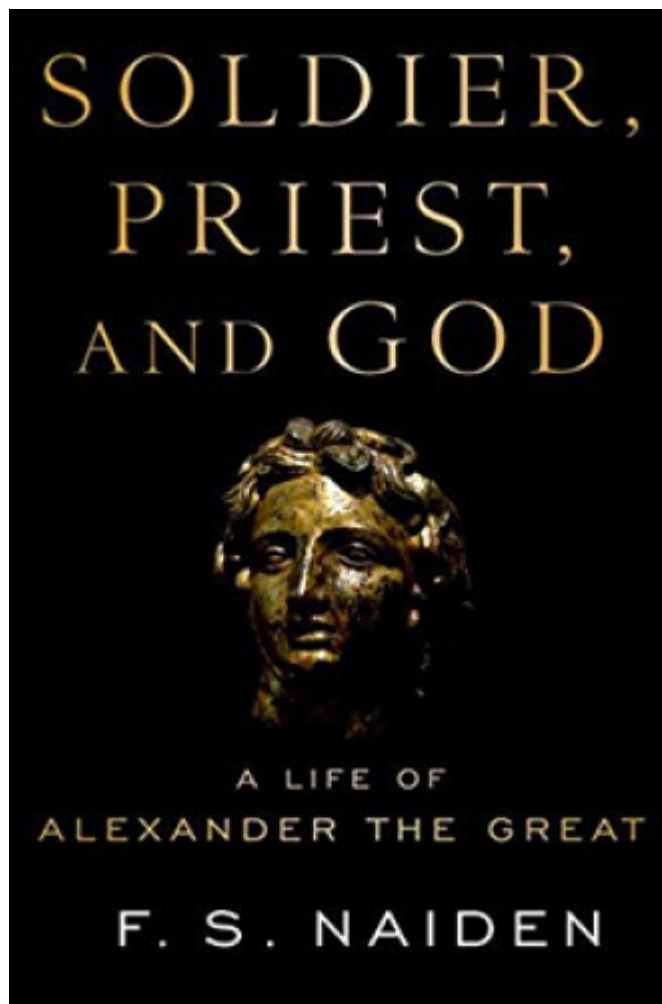


What made Alexander the Great so great?

F. S. Naiden's biography weaves Alexander's religious proclivities into his well-known martial exploits.

by [Tony Jones](#) in the [September 11, 2019](#) issue

In Review



Soldier, Priest, and God

A Life of Alexander the Great

By F. S. Naiden

Oxford University Press

A while back, some group or other of historians ranked the most important figures in history, and when they chose Alexander the Great as number one, it caused enough of a stir that I heard about it on NPR. My New Testament professor at seminary made a similarly surprising claim. He said that, without Alexander, Christianity would not have spread as it did, for it was on his empire's roads, subsequently paved by the Romans, that the good news traveled hither and yon.

Yet outside of history departments, Alexander gets short shrift. He doesn't occupy the popular imagination nearly as much as ancient religious figures like Jesus, Muhammad, or Buddha. If I asked you to name some emperors, I bet you'd say Augustus and Nero and Constantine before you'd mention Alexander. But by any honest reckoning, Alexander merits a spot at the top of the list.

Alexander III was born in 356 BCE. He succeeded his father, Philip II, as the king of Macedon at age 20. By the time he died just 13 years later, he'd led a virtually nonstop military campaign and conquered kingdoms from Greece to India.

F. S. Naiden sets out to tell a new story about Alexander, one that weaves his religious proclivities into his well-known martial exploits. "Religion dominated warfare because gods dominated everything," Naiden writes. Gods controlled birth, death, and everything in between, including warfare and the weather. Because Alexander took an active role in the religious life of his troops, performing sacrifices, leading prayers, and officiating funerals, "we may think of him as the Pope, the Holy Roman Emperor, and the head of the Church of England all rolled up in one."

This alone does not make Alexander unique. Prior to Thomas Jefferson penning his phrase about the separation of church and state, in his 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, terrestrial and celestial powers were almost always conflated, both by kings and by priests. But Naiden argues that Alexander's religious role has been undervalued in previous biographies.

Naiden sets out to prove his thesis by writing a history of Alexander's reign, paying special attention to his religious acts. Unfortunately, how he goes about this

reminded me of a line that another seminary professor told me: "History is just one damn thing after another." Too often, *Soldier, Priest, and God* reads as another catalog of Alexander's feats, long on history and short on analysis. The reader slogs through many battles and marches to get to a moment in which Alexander does something religious.

When we do get to those rites, though, we find some interesting patterns. Alexander recognized the importance of religion both to his own myriad troops and to the people he conquered. He often refused to delegate the sacerdotal duties to priests and instead performed them himself. His soldiers clearly considered him their high priest, which sometimes got him crossways with his generals.

In a precursor to the Pax Romana, Alexander did not foist his religion or gods on the people he conquered. Rather, he embraced their native religions. Famously, upon conquering Egypt he took the title of pharaoh, which elevated him from a priest to a god. "Egypt taught Alexander to think theologically," Naiden writes. "Alexander was one of the cross-cultural gods. He had become a religious innovator." But alas, other than telling us that by considering himself divine Alexander put a rift between himself and his troops, Naiden does not explain the nature or impact of this innovation.

Alexander stumbled in other lands, unwilling or unable to syncretize foreign faiths as he had in Egypt. In India, for example, he slew Buddhists, Jains, and Hindus by the hundreds of thousands, ultimately causing many of his troops to rebel. It seems they thought their young leader was going off the rails.

At this point, Alexander tried to motivate his men "by invoking omens, propitiating gods, and sending dead comrades on a safe trip to the underworld," using religion as both a carrot and a stick. But the damage had been done. To Naiden's mind, Alexander's religious missteps diminished his standing among his troops, possibly leading to the alcoholism that most likely killed him.

One of history's greatest military minds, Alexander the Great ruled at a time when religion could not be sloughed off. For the most part, he handled religions, both foreign and domestic, deftly. But not always. Then again, what leader does?