

BOOK REVIEW

Rob Bell. *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. New York: HarperOne, 2011.

Rob is convinced that many people who are alienated from Christianity have been estranged by a distorted picture of God, i.e., a God of wrath against sinners who will save some but will condemn many to eternal, conscious suffering in hell. He calls that belief *misguided and toxic* and a subversion of the spreading of Jesus' message to our world (page viii). His presenting question is this: *Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God?* (page 2) The rest of the book is his negative answer to that question. On the way to recasting a new story of Christianity, he re-imagines multiple Christian teachings.

1. Hell. After alleging that the Hebrew writers weren't very interested in issues relating to the afterlife, Rob lists all the New Testament references that include the words "hell" (*gehenna*), "abyss" (*tartarus*), and "*hades*." He reduces Jesus' teaching about hell to *a volatile mixture of images, pictures, and metaphors that describe the very real experiences and consequences of rejecting our God-given goodness and humanity*. (73) In other words, this is *hyperbole* and *surreal* language. He says that Jesus' warning about the *coming wrath* (Matthew 3:7), doesn't refer to divine judgment at all, but rather to the political consequences of revolting against Roman authority, as witnessed in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Furthermore, he pictures hell as a restoration process to bring sinners back to intimacy and blessing with God (this sounds a lot like purgatory), employing proof texts like the eschatological restoration prophecies regarding Sodom and Gomorrah, Egypt, and Israel in Jeremiah 5; 32; *Isaiah 19*, and a smattering of the Minor Prophets (87)—as well as the hopefully restorative "handing over to Satan" church-discipline procedure of *I Timothy 1* and I Corinthians 5. The closest he comes to a definition of hell is *...a loaded, volatile, adequately violent, dramatic, serious word to describe the very real consequences we experience when we reject the good and true and beautiful life that God has for us*. (93) *And*, by the way, when Jesus speaks of eternal punishment, Rob wants us to know that he didn't mean "forever." (92). It sounds a lot like hell is just the bad things that happen to us when we do bad things. Maybe *Rob* means more than that, but it is indistinct.
2. God's will. Woe to your church if your website statement of faith includes verbiage like this: "The unsaved will be separated forever from God in hell." Rob believes that such statements are not only spiritually uncouth, but are a slap in the face to the greatness of God. You see, the Bible affirms that "*God wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*." (I Timothy 2) After citing several such texts, Rob concludes that what God wishes will indeed be accomplished. In other words, sooner or later, given enough time, even after death, the sinning rebels will be inevitably drawn back to God—in other words, in the end, *Love Wins!* If you hold to belief in a literal, eternal hell, then sorry, but that *isn't a very good story*. (110) To affirm that in the end everyone will be attracted back to God *is bigger, more loving, more expansive, more extraordinary, beautiful, and inspiring than any other story about the ultimate course history takes*. (111)
3. Exclusivism. In chapter 6 Rob goes thoroughly inclusivistic, i.e., he affirms that Jesus alone is savior but that in terms of the mechanism by which people get saved, Jesus *leaves the door open, way open*. (155). He also interprets the "open gates" of the New Jerusalem of Revelation 20:25 as meaning that whenever unbelievers come to their senses, they will have a second chance to get into heaven (*akin to* the bus ride from hell in C. S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*). He rejects exclusivism (*i.e.*, there are two groups: saved and unsaved) and inclusivism (*i.e.*, as long as your heart or actions are OK, you're OK), and coins a new category: *exclusivity on the other side of inclusivity*. This means that *Jesus is the way, but...* [the love of Christ] *will of course include all sorts of unexpected people from across the cultural spectrum*, (155) meaning even people who have never heard about Jesus. By the way, Revelation 20:27 says that those city gates are *open to...* *only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life*. So does Rob believe that every human being's name is written there?
4. The Gospel invitation. If you tell people they need to accept Christ as savior, Rob labels you as a ticket-taker: *So when the gospel is diminished to a question of whether or not a person will "get into heaven," that reduces the good news to a ticket, a way to get past the bouncer and into the club*. (178) He calls this an "entrance understanding" of the Gospel and claims that *it has no place in the life of a disciple of Jesus, because it's missing the point of it all*. (179) He further calls this *a cheap view of the world, because it's a cheap view of God. It's a shriveled imagination. It's the gospel of goats*. (180) This version of the Gospel is too small for Rob.

