

A Not So Radical Look at Heaven and Hell

Love Wins

Rob Bell

Rob Bell pastors a megachurch in Grand Rapids, Michigan, that has been successful in seeing revival in a younger generation of Christians. He speaks frequently throughout the United States, and his NOOMA videos can be found in almost every youth room. He has captured the attention of Covenanters at Midwinter, CHIC, and North Park University, and is known for his engaging style, trendy appearance, and passionate love for Scripture, God, and the world.

Bell released his new and controversial book, *Love Wins*, in March. It has unleashed a firestorm as many see it as an attempt to answer the question, “Do all people go to heaven?” Bell’s critics have made the book a wonderful success; he was on the cover of *Time* magazine and has made several guest appearances on morning and evening news channels.

I hadn’t read any reviews of *Love Wins* prior to reading the book. Upon finishing it, I was amazed to see the number of responses and criticisms. Bloggers and reviewers either overly sympathize with him—“finally, someone has taken on this monumental issue that is consuming the faith of young and old, alike”—or they personally attack him. Most have responded with strong critiques—some exaggerate Bell’s devilish and heretical qualities; one blogger noted that Bell’s book has created a “tsunami” in his community.

I think overly romanticizing Bell’s contribution is a bit much, but so is comparing Bell’s book to a recent natural disaster that threatened nuclear meltdown. I wonder if we Christians will ever find a way to debate texts, ideas, and questions without following the popular media’s practice of personal attacks.

In my opinion, Bell’s book, five years in the making, is only semi-important. For younger evangelicals, Bell finally names the great divide between younger and older generations on mat-

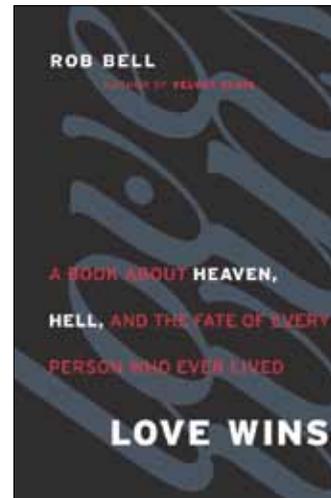
ters of Jesus—namely the question of whether God is more invested in judgment (hell) or in hospitality (heaven). This book has the potential to gather younger and older Christians together for a lively theological discussion, and hopefully the conversation will invite understanding and not battle!

As it is, this is not a particularly good book. The logic is often unclear, and Bell’s use of Scripture is just as user-centered as those who criticize him. Finally, the sentence structure is flippant and grammatically incoherent. I wondered if each chapter would work better as an individual sermon. On the writing level, English composition teachers should be as furious as John Piper or John MacArthur, two of Bell’s most vocal critics. Yet these critiques aside, Bell invites biblical and theological reflection—even when readers disagree with him (which, for me, was on and off throughout the book).

In his attempt to heighten heaven as a this-worldly participation with the love of God, Bell actually heightens our concerns for hell. By framing “God’s love” in terms of heaven and hell, he never quite gets beyond the old paradigm. The question, by the end of the book, is still, heaven or hell? The difference is that here heaven gets priority.

The first chapters outline classic and contemporary understandings of heaven, hell, judgment, and salvation. If the reader can get beyond the inflammatory speech and the confusing biblical work, Bell has a good idea for a book.

On the positive side, chapters 4–6 are an invitation to understand Bell’s desires. I recommend that readers begin the book here. These chapters



Love Wins
Rob Bell
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communicate a tone of humility and love. Bell truly wants the world to know that God desires to love them and not harshly judge them. He states that God is passionately committed to reconciling all things to him. Each page invites the reader to join a God who is gracious and merciful toward the world (a world that God deeply loves—John 3:16).

This book is anything but radical for the Evangelical Covenant Church. The Covenant has held strongly to a view of the atonement where “God’s love for the world is magnified” and less so to the more classic substitutionary model of atonement where “the wrath of God is satisfied.” Covenant theology rejoices that God came to love the world and generously gave himself fully to us. I would venture to say that Bell becomes a Covenanter in his middle chapters. He even sounds like P.P. Waldenström in a few places (who was also wrongly criticized for being a universalist). As I re-read sections of the book, I wondered if the Covenant Church (via the Communications Department) had been invited to edit the work, especially the tone and phrasing, would this book have been more palpable? Perhaps!

