

# SALVATION ACCORDING TO DAVID BENTLEY HART AND MONICA COLEMAN

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In *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*, David Bentley Hart lays out his universalist view that every human soul will eventually enter heaven to be reconciled with God. Although hell might exist, he argues that souls who go there are only visiting and do not suffer eternally. Instead, they will experience a process of refining or purifying, after which they are ready to accept God and progress to heaven, where they will rest forever. In other words, Hart sees “two distinct eschatological horizons”: The more proximate one that involves “historical judgment, where the good and evil in all of us are brought to light and (by whatever means necessary) are separated,” and the more remote horizon that brings the “final peace that awaits us all, beyond everything that ever had the power to divide souls from each other.”<sup>1</sup>

In making his case, Hart relies heavily on Scripture, reason, and tradition. To a lesser extent, he also uses the fourth component of the Wesleyan quadrilateral: experience. Regarding Scripture, he lists and discusses numerous verses that could be taken to mean that God will save everyone. One of the more convincing examples is a statement Jesus made to his disciples in anticipation of his death and resurrection:

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“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32, NRSV). Although various other passages definitely or possibly point to limited salvation, scholars agree that this verse is clearly universalist.<sup>2</sup> Hart also cites several excerpts from Paul’s letters (e.g., “for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” [1 Cor 15:22]), as well as numerous occasions in which Jesus compared God to a loving parent, encouraging his followers to “feel safe in assuming that God’s actions toward them will display something like – but also something far greater than – paternal love.”<sup>3</sup>

Detractors might complain that Hart has cherry-picked his way through the Scriptures, but this criticism seems unfair given that biblical passages about many topics are contradictory. For example, with regard to universal salvation in particular, scholars acknowledge that Revelation includes verses that explicitly portray the eventual redemption of all creation as well as others that explicitly depict salvation reserved for believers only.<sup>4</sup> It is probably impossible to draw any specific conclusion about a biblical issue without prioritizing certain passages over others. In fact, Jesus seems to have modeled exactly this approach when he was asked, “Which

<sup>1</sup> David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 109.

<sup>2</sup> M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 330.

<sup>3</sup> Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*, 53.

<sup>4</sup> Boring and Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary*, 817-819.

commandment in the law is the greatest?”<sup>5</sup> Instead of replying that all Scriptures are equally important, he said “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt 22:37-40).

Hart also uses tradition to support his thesis. Although limited salvation is the prevailing perspective in mainstream Eastern Orthodox and Western Christianity, he notes that some early Christian writers, such as Gregory of Nyssa and Origen, advocated universalism. He discusses Gregory’s views in detail, for example that “in Christ, God’s victory over evil and death was total” and will be finally fulfilled when all of creation is reconciled to God.<sup>6</sup> In addition to finding traditions within Christian history that fit with his position, Hart attempts to dismantle opposing traditions. For instance, he attacks the Augustinian view (presented in *The City of God* and other texts) that God will arbitrarily choose to save some souls while condemning others to suffer eternally by contending that Augustine used an ineptly translated version of the New Testament.<sup>7</sup> Augustine’s line of thought cascaded down through the centuries to influence later theologians like Thomas of Aquinas, John Calvin, and others. But according to Hart, we can dismiss more recent traditions (such as Calvinist predestination), because they rest on an earlier tradition that was faulty.

In addition to Scripture and tradition, Hart makes extensive use of reason by

carefully explaining why universal salvation is more logically coherent than limited salvation. For example, he argues that no rational being would freely reject the goodness of God in favor of evil. When individuals pursue an evil alternative, it is due to a misperception or psychological defect, in which case the choice is not really made freely.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps a thirsty man who has crawled out of the desert would refuse to drink at the oasis, but only because of a delusion that makes him act contrary to his nature. Following this line of reasoning, it makes no sense to claim that God permits people to spend eternity in hell because God prefers to let them exercise their free will. Relatedly, Hart contends that eternal suffering is logically inconsistent with the image of God as a loving parent. One reason is that good parents use punishment only for correction and never simply to cause pain, yet eternal torment in hell precludes any chance for an individual to try again and do better this time.<sup>9</sup> A second reason is that loving parents would never allow a child to permanently harm herself, for example by jumping into a fire, out of respect for her autonomy.<sup>10</sup>

Hart occasionally talks about experience (mostly his own), but it seems that these discussions are actually about reason. For instance, he recalls hearing a legend when he was a teenager about Abba Macarius, a “desert father” who received a glimpse of the terrible tortures of hell through a conversation with the soul of a pagan priest currently residing there.<sup>11</sup> The priest had never had the chance to know God but nevertheless had been damned. Hart

<sup>5</sup> Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, *If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person*. (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 2003), 52-53.

<sup>6</sup> Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*, 164.

<sup>7</sup> Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*, 49.

<sup>8</sup> Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*, 40-41.

<sup>9</sup> Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*, 54.

<sup>10</sup> Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*, 80.

<sup>11</sup> Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*, 9-12.

writes that he could not take the story seriously because it made no sense. How could a benevolent God condemn a man to hell for the sin of not worshipping God, yet God had never revealed Godself to the man? Moreover, how could God have been so cruel as to create this man in the first place, knowing he was destined for eternal torment?

