



Bell, Rob and Don Golden

Jesus Wants to Save Christians: A Manifesto for the Church in Exile

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth
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Part 1

Bell and Golden tell us in the introduction to the introduction that this is a “*book about a book*” that “*follows the narrative of the Bible.*” (8) I’m going to review this a bit differently than I have any other book. I’m simply going to show you my notes and expose you to my thoughts as I read through this volume. As you read, you’ll be reading my *actual* thoughts, like literally, the thoughts I think as I read this book. Seriously, these aren’t polished book review thoughts, they’re raw thinking thoughts. The kind of thoughts that you think before you edit them in your mind to speak through your mouth. Get it? Got it? Good. I’m like the narrator of this “book about a book [that] follows the narrative of the Bible.” So without further ado, here goes nothing... or... something... or... might be both... or... neither... [Note that all page numbers refer to the advance reader copy I was sent; I don't know if there were any changes made to the published hardcover edition.]

<thoughts>

Ooh... UPS truck... Please be for me, please be for me! Wope, he’s pulling in front of the house... is he... yes!!! He is! He’s walking up the driveway... Sweet!!! Small package, who’s this one from? Zondervan. Ahh, this is the one Chris was talking about. God I hope Bell isn’t the emerjerk that I expect him to be. Let’s see. What’s up with this package? Why is it giving me trouble opening i... ahh, there we go. Hmmm... weird cover. Reminds of of the graph paper we used to use in school. Might as well crack it open and start reading it. Well, hold on... I should post about it first.

[Informs readers about the book: <http://rdtwot.wordpress.com/2008/09/29/new-review-book/>]

Alright, let’s see what this is about. An introduction to the introduction? That’s just stupid. Okay, it’s a “*book about a book,*” I get that. The Bible is a “*narrative,*” check. That seems to

be a very popular buzz word these days... “narrative,” “narrative,” “narrative.” It does roll off the tongue. I wonder if it will lose all its meaning if I keep saying it over and over. Anyway...

Oh no, “*shout outs.*” These guys are trying to show us youngins how cool they are. That’s annoying. Just say thanks, what’s wrong with that? I hope the whole book isn’t filled with such dork-like pseudo-coolisms. Alright, the real introduction. Let’s see what they have to say. Hold on a second, Rob BELL and Don GOLDEN? That’s a strange coincidence... that’s like the reverse of the Golden Bell diner. Man I hate that diner! Why are they so expensive?!! Alright, focus Nick, read, read, read!

“Air Puffers and Rubber Gloves” huh? What’s that about? I guess I’ll find out. Uh oh... they begin by talking about the “*first family*” being “*dysfunctional*” (12). I can already see where this is going. Why does he start with Cain and Abel and not Adam and Eve? That’s weird. They sinned first. Isn’t that the beginning of the dysfunction? Okay, Cain went out “*east of Eden,*” so what? Adam and Eve did too (Gen. 3:24). Oh God...

The writer, or writers, of Genesis keeps returning to this eastward metaphor, insisting that something has gone terribly wrong with humanity, and that from the very beginning humans are moving in the wrong direction. (13)

Uhh... metaphor? How? Oh, (t)he(y) doesn’t explain that... big surprise there. What about the Magi seeing the star in the EAST (Mat. 2:2, 9) and following it to young Jesus? Was that the wrong direction? Didn’t Jesus say that his coming would be like the lighting that flashes from the EAST to the west (Mat. 24:27)? Jesus must have been starting out in the wrong direction, huh? Let’s grab the concordance and see what other east verses there are. Ahh, Numbers 3:38, the tabernacle was towards the EAST. Wrong direction, must’ve been. Job 1:3 huh? Job was from the EAST. We all know how he was going in the wrong direction, what, with his blamelessness, uprightness, and fear of the Lord. Ooh, Zechariah 14:4, it’s messianic! The messiah is going to touch down on the Mount of Olives? In the EAST?!! Alright, I’m convinced... Golden’s and Bell’s “metaphor” doesn’t hold up.

