

Finding
GOD
in the
SHACK

Seeking truth in a story

of evil and redemption



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Theological Review of the Movie

The Shack

Spoiler alert! If you have not seen the movie you may not want to read this review until you have seen it. This review contains spoilers about the movie, including its ending. However, the movie adheres closely to the book, so if you've read the book but not yet seen the movie, you may find this movie review helpful.

The movie *The Shack* (2017) is the long-awaited film version of the book by William Paul Young (with Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings) published in 2007. The book *The Shack* caused much controversy among Christians—including some who did not even read it! My commentary in *Finding God in the Shack*, written from my perspective as an evangelical Christian theologian, was intended to guide fellow Christians in thinking about the book's theological message. After my book was published, I had the privilege of meeting William Paul Young and hearing him speak about *The Shack*. I also spoke about *The Shack* and my book in many churches for some years after the book's release. The hubbub over *The Shack* eventually died down, but with the release of the film version, many Christians have a renewed interest in the story. The purpose of this review is to express my opinions about the movie and its message.

I need to begin this review with some caveats. I am not any kind of expert on film in general. Much of the time, I especially enjoy movies panned by movie critics and do not like movies that win praises (or even Oscar awards!). I do not pretend to know anything about the artistic side of film; I watch movies almost always only for entertainment. However, I sometimes also watch a movie for its message, especially about the human condition. I tend to think I see such messages embedded in movies (as in novels) that others miss.

The movie *The Shack* is clearly meant to convey a message and a very profound, if somewhat controversial, one. My review of the movie here will focus almost solely on that message; I claim no expertise about the artistic qualities of any movie, including *The Shack*. I will say that I enjoyed it very much, cried a little during it, and thought the cinematography and acting was excellent.

My main question, and qualm, about the movie before viewing it was whether it would stick closely to the book—especially in terms of its theological message. I thought the theological message of the book was very interesting, thought-provoking, and somewhat troubling in places, but overall theologically correct. In *Finding God in the Shack* I lay out my theological critique—both positive and negative—of the book’s message. I emphasize that I thought it a parable and not a true story in the sense of a description of real events that happened in time and space. I believe that it is a theological message conveyed through a story. I could discern certain Christian theologians’ ideas in the story even though none are mentioned specifically.

I was very pleased at how closely the movie stuck to the story and to the author’s theological message. One specific question I had in mind was whether the all-important chapter in *The Shack* titled “Here Come Da Judge” would be included in the movie and, if so, how. To me, it is the central chapter of the book; the events it describes and the dialogue it contains between Sophia and the main character, Mackenzie Phillips (Mack), are the chief point of the story. I was surprised and pleased by the way that scene was portrayed in the movie.

Frankly, I expected the movie, like so many that deal with theological questions and issues, would dumb down the message of the book. It didn’t. The basic message of the book comes through loud and clear in the movie, even if much of the dialogue in the book is omitted in the movie. As any reader of the book knows, much of it consists of rather lengthy conversations between Mack and God (portrayed as three persons such that Mack sometimes has separate conversations with them). I knew going into the movie that much of that dialogue would have to be deleted or at least condensed for time’s sake. It was. My opinion is that no one should see only the

movie! Read the book for the rest of the story and especially for the theological content of the conversations, which is the meat of the story.

Unlike some viewers, perhaps, I do not take the imagery literally—especially the imagery of God. Of course God is not three separate personalities as represented in the book and movie by an African American woman (Papa), a Jewish man (Jesus), and a young Asian woman (Sarayu). That is not the author's or the movie's intention, and anyone who listens closely to the three can discern that these are only forms, manifestations, taken on by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for the purpose of helping Mack recover his faith in them. As a historical theologian, while watching the movie I found myself saying, "Oh, that's sound like tritheism," and later, "Oh, that sounds like modalism." (Tritheism and modalism are historical heresies about the Trinity.) But I don't think it's fair to impose a literal interpretation on the imagery or the movie itself, which is clearly intended as a parable. The point of the story, both in the book and in the movie, will be missed by people who focus too much on the imagery. The message of both the book and the movie comes through clearly if someone is willing to "get it" despite the possibly distracting imagery. What is that message? Well, it's multifaceted but has a center. Let's begin with the center and work outward to the facets.

