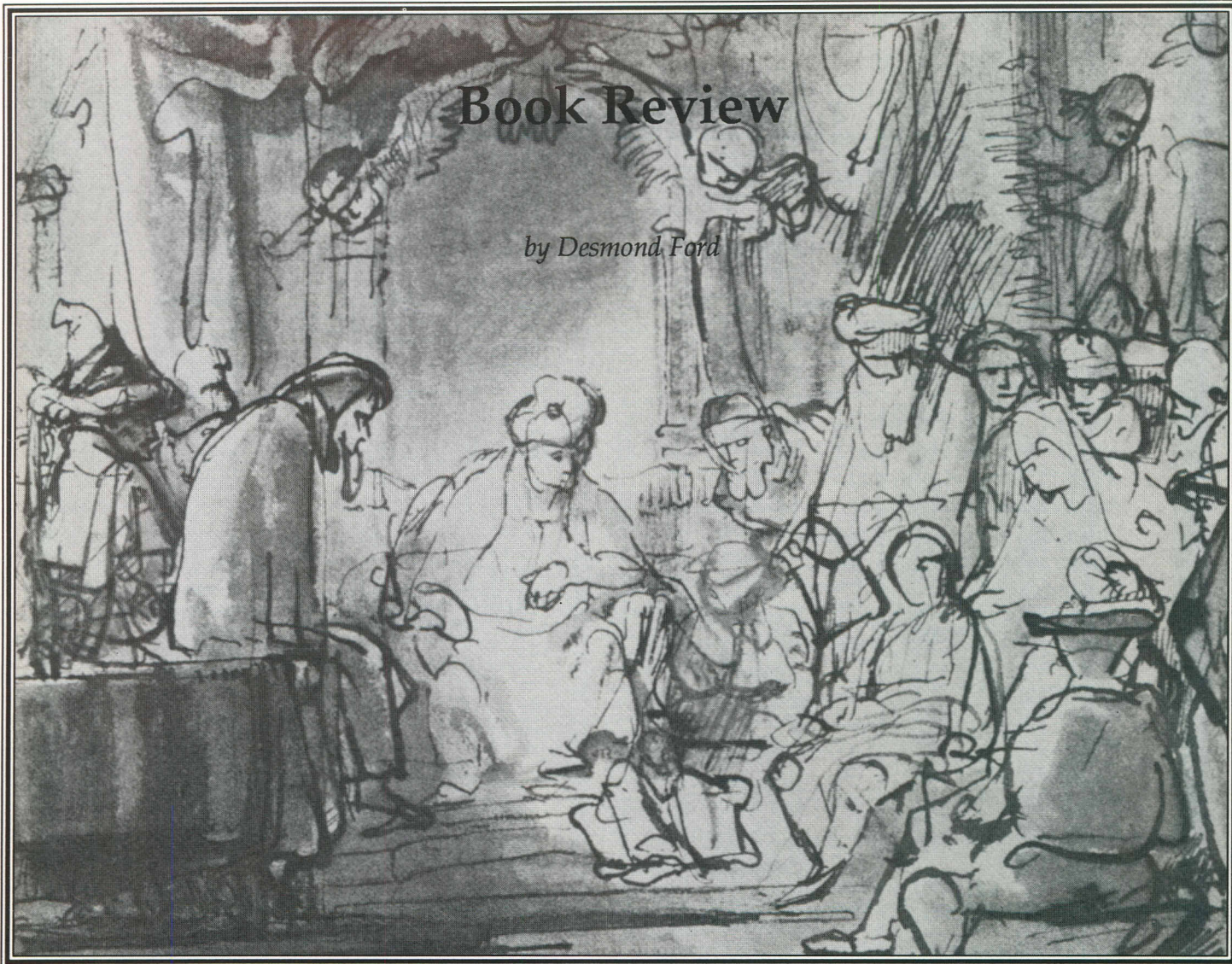


Book Review

by Desmond Ford



Death and the Afterlife, Dr. Robert A. Morey, Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1984, \$11.95.

This book is an interesting phenomenon and exceedingly rare. It endeavors to prove traditional beliefs on the soul and eternal torment. That makes it as rare as sermons taking the same position. This, despite the fact that the book is endorsed on its cover by an outstanding Christian leader!

Scholars aware of the progress made in twentieth-century biblical exegesis will recognize this doctrinal apologetic by Dr. Morey as appearing too late in the day. This book is too late to withstand the overwhelming tide of new understanding on the nature of human beings and the Bible's teaching on the afterlife.

