

FOREWORD

When I became a Christian back in 1984 I soon discovered that there were “sound” theologians and “unsound” theologians. J. A. T. Robinson was very definitely on the list of those I was told were “unsound.” Now I ought to add that we evangelicals loved his 1976 work on *Redating the New Testament*¹ because it was very conservative. But this was in part because we could say, “Look! *Even* such a woolly-minded liberal as John Robinson argued for the historicity of such and such, and clearly *he*—being an apostate—had no axe to grind!” ☺

For the most part, our dislike of Robinson was grounded on his 1963 book, *Honest to God*—an attempt to reconceptualize the very notion of “God” in ways that Robinson thought connected better with the modern world—but those of us who were aware of Robinson’s earlier explorations into universalism had extra reason to regard him as *persona non grata*. In our view Robinson was *always* a “bad egg” and over time he got increasingly “smelly”!

By the time Robinson wrote *Honest to God* his thinking had moved on from where he was at in 1949 and 1950 when he wrote his first book, *In the End, God . . .* Indeed, in the second edition of *In the End, God . . .* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) Robinson included two new chapters (not included in this edition) which reframed the old book in the light of subsequent changes in western culture and theology. He wrote: “I wondered, as I read [the original edition] after an interval in which so much water had passed under the bridge, how much of it I could make my own today. I was surprised. In one sense, I could never write it now. In another I found I wanted to alter remarkably little. I did not wish to

1. Now available from Wipf and Stock.

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withdraw anything of *substance* I had said. Yet I could not begin to say it *like that* now.”²

When I first decided to read Robinson’s exploration into universalism (during the period that I was rethinking my own beliefs on the issue) I had quite a lot of trouble chasing down a copy. In the end a visit to the library at Spurgeon’s College in London enabled me to read it, and a shrewd purchase at a second hand bookshop in Salisbury placed a copy of the original edition in my hands. So I read Robinson without having his ideas mediated through the filter of his later *Honest to God* thinking. And I think that this is indeed the best way to read *In the End, God . . .*—in the first instance, at least.

Rereading the book for this special edition was a fascinating experience. On one hand, it feels very dated. The social, ecclesial, and theological context in which he wrote has changed significantly (indeed, he himself was acutely aware of the changes in context between the publication of the first edition in 1950 and the second edition in 1968). Scholarship—both biblical and theological—has very definitely moved on, and eschatology is no longer thought of as an ugly duckling or the “optional extra” for those who want to add a little quirkiness to life. And yet, on the other hand, I was struck by how insightful—indeed ahead of its time—Robinson’s book was, and how helpful it remains. I want to offer a few thoughts about that.

The theological interpretation of the Bible is very fashionable these days—and rightly so. What struck me on rereading *In the End, God . . .* was what a deep and profoundly *theological* interpreter of Scripture Robinson was. At the very heart of this book lies a profound insight: that eschatology is not a road map for the future (in the sense that fundamentalists think that it is) but is, rather, a function of our doctrine of God. A distinctive biblical understanding of Yahweh, the God of Israel, is that Yahweh is the Lord of *history* and that, as a consequence, history has a *telos*. Thus Christian eschatology can never abandon this space-time universe but must embrace it within the end time, redemptive purposes of God. As Robinson says, eschatology is “the explication of what must be true of the end, both of history and of the individual, if God is to be the God of biblical faith.”³ Any eschatology that does not

2. J. A. T. Robinson, *In the End, God . . .* New York: Harper & Row, 1968, 1. Italics mine.

3. Ch. 2, 23.

comport with the *biblical* God—the loving Lord of history—fails to be an integrally Christian eschatology. The words “loving Lord of history,” though not used by Robinson, capture the heart of his view of eschatology. This God is “Lord” and *will* bring about his purposes. He is Lord of “history” so those purposes concern *this cosmos*. He is “loving” and so those purposes will be *kind and good*. Bad eschatology is derived from an inadequate doctrine of God. Everything else in the book flows from that core insight and it is an inspirational insight.

