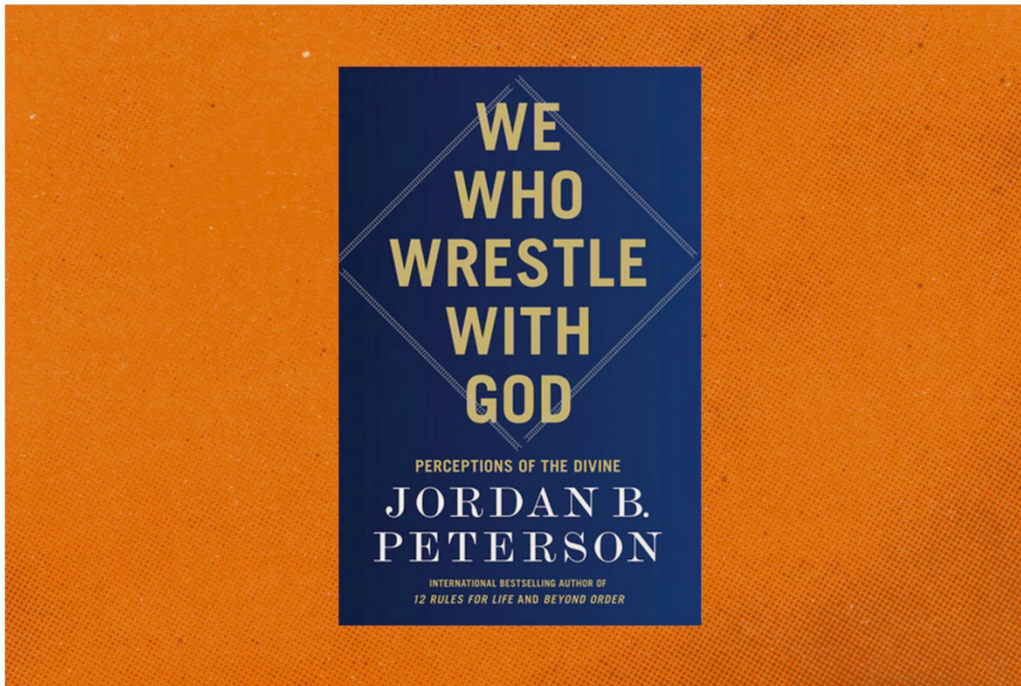


The gospel according to Jordan Peterson

In "We Who Wrestle With God," the Canadian provocateur finds that biblical staples confirm his favorite theories about the culture war

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(Portfolio)



Review by [Becca Rothfeld](#)

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I spent almost five years as a graduate student in a philosophy PhD program, and although I was photographed during that time, I was never captured in the act. What could a photo have memorialized? Nothing vital — not the heady delight of reading Hume for the first time, not the way that organizing thoughts into premises and conclusions sharpens them into little blades. Not, in short, the act of philosophizing: Intellectualism, with its thumbing through books and hunching over laptops, is notoriously difficult to visualize.

The Canadian provocateur Jordan Peterson is successful in part because he makes such a show of deep contemplation. Unlike most public intellectuals, he became famous not as a writer but as a talker. In 2016, when he was a

relatively unknown psychology professor at the University of Toronto, he chronicled his objections to “political correctness” in a video on YouTube that quickly went viral. From that moment on, he was in the business of DESTROYING and SHUTTING DOWN his liberal interlocutors, at least according to the adoring fans who titled the ensuing clips. It wasn’t long before he was a regular on the talk show circuit, proclaiming on Canadian national television that he would rather “go on a hunger strike” than call trans people by their preferred pronouns (“Jordan Peterson Destroys Entire Panel On Transgender Pronouns”) and insulting journalists on the BBC (“Jordan Peterson SHUTS DOWN Feminist BBC Journalist”).

He has since authored two bestsellers, but the truth is that these books are mere accessories. They pair well with Peterson’s crumpled suits and air of ruminative preoccupation, but incendiary videos have always been his primary product. His manner of speaking — passionate, emphatic and punctuated by theatrical gestures — is suited to the format of the sound bite, but perhaps above all, he *looks* the part. There he is, brow creased in concentration, hands beneath his chin in imitation of Rodin’s “Thinker.” There he is, sitting in an armchair in front of an ornate fireplace with a book displayed on the table beside him.

And here he is again, ratiocination personified in the trailer for his new book tour. “I’m pleased to announce my new tour for 2024,” he says. Then, he turns toward the camera and announces portentously, “[We Who Wrestle With God.](#)” The words appear on the screen, superimposed on an image of the Earth. Dramatic music thunders.

Is this what thinking looks like? Like the trailer for an action movie? I’m not convinced that it matters what “We Who Wrestle With God,” nominally a work of biblical exegesis, actually says. It is destined to serve as a prop in a video, and the only way to meet it on its own terms would be to circulate a counter-video titled “WaPo Critic DESTROYS Jungian pseudointellectual!” Still, the best way to puncture a performance is to treat it like the genuine article. If Peterson’s latest were a book and not a flashy facsimile of one, what arguments would it contain?



