

*THAT ALL SHALL BE SAVED: HEAVEN, HELL AND UNIVERSAL SALVATION.*  
DAVID BENTLEY HART, NEW HEAVEN, LONDON: YALE UNIVERSITY  
PRESS, 2019, 222 p.; ISBN 9780300246223; 26.00 USD \*

DOI: 10.29357/2521-179X.2020.24.20

David Bentley Hart has become famous for his criticism of new atheist and his love of Gregory of Nyssa and aesthetic theology. He was mostly publishing articles recently except his New Testament translation. So, the new book with a very provocative title attracted a lot of attention and following reviews.<sup>1</sup> The book is written rather as rhetorical theological tractates with slight reference to Rene Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*. There are almost no notes in the text and there is no bibliography, yet, there is a topical index. There are four meditations, just as there are four Gospels, or four columns holding the dome in a usual Orthodox cathedral architecture. This may mean that what is presented in the book represents the fulness of teaching and the foundations of the reason. The first meditation discusses the question of creation, the second of eschatology, the third one of human as the Divine image, and finally the fourth of the rational will. The main thesis of this book is that it is impossible to believe in God that would allow eternal torture for a creature (p. 13, 17). Annihilation is also not an option, as all that God created has its existence in Him (so why would He create something for suffering and destruction) (p. 87). In a rhetorical manner I may also suggest that this book also may correlate to the film of Lars von Trier *The House that Jack Built* (2018).<sup>2</sup> Hart suggest four principles that lead to conclusions very different from what was suggested in *The Beauty of the Infinite*, thus building a house of his own textual "corpses" and coming to the suggestion of the reversed heaven in hell, or hell in heaven.

David Bentley Hart is famous on being harsh on authors he is in dialog with and using a language that is not always appropriate for the scholarly discussion. In *That All Shall be Saved* Hart uses quite a strong language at some points of his arguments, like "twentieth-century biblical fundamentalism and its manifest imbecilities" (p. 92), or "The most effective technique for subduing the moral imagination is to teach it to mistake the contradictory for the paradoxical, and thereby to accept incoherence as profundity, or moral

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<sup>1</sup> Just to mention a few: Micheli, Jason. "Seriously, God is Good." *The Christian Century*, 136 no 26 Dec 18 2019, p. 30-31, 33-34; Farrow, Douglas. "That All Shall be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation." *First Things*, 296 Oct 2019, p 57-62; Alan W. Gomes, "Shall All be Saved? A Review of David Bentley Hart's Case for Universal Salvation." *Credo Magazine*. Volume 9, Issue 4, December 2, 2019, <https://credomag.com/article/shall-all-be-saved/>; John Panteleimon Manoussakis, "Salvation `a la Hart: A Review Essay of David Bentley Hart's *That All Shall be Saved*", 2019, [https://www.academia.edu/40052533/SALVATION\\_%C3%A0\\_la\\_HART](https://www.academia.edu/40052533/SALVATION_%C3%A0_la_HART)

<sup>2</sup> I was partially inspired by John Panteleimon Manoussakis, *The Bitter Tears of Lars von Trier: A Theology of Cinema* (New York/London: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020) to be published, currently available at [https://www.academia.edu/39771788/The\\_Bitter\\_Tears\\_of\\_LARS\\_VON\\_TRIER\\_A\\_Theology\\_of\\_Cinema](https://www.academia.edu/39771788/The_Bitter_Tears_of_LARS_VON_TRIER_A_Theology_of_Cinema).

\* Статья поступила в редакцию 02.04.2020; утверждена в печать 16.04.2020.

idiocy as spiritual subtlety.” (p. 19). It seems that there are not many who see how deep in a fallacy everyone in Christian tradition is, and only a few, one of which is David Bentley Hart, is to show us the reasonable, non idiotic or imbecilic truth about God. Which gives this book almost a manifesto status.