Bell is most brilliant in his invitation to readers to stop possessing Jesus. His opening chapters are a diatribe (to my dismay) against closed-theists and legalistic churches who attempt to possess Jesus. This, in my opinion, is the gift of the book. He deeply wants the world to know that Jesus is not held captive by the church. And regardless of how badly we in the church have disfigured the whole “Jesus thing,” there is hope—for everyone. Bell simply wants the skeptics to know that no one—not one—possesses Jesus. He poetically describes how God is radically committed to redeeming the entire world and how unavailable God is for our possession.

He writes, “[Jesus Christ] is for all people, and yet he refuses to be co-opted or owned by any one culture. That includes Christian culture. Any denomination. Any church. Any theological system. We can point to him, name him, follow him, discuss him, honor him, and believe in him—but we cannot claim him to be ours any more than he’s anyone else’s” (page 131).

There is a word here for the church. It is a word of freedom. We no longer need to uphold false certainties. The ambiguity of the kingdom invites the church to discover Jesus anew. Bell claims that we can stand assured of Christ’s resurrection powers that will now and in the future redeem the entire world—no exceptions. As stated at a recent funeral for a man who committed suicide, “There is nothing, not one thing, beyond the power of God’s redemption.” Bell’s book is about radical inclusivity, and God chooses the world.

Finally, I think there is something going on in this book that many of us cannot understand. I continually felt like I had entered another family’s argument. Bell is overly polemical throughout these pages. Several friends have commented that wherever Bell says something clear and helpful he uses the next page to make a point that resembles a sword and not a ploughshare. He seems to write as if embattled from the outset.

I think Bell is responding to his theological past—a past that many North American young people continue to revolt against—in profound ways. Bell is a Reformed guy with a love for C.S. Lewis. If you grew up Baptist, Bible church, Reformed Church, or even conservative Presbyterian, this book might deeply resonate with you. And most Americans have a Reformed view of God in their back pocket, even when they are not aware of it (see Sydney Ahlstrom’s *A Religious History of the American People*). Lutherans would be one of the few groups to be somewhat disengaged from the topic altogether.

Reformed theology is centrally concerned with the theological topic of election. Bell’s tradition most often stresses certainty of salvation and election, including predestination. Reformed folks, like John Piper, read the Bible through the lens of election, asking, “Who has God chosen and not chosen? God chose Israel, God chose Jesus; did God choose me?” This question strikes fear in the heart. This fear responds by seeking salvation because the other options *scare the hell out of us*.

In the end, I don’t think this book is about heaven and hell; it’s not really even about salvation. *Love Wins* is about election. If you live in

Grand Rapids or Minneapolis or anywhere else where evangelicalism and Calvinism have great sway, this is *the* great theological question.

American Calvinism has this interesting acronym for their theology called TULIP. I don't necessarily understand it, but it has to do with the question, "Who is in/out?" If you resonate with John Piper, your perspective is primarily on "Who is in?" and "How do we assure ourselves of this?" If you resonate with Bell, the perspective is "Who is out?" and "How do we welcome them in?" If you resonate with neither and wonder why this book has produced such a firestorm, perhaps it is because you believe in a God who blesses the world, inside and out, or possibly because regardless of debates about heaven and hell, open or closed, you believe that Jesus Christ *is* the world-concerned story of how *love wins*.

Reviewed by Kyle Small

In the Valley of the Shadow

James L. Kugel

James L. Kugel was a notable biblical scholar at Harvard, a well-respected academic absorbed in his career and research before being diagnosed with cancer in his mid-fifties. His decision to write a book about his reflections on that experience as a survivor echo author William Saroyan's poignant quip as he approached his own demise: "Everybody has got to die, but I always believed an exception would be made in my case. Now what?"

But Kugel accomplishes that endeavor with honest humility and facile grace, offering profound insights that may be best recognized by those who have known such profoundly stark places. *In the Valley of the Shadow* is his attempt to express modernity's loss of our sense of appropriate *size*—how we fit into relationship with God and the universe—and the resultant scarcity of the sacred in our human experience.