First, at its center, the story conveys the idea and promotes the belief that God is unconditionally good and therefore can and should be trusted in spite of evil, tragedy, and innocent suffering. There is an implicit *theodicy*, or vindication of God's goodness in the face of evil, at the center of the story. I suspect it may take two or more viewings of the movie or a careful reading of the book combined with a viewing to get it. But it is clear to me that the author and the makers of the movie are laying out for us, readers and viewers, a particular answer to the question, "Why?"

The answer to that question will not be appreciated by "divine determinists"—those who believe God has designed, ordained, and governs everything that happens including sin, evil, and innocent suffering. The center of the story of *The Shack* is that sin, evil, tragedy, and innocent suffering *are not planned or rendered certain by God*. They are foreknown by God, but they are not in any sense a part of God's will—except that he allows some of that to

happen. The book makes clear, in a way that I didn't hear in the movie, that God does intervene to stop much evil and innocent suffering but does not always do so for very good reasons unknown to us. Part of its message is that God is perfectly, unconditionally good and worthy of our trust in spite of our questions about evil and innocent suffering. Much more is said about this in the book than in the movie; that is why everyone who sees the movie needs also to read the book. You cannot get the whole message in all its fullness from the movie alone.

So what does God say to Mack about evil, tragedy, and innocent suffering? That it's a fallen world we live in, corrupted in every part by human forgetfulness of God and even rebellion against God, all of which comes from *misuse of free will*—which is itself a good gift God gave to humans for freely receiving his love and having communion with him. Free will is itself not the center of the story; it is one of the peripheral points but clearly connected with the center. Sin, evil, corruption, tragedy, and innocent suffering are *not* God's perfect will; they are not intended or rendered certain by God. They are permitted by God for reasons God cannot explain to creatures in a way we can fully understand. God expects us to trust his goodness.

Another facet of the story also clearly connected with the center is that God wants to redeem every creature, especially his human creatures of whom every one he is "especially fond." However, redemption requires cooperation. God does not redeem—which means more than only "forgive"—by coercion. Mack has to kneel with Papa and confess his lack of forgiveness and say that he is willing to forgive his worst enemy. Only then can he be redeemed in the fullest sense possible in this life; only then can he enjoy life as it was meant to be enjoyed in communion with God.

If the story of *The Shack* were a full blown systematic theology—which it is not intended to be!—surely the author would say much more about God, sin, salvation, the afterlife, etc. So that leaves many critics of the story guessing. Some of them put the worst spin possible on it and shout "heresy!" in response to things they think are implied but not expressly stated in the story. For example, one might guess that the story implies universalism—belief that all people will be saved in the future. It does not say that;

all it says is that God loves everyone equally, and that Jesus died for all people equally so that all people can be saved.

Stepping aside from the movie for a moment and going back to the book, it does say that God has already forgiven everyone and done everything possible to redeem everyone. But both the book and the movie make abundantly clear that full redemption includes reconciled relationship and not only forgiveness. To forgive does not automatically establish relationship or reconciliation. Forgiveness, God says, simply means taking your hands off the enemy's throat (again, imagery). One can assume it means not hating the person but being willing to have a reconciled relationship with them if they are willing.

I left the movie thinking many things at once (and with a few tears still in my eyes). Among them were that the movie leaves out much of the book that is at least peripherally important to the message. It also leaves out the most controversial parts of the book. (Unless one takes the imagery of God literally, in which case that's perhaps the most controversial part of the book and the movie.) The book contains much more about free will and God's will, and why God allows evil and innocent suffering—although that is never fully explained because it is alleged to be beyond human comprehension.

I think *The Shack* is a movie that requires more than one viewing to get it all. I have read the book several times but may read it yet again. My response to both is that this is perhaps the best Christian fiction since C. S. Lewis's novels, and that the movie does not dumb it down as much as I feared it would. I don't think I have ever seen a Hollywood-made feature movie that clearly conveys a profound Christian message as much as *The Shack*.