Oh boy, an analogy. So Bell is in the airport and he gets stopped and put into an “air puffer.” Okay, it’s supposed to make him feel safe and at the same time violated? I don’t get it, what’s his point? Now he’s talking about the news... and back to the air puffer... now back to the news... wow! He’s going to keep doing this, isn’t he? Yup, back and forth, forth and back. Oh Jesus, what did Chris get me into? What’s his point?!! I know he has to have some kind of point, doesn’t he? Oh... I see. The news says that “*American forces are now occupying [a] Middle Eastern country until peace can fully be realized within its borders.*” (17) Yeah, okay... and? Ahh... I see, “*Jesus was Middle Eastern man who lived in an occupied country and was killed by the superpower of his day.*” (17) So we’re like the superpower who killed Jesus! The Church is like the dysfunctional Cain who killed Abel and America is like the world superpower who killed Jesus. I get it, and I HATE it!!!

Oh well, gotta keep reading. Well, no, I don’t actually. I’ll pick it up later.

</thoughts>

To be continued...

Part 2

<thoughts>

Alright, let's see where these guys are going with this. Okay, chapter one "The Cry of the Opressed;" I wonder what they're crying about. Maybe they're crying about Bell and Golden calling Exodus the "*first book of the Bible*" (19, 22). How do they justify that? Oh, I got it, "*many scholars see Exodus, the second book of the Bible, as the book in which the central story of redemption begins — liberation from Egypt.*" (22) That's debatable, but who cares? Let's continue...

Egypt is an empire,
built on the backs of Israelite slave labor,
brick by
brick by
brick. (22)

True enough, although I'm pretty sure it was around before it enslaved the Israelites. And why, oh why do they do this retarded sentence structuring? If they just wrote it normal then this would be like a 90 page book. What editor came up with this scheme?!! This is seriously annoying me... anyway... alright, God sees the misery of the people and hears their cries. Good and well. This is the "catalyst" for the "new story." Alright, I can live with that.

Think about your life. (23)

Do I have to?

What are the moments that have shaped you the most. If you were to pick just a couple, what would they be? (23)

Doesn't much matter, whatever they are they're radically different than what was going on with Israel in Egypt. Why do authors like to apply stuff that isn't applicable? There's more than enough stuff that is... why bother with the stuff that isn't? Maybe these questions would have more relevance to a person who's been a slave... who knows?

In any event... This was the beginning of their liberation. Okay, I can see that. Alright, back to Genesis... Adam and Eve ate fruit... Cain killed Abel... Lamech is avenged 77 times... the whole world is headed for destruction except for Noah and his family... Yeah, I guess that's a "dramatic progression." (25) Oh wait, now "*The story is a tragic progression: the broken, toxic nature at the heart of a few humans has now spread to the whole world.*" (26)

Slavery is “*anti-kingdom*” — okay, if they say so. So then Egypt is “*anti-kingdom*” — alright, I guess. Exodus is about “*liberation*” — yeah, that makes sense. God sends Moses — yup. Moses takes Israel to Sinai — uh huh. God speaks... “*Sinai is the breaking of the silence.*” (29)

And it happens in the wilderness, which has global implications. Because the Sinai event happened in the wilderness and not in the midst of a nation or city or province where someone could make ownership claims, it was for all the people of the world. (29)

It was? Oh wait, there’s an end note. God, why did you ever allow people to think up end notes? The existence of end notes is more of a problem for theodicy than the “problem of evil!” And before I check this note way in the back of the book, please Lord, tell me why they can’t cite the Scripture references in the text itself? Who on Earth puts Scripture citations as end notes?!! Oh, yeah, Golden and Bell, that’s who! Alright, let me find this stinkin’ note.

