

The Shack

By Robert M. Bowman Jr.

Title: *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity*

Author: William Paul Young, “in collaboration with Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings”

HISTORY

Paul’s story: Born in Canada in 1955, William Paul Young was the son of missionaries in Indonesia. Tribesmen sexually abused Young as a small boy, and older students at a boarding school also molested him. Young earned a degree in Religion at Warner Pacific College and attended seminary. Soon after he married his wife Kim, Young lost three relatives—his younger brother, Kim’s mother, and a five-year-old niece.¹ In 1993, Young had a three-month affair with Kim’s best friend. After Kim confronted him about it, Young spent years in therapy; according to his own account, he did not come out of “the shack” in his own life until 2004.

The next year, Young wrote *The Shack* to explain to his children what he had learned.² He made fifteen copies to give to family and friends, including Wayne Jacobson. Over the next eighteen months, Young, Jacobson, and Brad Cummings polished the manuscript and submitted it to 26 publishers, all of whom rejected it. Jacobson and Cummings launched their own publishing house, Windblown Media, in order to publish *The Shack*. Released in June 2007, *The Shack* sold over 10 million copies by October 2009, including 2 million outside the United States in some 34 foreign translations.³ By June 2009, according to *Forbes* magazine, Young had already earned \$4 million from the book.⁴ A movie is reportedly in the works.

“Mack’s” story: *The Shack* is a story about “Mack,” a troubled man with a history much like Young’s. A “Great Sadness” descends on him when a child molester kidnaps and kills his little girl, Missy. Years later, he receives a note signed “Papa” (his wife Nan’s favorite name for God) inviting him to meet at “the shack” where police had found Missy’s blood-soaked dress. One wintry Friday, Mack borrows a truck and drives to the shack, which transforms into a beautiful log cabin on an idyllic spring day. Inside the shack Mack finds a large African-American woman (“Papa”), a diminutive Asian woman (the Holy Spirit, called “Sarayu,” Sanskrit for “wind”), and a Middle-Eastern man outfitted in tool belt and gloves (“Jesus”).

Over the rest of the weekend, Mack spends time with these three people, who represent the Trinity. He eats and talks theology with them, talks with Sophia (a personification of God’s wisdom in the form of a beautiful Hispanic woman), and sees Missy playing happily in the afterlife. Sunday morning Mack goes with Papa (now appearing as a man) to a cave where the killer had left Missy’s body. They take it back to the cabin and bury it. Then the shack and everything outside return to its earlier condition. On his way home, a drunk driver hits the truck and Mack is taken to a hospital. When he becomes conscious, Nan informs him that the accident really happened Friday night, not Sunday—suggesting that the entire experience had been a dream. Mack later led the police to the cave where the killer had left Missy’s body. We are apparently to understand that the Trinity appeared to Mack in dreams after the accident.

DOCTRINES

Analyzing *The Shack* theologically invites the complaint that it is a novel, not a theology textbook. However, Young wrote the book to summarize his own years of conversations with God. The narrative setting of Mack’s conversations with God is incidental to the book’s purpose. Young has said that the story is fiction but “the conversations are very real and true.”⁵

Scripture: *The Shack* criticizes the idea that God no longer speaks overtly to people, limiting revelation from God to the Bible: “God’s voice had been reduced to paper, and even that paper had to be moderated and deciphered by the proper authorities and intellects.... Nobody wanted God in a box, just in a book. Especially an expensive one bound in leather with gilt edges, or was that guilt edges?” (65-66). Sarayu tells Mack, “The Bible doesn’t teach you to follow rules. It is a picture of Jesus” (197). Describing the Bible this way strips it of divine authority, since any “picture” of Jesus would just be one picture among many.

God: In some respects, *The Shack* reflects an orthodox understanding of the nature of God, indicating that God is omniscient (90, 95) and affirming that God is unlimited in being (98) and unbounded by time (172). In other respects, however, *The Shack* appears quite unorthodox.

“Papa” (God the Father) appears to Mack for most of the book as a woman, although she says, “I am neither male nor female” (93). The Holy Spirit (Sarayu) is feminine throughout. Sophia, described as a personification of God’s wisdom, also appears as a woman (as of course wisdom does in Proverbs). Thus, three of the four figures representing God in *The Shack* are female. The only exception is Jesus—for obvious reasons. This lopsided portrayal of God in feminine images is part of a larger feminist perspective and agenda (see 99-105, 147-48, 192).