Jordan Peterson speaking in Budapest in 2023. (Attila Kisbenedek/AFP/Getty Images)

Following his lodestar, the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, Peterson proposes that diverse human cultures have yielded a fixed number of stories. There is nothing obviously silly about this notion, or about examining these stories for insight into the human condition. Absurdity creeps in when Peterson embraces the eccentric Jungian contention that certain archetypes recur in all of our narrative efforts. By his lights, the “archetypal characters of the narrative world” include “the Dragon of Chaos, the Great Mother, the Great Father, and the divine Son.” The Bible, the fundamental Western story, turns out to be yet another compendium of tropes that belong in fantasy novels. Peterson is cagey when it comes to the question of whether Christianity is literally true — but he is clear that it is salutary for us to conduct ourselves as believers. His is a pragmatic account of God as a useful construct, not a metaphysical account of God as an awesome reality.

It takes a special kind of spiritual dimwit to cast a text as fierce and mysterious as the Old Testament as a banal and scolding exhortation to make your bed, but Peterson, as it happens, is just that kind. Conveniently for him (and unfortunately for the rest of us), all the biblical staples confirm his favorite theories about the culture war. The story of Adam and Eve is really about “the

well-known personality differences between men and women.” Like the methodologically dubious works of evolutionary psychology that Peterson references ad nauseam in his interviews and lectures, the opening books of Genesis reveal that “women are more agreeable” (a claim I believe in this very review) and are “specialized, in some deep sense, to attend and care” for others. Men boast a longer and more enviable list of talents: they are “specialized, in turn, for outward striving, confronting the natural enemies of hearth and kin, competing and cooperating in hierarchical positioning and garnering the benefits thereof in the broader social world.” The devious serpent, an avatar of “what is marginal,” represents the chaos that ensues when minorities demand accommodation.



The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, by an unknown Mexican artist. (Francis G. Mayer/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images)

In other words, we were expelled from Eden because wokeness went too far.

Cain, too, was an early casualty of the liberal agenda. In Peterson’s reading, his is a cautionary tale about “the victim/victimizer narrative that plays such a key role in the ideologies of resentment that so truly characterize our time.” Noah and his ark remind us that “the state can never ... find itself in a position

where it can rightfully dispense with or deny the right to free speech”; the Tower of Babel is a symbol of the hedonistic excesses of trans people and the evils of pornography; the lesson of the story of David and Goliath is that “the true hero is he who defeats the giant tyrant of the state.”

In Peterson’s telling, the Old Testament is really a screed against campus protesters and a recommendation for those time-honored conservative virtues, *Standing Up Straight and Making Your Bed*. Yahweh sounds less like a fearsome sovereign and more like a suburban soccer coach. “He is the father Spirit who insists that we can triumph against adversity, no matter how profound the challenge,” Peterson writes. “We are called upon, in the face of life’s overwhelming difficulties and opportunities, to offer no less than absolutely everything we have.” What an elaborate way of trussing up the clichéd encouragements that a red-faced dad might shout from the sidelines. You can do it, kiddo! Give it your all!

But the content of “We Who Wrestle With God” is secondary to its form. Peterson does not seem to care if he wins debates or even if he makes basic sense: His aim is to stage a performance of profundity. In his prose, as in his oratory, the kitsch of grand pronouncements and the dazzle of quasi-technical terminology conspire to yield an imitation of depth.

It was not always thus: Peterson cut his teeth in an era when conservatives styled themselves as rationalists. (Recall all those liberal snowflakes whom they were always DESTROYING with the sheer force of reason on YouTube.) But then something changed: Peterson started crying. He cried when he whispered, “Is there anything more fundamental than pain?” and concluded, haltingly, “*Love ...*”; he cried when he lamented “loss of faith in the ideal of the individual.” Sometimes, he cried for no immediate reason, as if the poignancy of the world were simply too much to bear. Peterson was not just a lapsed rationalist: He was a full-fledged weepy sentimentalist, and his transformation heralded a broader stylistic shift. Now the predominant conservative sensibility is that of mystical grandiosity — of JD Vance’s nostalgic invocations of the good old days, of calls to heroism and spirit. The Democrats have been caricatured as soulless technocrats, concerned with the trifling details of governance and the minutiae of bureaucracy, and the GOP has become the party of capital-M Meaning.

In his study of proto-authoritarianism in Germany, the intellectual historian Fritz Stern once described a 19th-century reactionary writer as a would-be

“prophet.” This figure “never reasoned nor exposted, but poured out his excoriations and laments, his intuitive truths and promises.” The dominant tone in this writer’s books was “a kind of whiny heroism.” “Whiny heroism” is Peterson’s *métier* exactly.

The aesthetics of intellectualism, unaccompanied by the rigors of actual thinking, are on display on every page of “We Who Wrestle With God.” The Prophet of YouTube never settles for a simple phrase when a fancy or foreign one is available. He opts for the Greek “Logos” instead of “truth,” and he capitalizes the word “being” for no reason whatsoever. Sometimes, he is so desperate for syllables that he selects a long word seemingly at random. Even passages that are mercifully free of outright malapropisms are miracles of convolution. A characteristic sample is somewhere between an essay by Derrida and a bedtime story for children: “God is He who eternally defeats the monstrous Leviathan itself, confronting and overcoming chaos, underworld, and the possibility signified not least, by the terrible dragon, source of the greatest treasures of the world.”