15 Somebody somewhere pointed this out to us, and we don’t remember where or when or who. If it was you, well done. Dinner is on us. (195, n. 15)

What?!! Huh??? They’re kidding right? Now that has got to be the most obnoxious thing I’ve ever seen. Make some stupid claim, put a freakin’ end note for it, and then say you don’t know where you heard it? What the heck is wrong with these guys? Is that supposed to be cute or funny or something? Well it isn’t! Anyway, wilderness usually represents testing. Jesus was tested (tempted) in the wilderness. The same can be said of Israel. And where are they getting that the ten commandments are universal from? Oh, that’s right... they don’t remember! I guess it doesn’t matter who God was addressing, he was obviously talking to everyone cuz they were in the desert. I got it.

Alright, God calls priests. He tells Moses that he’ll be like God to Pharaoh. Wait, what’s that?

The answer leads us to a universal truth: God needs a body. God needs flesh and blood. God needs bones and skin so that Pharaoh will know just who this God is he’s dealing with and how this God acts in the world. And not just so Pharaoh will know but so that all of humanity will know. (31)

Universal truth? Too many “needs” in there for my liking. God doesn’t “need” anything, let alone people to mediate his word. He just got done speaking directly to Moses. He could have done that for Pharaoh too! Are they even connecting this to the incarnation? I guess I’ll have to wait for the narrative to progress to find out.

Okay, Egypt to Sinai, to the Promised Land (Israel). Now it’s generations later... got it. Solomon’s king now. He uses his wealth and power to build the temple. What’s that? He builds it with slave labor? Oh no! God forbid! “*This is a major moment in the Bible. In just a few generations, the oppressed have become the oppressors.*” [p. 39] Never really thought about that before. I guess Golden and Bell aren’t all that bad. Alright, Solomon uses his slaves to build military bases, and he has a bunch of horses and chariots. Just like Egypt. “*Jerusalem is the new Egypt.*” [p. 41] Bit of an overstatement, but ok.

Solomon breaks the covenant through idolatry because he took all those wives and concubines he shouldn't have been messing with in the first place. Fine. Some nonsense about 666 being “*a very Jewish way of saying that something is evil, dark, wrong, and opposed to God.*” [p. 43] Documentation? Nah, not a chance. Moving along... The Babylonians come along and destroy the temple. Israel is exiled. And now in Babylon they once again become servants.

Does this sound familiar?

Sounds a lot like Egypt, doesn't it? (49)

Yup. Definitely a pattern there.

Oppressed → Liberated → Oppressive → Oppressed again.

I bet they'll be liberated again! Let's see...

</thoughts>

To be continued...

Part 3

This will be the final installment in my review of *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*. This one will be more critical though and not just the random thoughts that I've shared in my first two posts.

I want to begin by saying that after reading this book I'm still not sure what it was about. I think it's supposed to be about the Church not being oppressive and helping the poor, but it seems to me that Bell and Golden could have communicated this better. It's also a frustrating book, not so much because I disagree with a lot of what it says, but rather because there's a lot of assertion without argument. For example, Bell and Golden assert that when Paul speaks of the “body of sin” and “body of flesh” that it is “*anywhere that power is misused.*” (104) But what comes before this i.e., their insistence that Paul uses the terms in a “*communal Jewish sense to refer to the sinful mode of existence*” doesn't bare out the interpretation that follows. It's simply one piece of a larger picture.