The Shack also implicitly teaches panentheism (not to be confused with pantheism), a worldview maintaining that God dwells in the universe in a way similar to a soul in its body. The book calls God *Elousia*, which “Jesus” explains:

El is my name as Creator God, but ousia is ‘being’ or ‘that which is truly real,’ so the name means the Creator God who is truly real and the ground of all being.... God, who is the ground of all being, dwells in, around, and through all things—ultimately emerging as the real—and any appearances that mask that reality will fall away (110-12).

Panentheism is apparent when Sarayu touches Mack’s eyes so that he sees the world in a new way: “Even in the darkness of the night everything had clarity and shone with halos of light in various hues and shades of color. The forest was itself afire with light and color” (210). This imagery comes from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s 1856 poem *Aurora Leigh*, which Young quotes at the book’s end: “Earth’s crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God. But only he who sees takes off his shoes; the rest sit round it and pluck blackberries” (249). These lines reflect the influence of panentheist Emanuel Swedenborg.⁶

The Shack denies that God or Jesus relates to humanity as King or Lord (145), even though it affirms that Jesus is “the Lord of all Creation” (248). Young draws here from Jacques Ellul (1912-1994), a neo-orthodox Christian anarchist whom Young has described as “one of my all-time favorite authors.”⁷ Young quotes Ellul: “...no matter what God’s power may be, the first aspect of God is never that of the absolute Master, the Almighty. It is that of the God who puts himself on our human level and limits himself” (88). This quote comes from *Anarchy and Christianity*, in which Ellul assures anarchists that God is not the absolute Master or Lord of traditional Christianity.⁸ It is in this anti-authoritarian, anarchist context that we should understand the casual, laid-back manner in which Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu relate to each other and to Mack. All three come across as “regular people,” evoking no reverence from Mack.

Christ: Again, in some ways *The Shack* reflects an orthodox view of Christ. Young describes Jesus as “the man who is God and the God who is man” (216). The characters affirm that Jesus was crucified and that he rose from the dead (191-92). On the other hand, the book explains and pictures the Incarnation in unorthodox ways. For example, Mack notices that Papa has “scars in her wrists, like those he now assumed Jesus also had on his” (95). She explains, “We were there *together*” (96). It is theologically correct to say that the three divine persons of the Trinity were never literally separate from one another.⁹ Nevertheless, Papa’s statement and the scars on her wrists tend toward Patripassianism—the heresy that the Father died on the cross. Adding to this confusion, Papa states, “When we three spoke ourself into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human.... Even though we have always been present in this created universe, we now became flesh and blood” (99). These statements assert that all three persons of the Trinity became human, rather than just the Second Person.

Evil: The heart of *The Shack* is the question of why an omnipotent, loving God allows evil. Young’s answer is that evil does not have “any actual existence” but is “the absence of Good” (136). This view has a history in orthodox theology (e.g., Augustine) and is not the same as the pantheist view that evil is an illusion. However, panentheism suggests that evil, while not an

illusion, is also not quite real. Young suggests as much when he says that God will emerge “as the real—and any appearances that mask that reality will fall away” (112). Sarayu even states, “the good may be the presence of cancer or the loss of income—or even a life” (136). God does not cause these things to happen, but he brings good out of them: “Just because I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn’t mean I orchestrate the tragedies” (185).

Salvation: *The Shack* reflects Young’s belief in *universal reconciliation*, which affirms that by his death and resurrection Jesus will eventually save everyone. This is different from the belief that many or all religions lead to God. In the book, Jesus explains: “Most roads don’t lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you” (182). Universal reconciliation means that God has already forgiven everyone and reconciled everyone to him. Papa tells Mack that through Jesus’ death and resurrection “I am now fully reconciled to the world” (192). If God has forgiven everyone, this implies that he will neither judge nor punish anyone: “I don’t need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. It’s not my purpose to punish it; it’s my joy to cure it” (119-20).