Hart is obsessed in this book with “rationality” and reason. The most puzzling concept that is heavily used in the book, and taken as if it is an axiom, is the idea of “rational soul/will”. It seems that for Hart human will is reasonable, and makes bad decisions being not enough informed of the nature of the good (humans just do not see God for who he is). So, for Hart, when people see that only God is pure good, they have no choice, but to desire Him and refuse any previous deviation from Him (e.g. p. 169-170). Thus, everyone has no other choice but to be saved. So, everyone will be saved sooner or later. And even if there is something like “hell” it can be only temporary to purify those that are mistaken, as all humans will admit that God is good and any opposition is “senseless”. Well, it may sound quite rationalistic, and almost as a Christian version of enlightenment ideals. Because it is only the knowledge of truth that holds people in bondage to unethical, irrational and evil, right? Well, we have a few centuries of this experience and things seem not improve much because of reasoning and informing. Hart may say that the information is not the same as meeting God in person. Yes, but why emphasize the reason and the rational will so much? But ironically enough he did not like the cartesian “revolution”, but seem to follow its rationalism and the totality of conceptual metaphysics. These are foundational meditations, and they are rather cartesian.

Another concept that is taken for granted is that personhood is an act of relations with others, so it is all or none that can be saved (p.153-155). It is true that especially in the Eastern Christian tradition “person” is foremost viewed not as self-consciousness, but in relations to the other “person”. Yet it is one thing to say that for Christ to be an image of God the Father is to incorporate the whole humanity “which only in its totality truly reflects the divine likeness and the divine beauty” (p. 140), and the other to say that Christ is all in all even by Himself, as there is fulness in Him already (mind the Apostle Paul). If Christ does not save “all in all” than there is no salvation, according to Hart (p. 164-165). It seems that in this quest for God’s love the individual is at danger of being dismissed in one’s particularity for the sake of the bigger interpersonal whole (even Christ in his particularity). It looks like the totality of salvation overcomes individual difference, even if for the sake of one’s good. Even more, this logic fits well with totalitarian political projects that always know better what is good for their citizens and neglect individual freedom for the good of all.

Similar approach is taken by Hart in his view of the free will. Basically, he claims “The freedom of a rational spirit is its consummation in union with God” (p. 172). To be free is to be consumed by God, basically. Freedom is also equated to the true knowledge and sanity of mind (p. 79-80, 177-178). Which ironically gives human beings more credit of being reasonable that we may experience in life around us, but slowly moving from this trust in reason into rejection of any real choice (as there is only one true answer, desire, being, one reasonable choice). Hart states that eternal hell is an ugly idea, but fails to admit that eternal all-powerful rapist is no better image of God too. The problem of no free will in

this approach is so obvious that Hart admits “that this all amounts to a kind of metaphysical determinism of the will” (p. 178), and there is “true freedom” as a form of determinism of freedom and will (p. 179). It looks like he agrees with Jack, who says “Heaven and Hell are one and the same”, as in God all that is there, is already in Him. Well, von Trier likes to provoke people with his films, and he likes to challenge common perspective. So, is Jack a true worshiper that finds himself called to build his architecture-cathedral-art of murders and bodies? He perceives a rain which washes a bloody trace as a sort of perdition and blessing to continue his “hobby”. According to Hart, Jack unconsciously loves God (as the good he desires through the murders), but looks for him in a wrong place (in the experience of a murder). It is not a provocation from this perspective. What about Jack’s victims, do they enjoy Jack’s calling? What is the proper reaction of God on Jack’s “addiction”? What is just in this situation? What Jack thinks of himself, and how he reasons his acts? Well, it seems it does not matter, because when reasonable soul sees God for who He is – then we all will be happy, and all agree that God is good. I think Hart never really tried Ivan Karamazov’s story, that he likes to mention in his books, apply to this thesis. Because, that is exactly what he suggests – the suffering history of creation just to see God clearer in the end (John Panteleimon Manoussakis points to this in his review<sup>3</sup>). What Hart misses about God in his view that God cannot exist knowing/witnessing eternal suffering of His creation (or annihilation) as loving option for creation made and preserved *ex nihilo* and for God just to share the “happy ending” with those that will be saved, is that it is not the only option of how we may view God. What if God chooses to “suffer” with creation eternally? What if, He shares in that suffering and in a sense partakes in it eternally (just as Logos becomes a man for eternity) and that “happy ending” is filled with sorrow both for God and saved? What if, true love is taking other seriously in his/her difference and taking suffering for the other as an eternal choice? What if, it is causing more “pain” to see your children do evil to others, than to see your children suffering? What if, in the end God is all in all, but in a different way? What if, exactly this all in all causes that other to suffer? After all, God payed more attention to Cain than to Abel in the Genesis story. But those options are not taken seriously and not elaborated, and even Hans Urs von Balthasar with his humble hope for salvation of all is taken as “disingenuous obscurantism” (p. 102-103). “There can be only one” in Hart’s intellectual universe, I suppose.

