

A Portrait Inaccurately Painted

By Ken Hathcoat
Pierce, Colorado

It's evident to me why William Young's *The Shack* is a best seller. The author paints clear pictures of settings and moods. He also does a great job in describing God's love, as well as other aspects of God (His creativity and patience). But, unfortunately, the overall picture he paints of God is inaccurate, and this is the picture that sticks with me the most.

God as a Woman?

God is portrayed as a woman (the Father and the Holy Spirit) and many commentators have made much of this. Obviously, if God wanted to, He could portray Himself that way. He could portray Himself as Flipper the dolphin if He desired.

But the bigger problem I see is that the Bible paints a portrait of God revealing Himself *in one ultimate way*—Jesus. I realize the author was trying to show the different facets of God's nature, but consider Phillip's question to Jesus in John 14:8-9, "...Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied." What Phillip was saying, in effect was, "Jesus, show us a different aspect, a different facet of God (through the Father) we have not seen—the picture you paint of God is not complete. Then we will have a fuller, a clearer image of God". What was Jesus' response in John 14:9, "...*He who has seen Me has seen the Father.*" In fact, you can hear the incredulousness in Jesus' reply to Phillip—"How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" as if there was something different to see. The full and complete picture of the God is found in Jesus. Colossians 1:19 says, "For in Him [Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."

The Portrait is in the Bible

There is a lot of dialogue between Mack and God, but unfortunately, God doesn't often reference the Bible. Why is that so wrong? Consider this: even though Jesus was and is the Living Word, and, as God and King and Creator, had every right to speak on His own authority (and did many times), look how He typically began answers to many questions He was asked:

"...have you not read?"... (Matt 12:3 and *many* others)

"...what does Moses command?" (Mk 10:3)

"...it is written..." (Matt 4:7, Lk 24:46, Jn 8:17 and *many* others)

"...well did Isaiah speak of you..." (Mk 7:6)

"...What is written in the Law; how do you read?" (Lk 10:26)

Even though Jesus was the *Living* Word, He often referred to the *written* Word, thereby showing the *authority and necessity* of the written Word.

Matt 5:18-19 says, “For truly I tell you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men to do so shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” This is Jesus’ heart toward the Word of God. Based on the portrait the Bible paints of Jesus, if I were to meet Jesus on earth and be given an extended amount of time with Him, it is *impossible for me to believe He would not frequently reference or at least allude to Scripture when I questioned Him.*

God’s Holiness and Sin

In *The Shack*, God’s holiness seems principally portrayed in how God relates with Himself (Father, Son, & the Holy Spirit)—their patience, their love with and ease with each other, the peace they had with one another. But this is not the whole picture of God’s holiness. When the Bible talks about God’s holiness, it conveys not just an image of perfect love and acceptance; it conveys a consuming goodness that seems to be as much a physical force and not simply a perfect attitude. In Hebrews, God is described as “a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29). In Exodus, God warns Moses to keep the elders back “lest the LORD break out against them” (Ex 19:21-22). The picture the Bible paints of God’s holiness is a unique blend of God that is not just “passive” (perfectly loving and giving, etc—“perfection” being an absence of sin) but also “active” (a hatred and loathing of sin, a “consuming fire”).

Unfortunately in *The Shack*, God comes across like a really powerful and loving New Age Dr. Laura who is going to heal Mack’s psyche—and not deal with sin in his life. There is a lot of talk of brokenness—broken relationships, lives, a need for healing—all in Mack’s conversations with God. But this is not the complete picture that the Bible presents. Sin is why there is brokenness. Sin is why there is a need for healing. And this may sound really harsh in light of Mack’s loss of his daughter to a brutal murder, but Mack’s darkness that enshrouds him *is also sin in Mack’s life*. His lack of trust in God, his bitterness and resentment, his vengeful attitude—all of this is sin.

When people in the Bible meet the God of the Bible, one of the first things either brought up by them or by God—is sin. When Moses meets God, God tells him what? “Put off your sandals; you are standing on holy ground.” (Ex 3:5) When Isaiah meets God, he says what? “Woe is me! For I am a man of unclean lips... for I have seen the King.” (Is. 6:5) When Peter sees Jesus’ miracle of the catch of fish in his boat, what does he say? “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinner.” (Lk 5:8) Before God reveals to Daniel the most detailed prophecy of the end times of the earth, what was he doing? Confessing sin. (Dan 9:3-4)

When the woman at the well asked Jesus for this eternal water He was talking about, Jesus said, “Sure, you bet!” No...He said, “Go call your husband”, which led her to confess her sin (Jn 4:16) And once more in the Bible, when someone has a face to face meeting with the God of Creation, the conversation is brought back to the topic...of sin.

If I were to meet Jesus on earth and begin to have a conversation with Him, even as a redeemed, forgiven man because of my faith in Jesus Christ, *it is impossible for me to believe I would not be keenly aware of my sin in His presence—both because of my nature and because of His.*

God's Judgment

On page 120, the author has God telling Mack, “It’s not my purpose to punish”. The author portrays the natural course of bad behavior as God’s punishment for sin, and while this, again, is partly true, it is not at all the whole picture the Bible paints about God as a judge. The Bible is replete with images of God being a judge; a judge who judges with equity and upholds the rights of the fatherless and the widow (an allusion for making things right for the helpless), a judge who punishes evil and repays those who have disobeyed Him *not just in the life to come but in this life.*

Just because God does not want us personally to judge and avenge wrong does not mean we cannot hope that wrongs will be judged and avenged by *Him*. The picture in *The Shack* that portrays a God counseling someone who has been wronged by saying, basically, “Let it go; he (the murderer in Mack’s case, for instance) is suffering in his own hell.” is fundamentally wrong. What God would and has said is “Vengeance is Mine; I will repay.” (Heb 10:30) In fact, the Jesus in *The Shack* might not recognize the Jesus in the New Testament; the One who mentioned (even threatened!) with hell more than any time God spoke in first Person in the Old Testament; the One who scorched the Pharisees and warned them that “men will render account for *every* careless word they utter” (Matt 12:36-37), the One who warned those who had seen apparent random death (the tower of Siloam) and wondered if they were worse sinners, with “...unless you repent, you will likewise perish.” (Lk 13:5)

Unfortunately, *The Shack* does not include any of the full and rich brush strokes that the Bible paints of the God that is found in the Bible, and like any incomplete picture, it can give a distorted view about that picture. The portrait this book teaches about God—and make no mistake, this novel *is* teaching people about God—is a dangerous painting.