The Shack implicitly denies that anyone will end up in Hell. When Mack asks Papa if she will be “throwing people into a burning lake of fire,” Papa replies: “I am not who you think I am” (119-20). When Sophia tells Mack to judge which of his children should go to hell and Mack offers to go to hell in his children’s place, Sophia replies, “Now you sound like Jesus.... And now you know Papa’s heart...who loves all his children perfectly” (163). The logic of this emotionally manipulative part of the story is that “Papa” sends no one to hell.

Ironically, Wayne Jacobson admits that Young’s manuscript had elements of universal reconciliation but claims that he took them out.¹⁰ While the first draft may have been more explicit, the idea of universal reconciliation is still in the book. James De Young, who has known Young personally for years, has done a good job documenting its themes in *The Shack*.¹¹

Church: When Mack asks how to become part of the Church, Jesus replies: “It’s simple, Mack. It’s all about relationships and simply sharing life. What we are doing right now—just doing this—and being open and available to others around us.... I don’t create institutions—never have, never will” (178, 179). These statements reflect Young’s anarchism, which views all religious and political institutions as evil (179). (Young is part of no regular Christian church or fellowship.) This anti-institutional stance explains a passage in which Jesus says:

Who said anything about being a Christian? I’m not a Christian.... Those who love me come from every system that exists. They were Buddhists or Mormons, Baptists or Muslims.... I have no desire to make them Christian, but I do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, into my brothers and sisters, into my Beloved (182).

CHRISTIAN/BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Scripture: The neglect of Scripture in *The Shack* (which never quotes and rarely alludes to the Bible) and its cutting remarks against dependence on the Bible are inconsistent with the Christian faith, for which Scripture is the indispensable source and standard of belief (2 Tim. 3:14-17). The real Jesus, unlike the Jesus of *The Shack*, constantly quoted from and affirmed the authority of the Bible (e.g., Matt. 4:4, 7, 10; 5:17-18; 22:29-32, 37-40).

God: Although God the Father is “neither male nor female,” the Bible consistently refers to him using masculine language (e.g., “Father” is used of God about 250 times). Metaphors and parables that figuratively use a woman to represent God (e.g., the parable of the lost coin, Luke 15:8-10) are one thing; a story of God the Father appearing as a woman is quite another.

Of serious concern is the panentheistic view of God implicit in many places in *The Shack*. In the Bible, God’s relation to the world is in no sense analogous to that of the human soul to its body. Rather, the world is God’s handiwork (Ps. 8:3; 19:1; 102:25; Is. 40:12; Rom. 1:19-21; Heb. 1:10). Theism maintains a sharp, clear distinction between the Creator and his creation (Is. 40:28; Rom. 1:25). God is not “the real” or “the ground of all being” dwelling “in, around, and through all things.” Rather, he is the self-existent Creator, the one by, through, and for whom all other beings exist and are real (Gen. 1:1; John 1:3; Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 8:6).

Young’s belief that God does not relate to human beings as their Lord and King is simply unbiblical. Jesus addressed the Father as “Lord of heaven and earth” (Matt. 11:25) and claimed

“all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18 NIV). God “is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords” (1 Tim. 6:15 NASB). Seated on God’s throne, ruling over the universe, Jesus will direct history to its end and judge all people (Matt. 25:31; 1 Cor. 15:25-27; 2 Cor. 5:10; Eph. 1:19-22; Rev. 22:1-3).¹² Knowing God ought to provoke us to holy reverence and awe toward him (Heb. 12:28-29). Being Jesus’ “friends” means obeying his commands (John 15:14), not palling around with him like just another buddy.

Christ: Only the Son became human in the Incarnation, and of the three divine persons, only he suffered and died on the cross (John 1:14-18; Rom. 5:10; 8:3; Heb. 5:7-8). The Father was always with and in the Son (e.g., John 14:10-11; 16:32), but the Father was not incarnate.

Evil: Evil is not merely the absence of good but its *opposite* (Rom. 12:9). Panentheism has difficulty avoiding the implication, hinted at in *The Shack*, that nothing is truly evil. But Jesus plainly calls human beings and their actions evil (Matt. 7:11; 12:34-35). The Bible never suggests that occurrences such as death might actually be good; death is the final enemy to be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26). God can bring good out of evil (Gen. 50:20), but he promises to do this, not for everyone, but for those who love him and live according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28).