Viewer Guide to the Movie

The Shack

This viewer guide for the movie *The Shack* is to help people think about its message. The movie, like the book, contains a strong Christian theological message without being a sermon or lecture. Calling it a “Christian theological message” does not imply agreement with every point of the message. It is always important, especially for Christians, to be biblically discerning when reading any book or watching any movie. To that end, these discussion questions can be used on your own or with a group.

1. If you read *The Shack*, how does the movie compare with the book, especially with regard to its message about God?
2. What is the overall theme and message of the movie?
3. What is the movie’s overall message about God’s nature and character?
4. What is the Great Sadness referred to in both the book and movie? Whose sadness is it? What causes it (beyond a specific event)?
5. How would you describe the religious life of the main character, Mackenzie Phillips (Mack), in the early part of the movie? How deep is it?
6. Mack’s two daughters have theological questions they ask during their camping experience after viewing a waterfall and hearing Mack tell a legend about its origin. What are they really wrestling with in terms of the Bible’s story about God and Jesus? What do you think about Mack’s answer?
7. The movie revolves around a tragic event. What does it do to Mack and his family? How do they respond emotionally, especially in terms of their personal feelings and thoughts about their own roles and God’s role in the event?
8. Does God’s portrayal in the movie bother you? Why or why not? Are you supposed to take it literally? (If not, how are you supposed to interpret the depiction of God?)

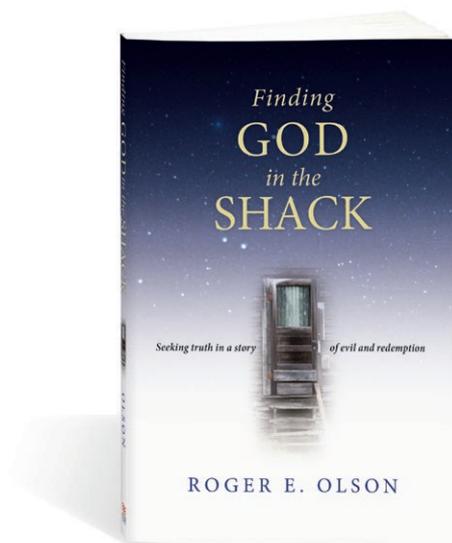
The movie, like the book, is intended to convince you to think a certain way about God, human existence in the world, tragedy, evil, and the meaning of life. The following questions are guides to thinking about these things in your life. So, the implied follow-up question for each of these is: “What do you think about this, and why?”

1. According to the movie, what is the real cause of Mack’s Great Sadness? (In the book, his Great Sadness refers to more than an emotional feeling or state of mind; it refers to something deeper in the human condition.)
2. The movie, like the book it is based on, contains a message about religion. What is that message?
3. How do the divine characters in the movie diagnose Mack’s condition? What do they tell him are the underlying causes of his emotional and spiritual malaise? What do they ask him to do?
4. The movie, like the book, contains and communicates a certain theological perspective about evil, tragedy, innocent suffering, humanity, and God. A pivotal point in all that seems to be a certain perspective on free will. What is it?
5. According to the movie (and book), what is the purpose of free will? What good does it serve? Why has God given it to humans? What are we supposed to do with it?
6. Perhaps the most poignant scene in the movie (and book) is Mack’s confrontation with Wisdom (an aspect of God) in a cave. What message does Wisdom give Mack about himself?
7. If we view the book and the movie as a kind of parable, whom does Mack represent?
8. *Theodicy* is the word used in philosophy and theology for any attempt to explain why there is evil and innocent suffering in a world created and ruled over by an all-good and all-powerful God. What is the movie’s theodicy?
9. How does the movie portray life after death?

10. What is the turning point for Mack in the story? At what point, and why, does the Great Sadness fall away?
11. Inevitably, viewers will have widely varying emotional responses to the story, depending partly on their own experiences of tragedy. Setting emotion aside as much as possible, what do you think about the movie's message about God, the human condition in this world, tragedy, evil, innocent suffering, forgiveness, salvation, etc.?

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