

Title: Stay out of *The Shack*
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When the prophet Isaiah and the apostle John caught glimpses of God, they were overcome with despair at their own unworthiness in the light of His glory. The same could be said of Daniel or Paul, or any number of figures from Scripture.

But when the protagonist of a new book called *The Shack* is introduced to the Father of heaven, he is greeted by a "large, beaming, African-American woman" who goes by the name of Papa.

If you have not heard about *The Shack*, there is a good chance you will soon. A novel self-published about a year ago by William P. Young, the book has gained quite a following in Christian circles. It is still among the top ten sellers at Amazon.com. And when it receives a glowing endorsement from a scholar whom I respect, like Eugene Peterson, it is not a phenomenon that discerning Christians can ignore.

The story is about a man named Mack, who is struggling in the aftermath of the brutal murder of his young daughter. One day he finds a note in his mailbox—apparently from God. God wants Mack to meet Him at "the shack," the place where his daughter was killed.

When he arrives, the shack and the winter scene around it transform, Narnia-like, into a mystical mountain paradise, perhaps meant to be heaven itself. Now dwelling in the shack are three mysterious figures—the African-American woman, a Middle Eastern workman, and an Asian girl—who reveal themselves as God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The rest of the book is basically a discussion between Mack and the three persons of the Trinity. While the discussion is mostly on the deep topics of creation, the fall, freedom, and forgiveness, too often the author slips in silly lines that, frankly, seem ridiculous in the mouth of the godhead. Jesus, looking at Papa, says, "Isn't she great?" At one point, Papa warns Mack that eating too many of the greens in front of him will "give him the trots." And when Jesus spills batter on the floor and on Papa, Jesus then washes Her—or is it His?—feet. Papa coos, "Oh, that feels sooooo good." Ugh.

Okay, it is only an allegory. But like *Pilgrim's Progress*, allegories contain deep truths. That is my problem. It is the author's low view of Scripture. For example, Mack is tied to a tree by his drunken, abusive father, who "beats Mack with a belt and Bible verses." The author reflects derisively in another spot that "nobody wanted God in a box, just in a book. Especially an expensive one bound in leather with gilt edges, or was that 'guilt' edges."

The Bible, it seems, is just one among many equally valid ways in which God reveals Himself. And, we are told, the Bible is not about rules and principles; it is about relationship. Sadly, the author fails to show that the relationship with God must be built on the truth of who He really is, not on our reaction to a sunset or a painting.

That is not to say *The Shack* is without merit. The centrality of Christ and God's breathtaking, costly love come through loud and clear. But these truths are available everywhere in Scripture, everywhere in Christian literature. You do not have to visit *The Shack* to find them.

As Papa warns Mack, God is not who Mack expects He is. But He is also not what our creative imaginations make Him to be, either.

He Is, after all, Who He Is.