Salvation: Jesus taught that God will not forgive or save everyone (Matt. 7:13-14, 21-23; 12:31-32; 26:24). Jesus’ death is the basis for reconciling us to God, but that reconciliation does not happen without a believing response (2 Cor. 5:18-20). Those who confess their sins and believe in Jesus receive forgiveness (Acts 10:43; 26:18; 1 John 1:9). Hell—the lake of fire—awaits those who reject Christ (Matt. 25:46; 2 Thess. 1:6-9; Rev. 20:10-15).¹³

Church: One does not become part of the church merely by having loving relationships. The church is the covenant community of people, established by Jesus, who meet together as part of their commitment to him (Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 1:2; 11:18; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 10:25). One becomes part of the church by confessing faith in Christ and being baptized (Matt. 28:19-20; Acts 2:38, 41; 1 Cor. 12:13). While the universal church is not an institution, it functions through institutional forms, including appointed leaders (Acts 14:23; Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:1-13; 1 Pet. 5:5). The Bible does not support anarchy in the church or in politics (Rom. 13:1-6).

Young’s intention in *The Shack* to foster trust in God’s love and goodness is commendable. However, the theology through which he seeks to establish this trust is unsound.

Robert M. Bowman Jr., formerly on staff with Watchman Fellowship, is now the Director of Research for the Institute for Religious Research (www.irr.org/). Rob is the author of a dozen books including Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ (Kregel, 2007).

Notes

- 1 Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Shack’ opens doors, but critics call book ‘scripturally incorrect,’” *USA Today*, 29 May 2008; http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2008-05-28-the-shack_N.htm. All URLs checked as of Nov. 8, 2009.
- 2 Interview with James Robison, July 14-15, 2008; http://www.lifetoday.org/site/PageServer?pagename=tel_USCalendar_Jul08.
- 3 <http://www.windblownmedia.com/news.html>.
- 4 Lauren Streib, “Paul Young’s Publishing Miracle,” *Forbes*, Jun 22, 2009; <http://www.forbes.com/forbes/2009/0622/celebrity-09-shack-religious-thriller-paul-young-publishing-miracle.html>.
- 5 William Paul Young, “Is the story of THE SHACK true...is Mack a ‘real’ person?” *WindRumors* (blog), Aug. 15, 2007; <http://windrumors.com/2007/08/is-the-story-of-the-shack-true-is-mack-a-real-person/>.
- 6 Linda M. Lewis, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Spiritual Progress: Face to Face with God* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 11-13. On Swedenborg, see also the separate 4-page Profile: Tim Martin, “Swedenborgianism,” *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, TX: Watchman Fellowship, 1994-2009). A complete *Profile Notebook* (over 370-pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook.htm.
- 7 William Paul Young, “Ellul, *The Shack*, and Theodicy,” *WindRumors* (blog), June 27, 2007; <http://windrumors.com/2007/06/ellul-the-shack-and-theodicy/>.
- 8 Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 33-34.
- 9 Robert M. Bowman Jr., *The Word-Faith Controversy: Understanding the Health and Wealth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 171-74.
- 10 Wayne Jacobson, “Is the Shack Heresy?” *Lifestream* (blog), March 4, 2008; <http://lifestream.org/blog/2008/03/04/is-the-shack-heresy/>.
- 11 James B. De Young, “At the Back of *The Shack*: A Torrent of Universalism: A Review,” rev. ed. (May 2008); <http://theshackreview.com/content/ReviewofTheShack.pdf>.
- 12 See Robert M. Bowman Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 223-66.
- 13 See Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman Jr., *Sense and Nonsense about Heaven and Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 80-119.



Profile is a regular publication of Watchman Fellowship, Inc. Readers are encouraged to begin their own religious research notebooks using these articles. Profiles are published by Watchman Fellowship approximately 6 times per year, covering subjects such as new religious movements, counterfeit Christianity, the occult, New Age Spirituality, and related doctrines and practices. Complete Profile Notebooks containing all Profiles published to date are available. Please contact Watchman Fellowship for current pricing and availability. All rights reserved © 2009.