Significant as the insights that surround this thesis are, they might have been offered adequately in the first and last chapters alone, but Kugel opts to use the perspective of fragility imposed by his illness as a launching point to re-

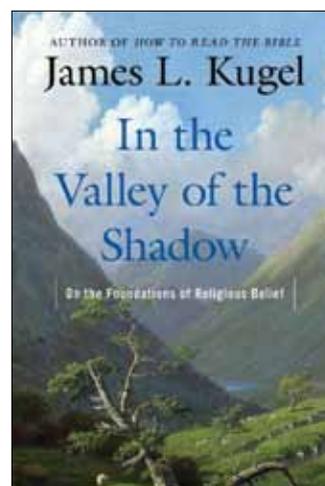
flect on his life's research into religion, using his physically and emotionally harrowing journey as a vehicle in which to explore the genesis and development of human spiritual experience—especially our concept of God and the self. As such, this book becomes a kind of primer of religious anthropology, sociology, and cutting-edge neuro-science into psychological mapping of the anatomy of the brain as it relates to religious experience and theological evolution.

Kugel's intimate and extensive knowledge

of biblical and other ancient cultures is illuminating, provocative, wise, and often witty—even if some patience is needed for occasional self-indulgent scholarly tedium. He is exceptionally adept at moving between the ancient and modern worlds with clarity and ease, his stark contrasts carving out intentionally ironic connections. His presupposition is simple: we have grown too *big*, enthralled with and anesthetized by our busy, self-important

lives, artificially out of proportion to our appropriate relation to God. Though we have matured past the frightening superstitions and spiritual slavery of our forebears, we have unconsciously traded away our sense of the immanence of the Divine—that God is present and powerful and intimately active in our lives. God has become (conveniently) other, out there, distant and even irrelevant to our large agendas except, of course, when "the music stops," when the incessant rush of the sound of our life ceases abruptly because of illness, tragedy—whatever it takes to remind us of our smallness in relation to God and his infinite, eternal purpose. Kugel comments, "Death has become taboo in America because it spoils the myth of human control and our newer, bigger selves."

Frequent reference to the Psalms (and other



In the Valley of the Shadow
James L. Kugel
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ancient texts) describes Kugel's thesis of our appropriate size in relation to God, the boundaries and perspective that keep us in wisdom and out of wickedness, in relationship and in concert with the divine will: "LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.... When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what are mere mortals that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:1, 3-4, TNIV).

Our modern, out-of-proportion dilemma is exemplified by our lack of awareness of God, forgetting who we are and how we fit, the paucity of our prayers, our confusion of purpose and value, and our confusion of purpose and place in relation to God, each other, and the meaning and value of existence. Concurrent with that disease is our missing sense of "starkness"—of the quality of essential difference between sacred and secular, light and dark, good and evil, etc. Lacking this clarity we are cast into the persistently gnawing questions of our own finitude, the stuff of the valley of the shadow: fear of death, angst regarding life's meaning, protesting the seeming unfairness and terrible fragility of life, and our search for God in the midst of it all. As Kugel reflects on his own illness as a kind of metaphor of our human condition, he asks "the sickening question," "Why do we expect the world to be a fair place?... what right do we have to expect [life] to be good?" It is the intimate question of theodicy. How, and for what, can we trust in a loving God?

Kugel's concentration on the evolution of the brain is enlightening at times, especially in terms of the development of the modern sense

of self—too often over against the primal sense of soul. Central to his message is that true religion requires embracing the smallness of our real self in relation to God, that our souls might grow in awareness and truly human maturity. Noting that "as usual, the strongest beliefs are the ones of which we are unaware," Kugel is proposing that we look carefully at what we believe, and how, perhaps daring to become aware that our beliefs—Christian or otherwise—are too often little more than modern totemism—pretenses at religion akin to the magical efforts of our forebears to control their world.

Kugel offers no prescription to cure our spiritual malady but rather a humble suggestion that (whatever our religious orientation) we look "outward and upward in the desperate dignity of [our] smallness," confessing that the most fundamental element of religious belief is not "God's sovereignty over the entire universe... so much as it is his sovereignty over the cubic centimeter of space that sits just in front of our own noses. That is to say, religion is first of all about fitting into the world and fitting into one's borders." *In the Valley of the Shadow*, as in the psalm that gives it name, is a good place to begin.

Reviewed by Chris Haydon

THIS MONTH'S REVIEWERS: **Kyle Small** is co-pastor of Harbert Community Church in Sawyer, Michigan. **Chris Haydon** is a Covenant minister and a member of the Board of Ordered Ministry.