At the level of the sentence, “We Who Wrestle With God” is probably the most unendurable book I have ever suffered through. But its unreadability is the point: Density passes for sophistication, and verbosity conceals vapidness.

Peterson’s language complicates — but his taxonomies simplify. He admitted as much in the introduction to his first bestseller, “12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos.” He chose that title, he explained, “because of its simplicity.” He even downsized from 25 rules, which would have been too many. (He followed up “12 Rules” with “12 More Rules,” thereby undermining himself.)

This is a worldview that strives relentlessly for juvenile clarity. It is perhaps for this reason that, for all Peterson’s emphasis on maturity, his cultural repertoire is so curiously stunted. In his latest, he admonishes his readers to grow up — while citing such rich adult films and books as “Harry Potter,” “Pinocchio” and “The Lion King.” Life, he stresses in sentences in various states of syntactic dishevelment, is best regarded as an *adventure*.

In Peterson’s world, there are no confusions or uncertainties. Every story reduces to the same message (order good, chaos bad), and every person conforms to one of a fixed set of models (male or female, evil or exalted). “If you serve a multiplicity, instead of a unity, you are confused, anxious, aimless, and

hopeless,” he warns. There are 12 rules, 12 Jungian archetypes, two genders and one proper form of life.

And of course, there is only one prophet.

It is tempting to dismiss Peterson as a stupid person’s idea of a smart person. But perhaps he is just a desperate person’s idea of an intellectual lifeline. A quick glance at the comments section of any of his videos attests to his power. There, thousands of viewers thank him for saving their lives, for helping them recover a sense of meaning, for opening their eyes to truth and beauty.

At a time when humanities programs are hemorrhaging funding; when anti-intellectualism is such a badge of pride that crypto tycoons brag about hating books; when the cost of college is rising exponentially and the percentage of Americans pursuing higher education is declining; when religion, once the site of regular and ritualized self-examination, is attracting fewer and fewer adherents; and when humanists in the academy are turning their back on the public in favor of uninviting jargon: Is it any wonder that Peterson-style hucksters can so easily step in to fill the void?

Call me impractical or romantic, but for my money, the hunger for meaning is as basic as the craving for food. The fundamental questions aren’t luxuries, and people will always find a way to ask them. Peterson is a charlatan and a fraud, but at least he does what academics and the philistines of Silicon Valley refuse to do: He takes the public’s propensity for philosophy seriously (if only to exploit it), and he presents the life of the mind as an exciting pursuit (if only to flatten it into a Disney movie).

Society’s illness is real, but Peterson is only a nostrum. In his deflating hands, even the fearsome god of the Old Testament is reduced to a fount of therapeutic platitudes. In the end, “We Who Wrestle With God” is a work of neither theology nor philosophy but an entry in the only genre Peterson has mastered: self-help.

What is the difference between philosophy and self-help? It isn’t that philosophy is never helpful. It is that philosophy values questions over answers. Bertrand Russell once wrote that “philosophy, if it cannot answer so many questions as we could wish, has at least the power of asking questions which increase the interest of the world, and show the strangeness and wonder lying just below the surface even in the commonest things of daily life.” There is something better and ultimately more consoling than facile instructions for

living: learning to love that the wild world is not yet so withered as to be reducible to a handful of types and a dozen meager rules.

Becca Rothfeld is the nonfiction book critic for The Washington Post and the author of "All Things Are Too Small: Essays in Praise of Excess."

We Who Wrestle With God
Perceptions of the Divine

By Jordan B. Peterson
Portfolio. 544 pp. \$35

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/books/2024/12/06/we-who-wrestle-with-god-jordan-peterson-review/>

As someone with three degrees, two of them in Psychology, and loyalty (however heretical) to the Christian saga, I should find Jordan Peterson speaks to me, speaks my language. For all of my progressive ways and concern for social justice, I have roots in conservative places and states of mind, and am left nonplussed by most “woke” proponents of “political correctness.” I once devoured Jung and analytical psychology as an antidote and upgrade to Freudian profundities and follies. (I ended up inclined towards depth psychology and Lacanian thinkers, even if I too have only an uncertain grasp of “Lacan.”) But I cannot bear to read or listen to Jordan Peterson. This is not the language or imagination or manner of epistemological and veridical discernment. Mr. Peterson has just launched headlong further down the wrong track. I would say “rabbit hole” but everyone throws this around casually now.

I find that the smartest people are not those telling us things, but rather those who humbly “know what they know” and are more interested in asking the right questions to learn more to better evaluate that which they have come to “understand” to date. Discernment and faith will always be for me a “work in progress.” Even when doing so with Christian terminology and cosmology, this involves more “shedding” and “simplification” than “constructing” and “complexity.” Christianity itself—Christ—of necessity is a work in progress. TJB