

DISCERNMENT

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Book Review: God Is

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Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Book Review

God Is, by Mallory Wyckoff. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022. 158 pages, \$21.99.

Reviewer: Jeanene Reese

Throughout church history, women have felt the weight of patriarchy and its limitations on their lived experiences as well as their theological expressions. The rationale for marginalizing women often centered on their perceived inferiority to men and appeals to Scripture and the restrictive passages found there. Wyckoff cites influential church fathers and even the Reformers to underscore how their views impacted women for centuries (pp. 19-22).

Although numerous books are written about women in ministry, spiritual formation, and theological reflection, few have invited others so freely into their authentic lived experiences and theological expressions more beautifully than Mallory Wyckoff does in her book *God Is*.

In the opening chapters and throughout the book, Wyckoff shares her journey of faith, her fears and inadequacies, and how she perceived God in various forms from pre-school into adulthood. Her ability to name her views of God and how she came to them challenges readers to reflect on their own journeys and theological understandings. The book is short but is not one to be read in haste.

The invitation issued throughout the book is for readers to expand their views of God and experience true theological liberation. In chapter 4, *God is Communicator*, Wyckoff admits to being confounded by “God’s willingness to inhabit human language but even more so our response to clamp down with a perceived sense of certainty and rightness on what we think God says and means, to make absolute claims about divinity and truth, and to then retreat into our bunkers with weapons at the ready to shoot down anyone whose voice or perspective speaks a different word” (p. 30).

Chapters 6 and 7 provide interesting insights into *God as Creator* and *God as Seamstress*, respectively, but it is chapters 8 and 9 that almost took this reviewer's breath away. God as our heavenly Father is a metaphor found extensively throughout Scripture and one that many believers hold dearly. Yet, for others this image of God is inadequate and even painful. Images of God as Mother are found in numerous instances throughout the Bible, and they provide a whole new understanding of God's character and person.

Wyckoff shares her experiences at becoming a mother and those of various other women she observed noting the constant presence that mothers have in the lives of their children—nourishing them with their bodies, tending to them in illness, teaching them valuable life lessons, and instilling faith in them, just to name a few.

In chapter 9, Wyckoff views *God as Midwife* and speaks of the birth experience in graphic detail that, although it might make some readers a bit uncomfortable, is an honest recounting of the experience of birth. The midwife in the story is the constant encouraging presence reminding the laboring mother that she is strong, that she is capable, and that she is doing a good job. This image of God is a fresh and exciting one that many will find opens new understandings and experiences of God.

Chapter 11 provides what is probably the most unique of Wyckoff's theological reflections on God—*God is Sexual Trauma Survivor*. Based on her own work with victims of sexual trauma as well as her doctoral research, Wyckoff lays out the extent to which these forms of trauma exist for both men and women and how poorly the church has often handled them. At the same time, she connects the suffering of these individuals with the suffering of Christ and reminds readers that "God has always been One Who Suffers *With*, one who willingly makes herself vulnerable to and with humanity" (p. 96).

Other chapters in Wyckoff's writing images God as Hostess, God as Wisdom Within, God as Home, and God as Mystery. Each of these reflections on God allows readers to consider even more in-depth views and personal understandings of God that have not always been readily accessible. In every chapter, Wyckoff gives fresh insights into well-known biblical stories and provides readers with opportunities to think differently about God, about Scripture, and about themselves.

In the final chapter, Wyckoff gives an extensive list of names for God that she has collected on her journey (pp. 130-133). She also acknowledges: "There are risks to everything I've proposed here. It's hard to bring into question what you've known of yourself, to interrogate reality and wonder

about why you ended up playing small. It's hard to bring into question your sense of God, to consider that perhaps the ways you've come to image God has been just as small. I've felt both fears. I still do" (p. 137). The epilogue provides excellent reflection on where Wyckoff is as she finishes the book and purposes to go forward in her efforts to seek and know an expansive God.

Most reviews are meant to point out weaknesses in any book, but simply put, there are none to be found in Wyckoff's writing. It is a valuable tool for all readers—men and women, young and old, believers and doubters—as they consider who God is and how that affects their lives. The reflections on each chapter found at the end of the book give even more opportunities to engage this meaningful book. Let's hope that Wyckoff continues to write such valuable works.

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