Some of the Book's Claims

Here are some of the book's claims:

1. At death, the transcendent self, as well as the life

principle, leaves the body (pp.46-47).

2. Bible writers believed in the immortal soul (p.50).

3. Disincarnate souls worship at God's throne (Rev 6:9). Luke clearly states that the conscious *psyche* of Christ went to the underworld (Hades) while his body went to the grave (pp.55-56).

4. The earliest Christian literature taught a conscious afterlife and eternal punishment. We must therefore assume that such teachings were received from the apostles themselves (p.57).

5. Even though an author might use words such as "destroy" or "perish" it does not mean annihilationism is being taught (p.57).

6. No scholar of Hebrew or Greek defines *hades* as “the grave” (p.82).

7. *Hades* refers to the place of disembodied souls. There is no controversy on this point among biblical scholars (p. 82).

8. The King James Version (KJV) mistranslated the word *hades* every time (p. 83).

9. Neither *sheol* or *hades* can mean the grave (pp. 82-83).

10. The first occurrence of *hades* in the New Testament is Luke 16 (p. 84).

11. Christ taught that in the hereafter the wicked experience eternal torment and the righteous bliss (p. 85).

12. Fifty different Hebrew words and twelve different Greek words are translated “destroy” or “destruction.” None of them means “to cause something to pass into nonexistence” (p. 109).

13. “For ever” (*aion*, *aiionios* and *olam* in Greek and Hebrew) means absolute endlessness when referring to the final state. Rebel humans and angels face ultimate and irreversible eternal torment (p. 150).

14. The Christian cannot help be moved by the clarity of the NT concerning the doctrine of eternal punishment.

This is, I believe, a fair summary of the exegetical section of Dr. Morey’s book.

Quotations from Other Sources

Is it true that the majority of modern scholars teach what the above points suggest? By no means. Consider the following quotations:

The Hebrews did not conceive of the soul as existing apart from the body. A man was a living body. Thus, the ancient Church inherited from Greek thought the notion of a soul-substance which was by nature immortal, and this conception was often intertwined with biblical teaching about resurrection. In the biblical view a man dies and literally ceases to exist: his resurrection ... was the result of an act of new creation by God.

Ancient doctrines of an indestructible soul-substance, or of the soul as a ‘machine-minder’ within the body ... have fallen into disfavor (*A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, edited by Alan Richardson, p. 316).

The biblical idea of immortality thus differs from all others in certain important respects. One of these is that in non-biblical teaching man is inherently immortal.

In biblical thought, man is not inherently

immortal ... Immortality for the Christian involves the resurrection and may be fully attained only after it (*Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, p. 281).

My mind fails to conceive a grosser misinterpretation of language than when the five or six strongest words which the Greek tongue possesses, signifying “destroy” or “destruction” are explained to mean maintaining an everlasting but wretched existence. To translate black as white is nothing to this (R.F. Weymouth, translator of the NT, cited in *The Duration and Nature of Future Punishment*, Henry Constable, p.36).

[A complete list of the ten quotes supplied by Dr. Ford is available free upon request. Included will be a list of scholars holding similar views—Ed.]

The English Bible Is Good Enough

Do you have to be a biblical scholar to test the issues under discussion? By no means. A knowledge of biblical Hebrew and Greek can always help. However, unless you have devoted about ten years to such study it is not likely you will be able to improve on Bible translations already available.

A good understanding of the English Bible is usually enough to test the contentions of any religious writer. For example, take Dr. Morey’s contention that neither *sheol* or *hades* should be translated “death” or “the grave.”

Numerous Bible versions do this continually! (See The New International Version or KJV.) The KJV translates *sheol* as grave over thirty times, and the NIV more often. Particularly note that Peter, in his sermon during Pentecost (Acts 2:27), made it clear that Christ was in *hades* while dead. Peter was quoting Psalm 16, which used the word *sheol*.

The New English Bible and other modern translations constantly use personal pronouns rather than the Hebrew or Greek words for “soul.” Compare the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:13-21 in the NEB and KJV.

Dr. Morey’s Case

How is it that Dr. Morey can make even a shadow of a case for his unbiblical positions?

First, he quotes much from lexicons. Do those lexicographers draw their definitions from Scripture or from tradition? Morey fails to demonstrate that the definitions are from Scripture. Modern scholars differ profoundly with their predecessors in their understanding of debatable areas of tradition.

