readers probably do. A more cogent title might have been "Wrestling with Jordan B. Peterson's Conceptualization of the Significance of God."

Highly recommended, primarily to anyone who majored in philosophy, religion and/or creative writing.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, WKU.