Considering Hart’s biblical hermeneutics, it is rather ironic that he despises proof-texting and states that “the Bible is not a system” (p. 161), but does exactly the opposite. He lists many texts out of context concentrating on some words to prove the salvation of all. He also neglects some texts that present the opposite picture (sometimes saying it is all intertestamental confusion, that should not be taken as a rule etc.). Not to mention that he follows Gregory of Nyssa’s and Origen interpretations and concepts mostly (which is not a hermeneutical problem, if not taken to the extreme). Yet, the Bible heavily emphasizes our bodily experience and choice, what we eat, what we say, what we do, and then there is a resurrection of the body at the judgment. With some ancient Greek or Hindu ideas, you can improve yourself through many lives until you reach the One (of the Nothing, or

<sup>3</sup> John Panteleimon Manoussakis, “Salvation *à la* Hart: A Review Essay of David Bentley Hart’s *That All Shall be Saved*”, 2019, [https://www.academia.edu/40052533/SALVATION\\_%C3%A0\\_la\\_HART](https://www.academia.edu/40052533/SALVATION_%C3%A0_la_HART)

else). So, for these intellectual traditions life may be just a movement towards the bigger end, but not so for Judeo-Christian tradition where what you do here and now defines your future (and it is not a quote from Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000), but rather from Matthew 25:31-41).

In *The Beauty of the Infinite* Hart strongly opposes the danger of totality, and takes creation *ex nihilo* in our understanding of God as the one in whom the being is possible as important, because it creates *perichoretic* trinitarian difference of creation in its unity. For some reason in *That All Shall be Saved* he interprets the same idea of God as the core of being in quite different totality terms, where individual person, freedom and will disappear in God (and the trinitarian language is heavily minimized). God suddenly becomes not the Beauty of *perichoresis*, but the supreme power-sublime core of reality that Hart was opposing before. And we may hear the Foucauldian question "who decides what is good and reasonable for God?" It seems that there is no peaceful witness of Beauty in this perspective, but a cold totality of a particular reason (with no choice to make but to love God). It seems to me, that in Hart's objections to Evangelical fundamentalists, Reformed theologians of predestination and some Catholic thinkers he trapped himself into the mirroring reality of this book, these meditations are exactly the ghost of his Christian experience he is trying to overcome. Fighting "infernalism" with his version of "universalism" he seemed to invent a reverse thing – "paradisalism" (which is a film negative of "infernalism"). Jack is in hell after all falling down to the bottom, but hell looks just like heaven upside-down in a white-shining final film negative. Hell is hell, even if it looks like heaven, after all.

In the end von Trier is quite ironic about his art and previous films, and about Jack himself, but Hart takes this book and its thesis too seriously. It looks like he wants to prove to himself he does not believe in "that God of hell" so it has to be "this God of salvation, with no other choice". Even if the Church and others may not completely agree with this perspective (p. 208-209). I think this book may be called an intellectual self-therapy book. But why others should take it as universal, total and perfect in its logic, I do not know. It is a provocative book to read, yet personhood is about the other, and there is not much room for the other in this totality of thought. Unfortunately, in the house that David built there is not much space for the other voices, but it may be interesting to those who want to understand what David Bentley Hart believes and thinks of salvation and other Christians.

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