The same can be said about Bible dictionaries and commentaries. Scholars have their own prejudices and presuppositions too. All must be tested by Scripture.

Second, when Dr. Morey uses poetical allusions as literal (and vice versa) he is only unsteadily bolstering an unsteady case. Using his method we can prove that

mountains skip like lambs, God rides on the wind with smoke pouring from his nostrils, and the trees once anointed a king over them. Many passages do say that *sheol* is where dirt and worms are present. Dr. Morey takes these poetical allusions to the fate of the dead and tries to make them literal. (See Job 17:13-16 for an example of the mingling of literal and poetic.) Ezekiel 18:4 says, "The soul who sins is the one who will die." We should require considerable persuasion before we leave such a straightforward statement of fact.

What We Need to Know

As this topic is studied from the Bible, certain things need to be kept in mind:

1. "Soul" and "spirit" occur over 1,600 times in Scripture. Not one is accompanied by any such adjective as Plato or immortal soulists delight in. "Undying," "immortal," "indestructible," etc. are words never found connected to soul or spirit.

2. Scripture distinctly and repeatedly affirms that humans are mortal. (See such passages as Job 4:7;17:1.) God alone is described as inherently immortal (1 Ti 1:17; 6:16). Humans are admonished to seek immortality (Rom 2:7).

3. We are all but breathing dust and have nothing good in ourselves. We depend on Christ for all spiritual blessings (Eph 1:3). Christ is our righteousness and our life (Col 3:1-3; 1 Jn 5:11-12). Not to believe in Christ is to perish. Unbelievers do not live on eternally. So says the Bible's best-known text, John 3:16.

4. Traditional teachings about the soul going to heaven or hell at death render unnecessary precious Bible truths. As William Tyndale pointed out long ago, clear Bible truths such as the day of judgment, the return of Christ, and the resurrection of the dead are rendered useless by natural immortality. Why have a day of judgment if the decision about our fate was made at death? Why have Christ return to receive us if we are already with him (Jn 14:1-3)? Why shackle our spirits to this mortal coil of a body again if we can do very well without it?

Summary of Bible Teaching

Here is a summary of the biblical teaching on these matters. We urge you to confirm it by Bible and concordance.

1. "Soul" is used primarily in both Testaments for anything that breathes. It has subordinate meanings such as life, emotions, etc.

2. "Spirit" refers basically to the life principle. God breathed spirit/breath into Adam at the beginning.

Spirit sometimes is a synonym for soul, and often means life. When Christ and Stephen committed their spirits to God, it was their lives they entrusted. It was not their conscious existence.

3. Neither Testament ever asserts that a soul or spirit of a human can function without a body.

4. *Sheol* and *hades* are equivalents. (Compare Acts 2:27 and Psalm 16:10.) They refer to *the* grave rather than *a* grave. They refer to the state of death rather than a particular burial site.

5. The blessed hope of the New Testament is the second coming of Christ, not death. (Compare Titus 2:13 with Paul's description of death as the last enemy in 1 Corinthians 15:26.)

6. Scripture clearly teaches that without resurrection our beloved dead have perished (1 Cor 15:18).

7. Scripture affirms over fifty times that the dead are asleep. There is no consciousness of time in a sound sleep. For Abel and the most recent martyr, the time between death and resurrection will seem but a split second. This explains passages such as 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 and Philippians 1:23.

8. John 3:16, the Bible's best-known text, agrees with all others that say the wicked shall perish (Mal 4:1-3; Rev 20:11-15).

9. In view of these things we need not be afraid to affirm that the gospel is good news indeed. The gospel is far superior to a message that says the majority of our neighbors, friends, and loved ones will pay infinitely and terribly for their folly in failing to choose Christ. Our God, who is love, does not intend there be any everlasting Belsen or Dachau in his universe. Rather, it is written that all living creatures throughout God's universe will praise him eternally (Rev 5:13).

Disagreeing Agreeably

Nothing in this review is meant to suggest that those who believe the traditional views found in Dr. Morey's book are any less Christian for so believing. God has great Christian leaders in churches and on media who believe traditional doctrines. Despite those doctrines, they are powerfully and effectively presenting the saving gospel. I also believe things that are not so. (If only I knew what they were! Then I could change them.) If we were to all pool our knowledge, we still could not fill a girl's thimble. What is important is that we know Christ, whom to know is life eternal!

[Special thanks to Elliot Kuchuk, GNU Fellowship, for bringing this book to our attention—Ed.]