And by the way, if you have no patience for Rob's teaching, you must be one of those *...communities [that] don't permit open, honest inquiry about the things that matter most*. (ix) And he wants you to know that he isn't advocating anything new: *[N]othing in this book hasn't been taught, suggested, or celebrated by many before me. I haven't come up with a radical new teaching...* (x)

CRITIQUE

Rob's book is a pathetic example of doing theology by emotion, story, anecdote, and selectivity. Fundamentally, his approach starts with the premise that a loving God would not condemn or allow people to suffer forever in hell. Having adopted that premise, he adjusts the biblical data to fit and grabs any ammunition that seems to bolster his view, like citing a few early church fathers who *allegedly denied* hell, and marshalling other contemporaries who agree with him (Clark Pinnock and John Stott).

His hermeneutic is flawed. “Hermeneutics” is the biblical science and art of biblical interpretation. He exhibits the trademark of postmodern linguistic theory that minimizes authorial intent in favor of what the reader “gets out of it.” Orthodoxy has always taken the language of Jesus seriously when he speaks about “gehenna.” It is recognized that “gehenna” is a **metaphor-word**, but it **is also** recognized that the **metaphor-word** means something objective. Rob dismisses the objective reality of “gehenna” and reduces it to seemingly refer to just the bad things that happen to people through their own foolishness or perversity. For instance, he implies that “**hell/gehenna**” may be childhood sexual abuse, or living with the misery of your own greed. Additionally he stresses that heaven is not “somewhere else.” (He really dislikes the classic “bridge” illustration—the one where the cross of Jesus bridges across the fiery chasm and in the distance you see the shining city.) It is important for his theology to make “forever” not mean “forever.” So he has to redefine the Greek term “**aion**.” *It doesn’t mean “forever” as we think of forever.* (31) Hebrews 6:2 uses the word, “**aion**,” which is translated “**eternal**” ...*the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.* My lexicon defines the word as *1) without beginning and end, that which always has been and always will be 2) without beginning 3) without end, never to cease, everlasting.* Rob admits this definition, but argues that the word can also mean an emotionally intense experience, and—by the time you get to page 58—that’s his main meaning of the word. I have read through ten pages of fine print on the meaning of “**aion**” in the authoritative *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, and there is no hint that the word has a nuance of intense experience. Rob says that *when Jesus talked about heaven, he was talking about our present eternal, intense, real experiences of joy, peace, and love in this life, this side of death and the age to come. Heaven for Jesus wasn’t just “someday”; it was a present reality. Jesus blurs the lines, inviting...us, into the merging of heaven and earth, the future and the present, here and now.* (59) His argument gets murky to me, but he seems to be so mixing together the concepts of the present and the eternal, and of heaven and hell, that it is all happening right now. It is true that there is a present-tense possession of eternal life, (1 John 5:13, *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.*) but that does not discount the reality of the future-tense full possession of eternal life. Rob brings up the idea of “**aion**” as intense experience again on page 91 to emphasize that hell is not “forever judgment,” but rather “*an intense experience of correction.*” So, according to Rob, hell is not “eternal punishment” (Matthew 25:46), but rather *an intense period of pruning...an intense experience of correction.* (91--sounds like purgatory again.) He affirms that the word in Matthew 25:46 for “punishment” is an agriculture term meaning pruning, hence the idea of hell as a transitive, corrective experience. Once again, the Greek lexicons disagree. Rob is making up his own definitions.

It is instructive to note the topics that Rob leaves out such as The Lake of Fire (see Revelation 20:7-15), The Wrath of God (see Psalm 90:11 and Romans 1:18), and Divine Vengeance (Revelation 6:10). Also missing is any clear description of what heaven and hell are like. He talks more about what they are *not* like. And what he says they are *not* like is pretty much everything you ever thought the Bible said they *were* like.

In the last few pages the gloves really come off. The orthodox, evangelical view of God is totally unacceptable. Rob is incredulous that the God of love we all profess...

...would, in the blink of an eye [i.e., at the moment an unbeliever dies] become a cruel, mean, vicious tormentor who would ensure that they had no escape from an endless future of agony.

If there was an earthly father who was like that, we would call the authorities....

That kind of God is simply devastating. Psychologically crushing. We can’t bear it. No one can.

And Rob concludes that this view of God is ...*glaring, untenable, unacceptable...* (173-175). **If your** church wants to reach people with the Gospel, Rob says, you had better get that doctrine of hell off your website!

It is particularly challenging to critique Rob Bell because he writes so poetically and anecdotally. At times one struggles to “read between the lines” to try to pin down what he is actually saying. Thus, I may have erred on a point or two in my interpretation of him. However, his central message is clear--Hell, as you have believed it all your life, doesn’t exist.

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Other resources:

MSNBC host, Martin Bashir, interviews Rob Bell. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vg-qgmJ7nzA> . Electrifying!

Multiple resources concerning the Rob Bell debate at <http://theresurgence.com/2011/03/15/a-chronology-of-rob-bell-on-hell>