Or there's the claim that:

God's judgment, then, on the firstborn of Egypt is a declaration that the gods behind Pharaoh's brutal and oppressive rule are powerless and will be allowed to tyrannize humanity no longer. (147)

Maybe, maybe not; there's simply no argument for this interpretation so how is the reader to judge the value of it? Perhaps the judgment on the firstborn of Egypt was retribution for Egypt's slaughter of Israel's sons (Ex. 1:15-16). This is as seemingly valid an assertion as theirs, what's to keep one from rejecting it? Obviously you can see how such things would be frustrating. They're also inconsistent in how they want to apply the Scriptures. On p. 135 they ask the

question of whether or not the original readers of Revelation would think that the book would be helpful for Christians 2000 years later who didn't want to be left behind. Their point was that it meant something in its original context and should be viewed as such. But a few pages earlier on p. 128 they assert that *"if you're a citizen of an empire that has the most powerful army in the history of humanity [i.e. America]...passages in the Bible about those who accumulate chariots and horses from Egypt are passages about you and your people."* To put it mildly, I'd qualify their hermeneutic as "suspect" at best.

I was also disappointed by what seemed to be moments of anti-American sentiment. They pay lip service to the good that America as a nation does, but in the next breath compare it to the oppressive empires throughout the world's history. But the connection between "power" and "oppression" while easy to make in the case of empires such as the Babylonian, Medio-Persian, and Greco-Roman empires is not nearly as easy to make in the case of the United States of America. No one is defending stealing land from the natives or slavery, but Bell and Golden are speaking of current events, America as it presently exists. They make mention of a US government official saying that the US must have free access to the Persian Gulf's resources, i.e. oil (127) as if to say that America has been over there taking what we want. Anyone living here and paying the extremely high prices for gas knows that this isn't what's been happening at all.

World War II era America is criticized for dropping nuclear bombs saying that *"we didn't have to. The Japanese were already defeated."* (130) But the fact remains that Japan didn't surrender until AFTER the bombs were dropped, regardless of the speculation that they MIGHT HAVE surrendered soon if they had not been bombed. Now don't get me wrong, there's nothing wrong with criticism where you feel it's necessary, but Bell and Golden skew the facts in order to support their position, and that in my opinion is less than admirable.

Golden and Bell at times say things and appeal to experience, but my experience of those things is contrary to their assertion. For instance, in talking about Paul's saying that he became Jew to the Jew, one as under the law to those under the law, weak to the weak, etc., their point is to stress that Paul only says that he became weak and not strong. They say:

If you've ever been to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, you know exactly what this is like. An AA meeting is a room full of people who are done pretending. There are no facades. There is no acting. And it's overwhelmingly powerful. Everybody in that room is in recovery from addiction, and they all know each other's games, masks, and manipulations. A whole world of posturing and pretending is simply absent. You're there because you have hit bottom, at least most of the time, and you need others who know how it feels. (153-4)

But this is so far from the truth as to be ridiculous! I've been to many AA and NA meetings and everything that Bell and Golden assert is absent from the meetings is actually there in abundance! I don't wish to speculate about the authors' life experience, but I have to question if they've ever been on the addiction side of the meetings they've been to (assuming they've been to any at all).

This is a small point but I didn't particularly care for some of the chapter titles such as: "Genital-Free Africans" (ch. 4); "Swollen-Bellied Black Babies, Soccer Moms on Prozac, and the Mark of the Beast" (ch. 5). I suppose that they're intended to be intentionally provocative, but I can see how some readers might perceive them to be somewhat offensive. Another small point, well, actually not so small, is their appropriation of the word "Eucharist" to refer to members of the Church. The reasoning is that because Christ's body and blood is the eucharist, and we're members of the body of Christ, then we also are the eucharist, and as such are to have our bodies broken and our blood poured out for the healing of the world. (153) This turns into an obscene overuse of the term as a theological buzz word, and I found it extremely annoying.

To be honest I could rant about this book so much that it would amount to more material than is in the book itself, but I'll end on a positive note. Bell and Golden do help the reader to see some patterns in Scripture that they otherwise might have missed. They do seem to express a genuine concern for the disenfranchised of the world. But I think that there are better ways of going about voicing such concerns and calling people to action. I don't think we need to engage in the type of interpretation and rhetoric that Golden and Bell do to accomplish the mission that they are seeking to accomplish. I wouldn't recommend this book to anyone but it's not the worst thing I've ever read.