Like Hart, Monica Coleman envisions salvation, but she is more concerned with “here and now” than with eschatology. For her, salvation is about working for social justice against steep odds, as she describes in *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*.<sup>12</sup> Influenced by womanist thought and by process theology based on the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, she sees God calling human beings to participate in “creative transformation” designed to relieve suffering caused by systematic oppression, racism, and classism. As a process theologian, she believes God “influences, persuades, [and] lures” us “to embrace the principles of God’s vision in every context,” but at the same time “what we do influences God” and contributes to the vision.<sup>13</sup> As a womanist, she argues that a key component of God’s vision is to overthrow oppression in all its forms. To illustrate this point, she offers a thought experiment that starts with the assumption that a Black man in our racist society is oppressed.<sup>14</sup> It then follows that the “God of the oppressed” is on that man’s side. But what if the man abuses his female partner? Does God switch to her side? Then what if she harms her child? Does God switch again? Coleman suggests that God

“resists [all] oppressive activity and calls each party to justice in their future actions.”

Creative transformation, which forms the core of Coleman’s view of salvation, is an active process. It includes teaching and healing, it challenges the status quo, it occurs within the context of community, and it is ongoing. It assumes that every individual has intrinsic worth and that we are defined as humans by our interrelatedness. Therefore, if any of us are to be saved, every one of us must be saved.

As with Hart, Coleman’s thesis can be analyzed with respect to the Wesleyan quadrilateral. First, she places a high value on experience. For example, her book’s title comes from a phrase used by Black women to capture their “experiences of struggle and of God’s assistance in helping them to overcome struggle.”<sup>15</sup> Salvation, from a womanist perspective, is “making a way out of no way.” As another example, Coleman writes movingly of the experience of sitting with “Lisa,” whose boyfriend had brutally beaten her and pulled out patches of her hair.<sup>16</sup> Along with other members of a domestic violence support group, Coleman tried to comfort the sobbing woman who wondered, “Why did God let this happen to me?” According to Coleman, experiences like this one illustrate what evil is, but they also reveal God at Lisa’s side, feeling her suffering. Moreover, they reveal God working through the women who surrounded her, gently patting her shoulders, braiding her ruined hair in preparation for fitting her with a wig, and promising to help her deal with the legal system and the social workers.

Tradition is also important to Coleman, although not necessarily Christian traditions. For instance, she appreciates the value of

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<sup>12</sup> Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, 59, 63.

<sup>14</sup> Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, 82.

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<sup>15</sup> Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, 33.

<sup>16</sup> Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, 1-3, 172-173.

West African religions, rituals, and dancing. In one passage she describes participating with other women in a dance that honored Oya, a female spirit ancestor in Yoruba religions who guides individuals through life transitions, helping them adapt and grow. One of the dancers made a comment that connected the ritual to salvation: “I don’t know how this works, but it makes me feel whole.”<sup>17</sup> Veneration of ancestors is another important part of African traditions, according to Coleman.<sup>18</sup> Individuals who lived long and well can become deified ancestors at death, and then they can serve as a moral compass for their surviving family members. The family remembers and honors them through storytelling and building shrines. In addition, to show respect and avoid angering the ancestors, family members strive to live in accordance with their cultural values, and in this way they can help transform their community for the better. Interestingly, Coleman sees a connection between the ancestors in this tradition and the Holy Spirit, who came to the disciples as a Comforter and a guide after the death of Jesus (John 16:7).<sup>19</sup>

In urging readers to participate with God in working toward salvation here and now, Coleman is not particularly interested in laying out a cohesive, logical argument like Hart is. Instead, her strategy is more about offering anecdotes and illustrations that contrast what is with what could be. However, she does appeal to reason to some extent, for example in her explanation of process theology.<sup>20</sup> Process theologians describe the activity of the cosmos as the interaction of all entities (e.g., quarks,

amoebas, human beings, God) with “three inputs: what you inherit from the world, what’s possible in your context, and what you do about it.” From this basic assumption, various conclusions can be drawn by applying logic. For example, in any given situation there are a finite number of options available to a person. Perhaps none of them are ideal. One may emerge as the best one – the one God calls for – but it may nevertheless bring pain and loss.

Regarding the fourth component of the quadrilateral, Coleman does not often directly mention Scripture, but she occasionally connects biblical passages to salvation here and now. In one such case, she discusses the story of Hagar, the pregnant slave who ran away after being mistreated by her mistress, Sarai (Gen 16:1-16). From a womanist perspective, one could say that God wanted to make sure Hagar would survive, so God convinced her to return to Sarai. As Coleman explains, going back to Sarai was not Hagar’s preference, and it was not full liberation, but it was the best option for her at the time because it meant survival. “For Hagar,” Coleman writes, “salvation can look like a place with food and shelter for the delivery of a baby.”<sup>21</sup>

The images of salvation described by Hart and Coleman can be seen as complementary. To both authors, evil is a departure from God’s vision of peace and justice for all creation, and salvation is reconciliation with that vision, whether here and now or in the eschatological future. Both see human action as necessary for salvation. For Hart, the human soul must give up resisting God’s call and turn toward what is good, and for Coleman, salvation breaks into this world when people begin to act in community to lift up the oppressed,

<sup>17</sup> Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, 6-7.

<sup>18</sup> Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, 112-114.

<sup>19</sup> Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, 121.

<sup>20</sup> Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, 51, 57.

<sup>21</sup> Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, 34.

share their resources, and restructure society to make it more just.

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