Robinson’s grasp of the fundamental importance of eschatology for perceiving the significance of life in the present is also very helpful. His insights into the way in which all present events must be seen in the light of the end and from the perspective of the end are spot on! And his appreciation of the fundamental unity of the first and second advents—that the second coming is, in part, a way of bringing out the eschatological character of the first—reflect a theologically sensitive reading of New Testament texts.

Robinson argues that the *form* in which eschatology is embodied is *myth*. Myth is a notoriously slippery word but, if used with caution and clarity, it can be helpful. I find myself in agreement with much of what he writes but, I confess, I am unable to go as far as he goes. My main concern regards what seems to me to be *too sharp* a disjunction between what Robinson calls *kairos* time (time as measured by significance and purpose) and what he calls *chronos* time (chronological clock-time).⁴ Now the distinction is helpful and does highlight important dimensions of eschatological time. But, whilst *kairos* and *chronos* can be *distinguished* with profit—and Robinson has some really helpful things to say on the basis of the distinction—they cannot be *pulled apart* without causing theological mischief. And sometimes Robinson seems to pull them apart too far. On occasion, he appears to suggest that Christian eschatology projects certain futures as *no more than* a way to speak of the theological significance of the *present*. Thus he writes that, “the Christian has no more knowledge of or interest in the final state of this planet than he has in its first . . . Of course, the Christian cannot say that the ‘events’ of the end will *not* literally take place . . . He can only declare that, as a Christian, he has no interest in these matters.”⁵

4. Obviously I use *kairos* and *chronos* to refer to *concepts* as developed and described by Robinson and *not* as any claim about the “meaning” of the Greek words.

5. Ch. 5, 62–63.

But surely that is just wrong. If the cosmos will never *actually* be “resurrected” at some future time then the very thing that invests the present with eschatological significance is voided and the myth becomes no more than wishful thinking—a *false* myth. How could a Christian be *indifferent* about such a thing? However, at other times Robinson seems conscious that the world really must come to a *temporal* destination (perhaps a better word than “end”) something like that presented in the vision of the new creation if the claims embodied in the eschatological “myths” are to be true. Thus he writes, “The temporal end . . . will certainly reflect and embody the moment of ultimate significance (as the last move in chess match translates into finality the move that really won).”⁶ Absolutely! Perhaps the balance required is best found when he says, “the meaning of history must be vindicated *within* history and yet . . . the complete purpose of God must *transcend* history.”⁷

Robinson’s chapter on Paul’s theology of the “body” (*soma*) is both a nice summary of some of the insights of his book *The Body*—a book that still warrants serious consideration—and represents a great example of the theological interpreter at work. The discussion is nuanced and enlightening. It offers a view of humanity as fundamentally embodied and as corporate. It is not the body that individuates the person—the boundaries of bodies are porous—but the call of God. Fascinating stuff! And the corporate solidarity expressed by the body allows Robinson to observe, almost in passing, that “not till *all* have found themselves in [the body of Christ], and everything is finally summed up in Christ, will this salvation be complete for *any*.”⁸ This idea—that the full salvation of *any* requires the final salvation of *all*—is one that warrants a fuller theological exposition.

As a universalist what most fascinates me about this book is the way in which Robinson tries to take with *equal seriousness* the biblical teaching on universal salvation *and* the biblical teaching on hell. It fascinates me because it is so original and so thought provoking. Traditionally universalists have tried to find ways to hold the two strands in the biblical texts together by arguing that they are, contrary to appearances, not inconsistent. So the texts about hell need not refer

6. Ch. 4, 48.

7. Ch. 7, 88.

8. Ch. 7, 92.

to a place of eternal torment but can be thought to refer to a temporary punishment. This universalist strategy—albeit worked out in different ways—runs through from Clement of Alexandria to the current day. In fact, for the record, it is my own strategy.⁹ Yet, surprisingly for a universalist, Robinson did not even dialogue with this view, except to dismiss it in passing. For him it was clear that the hell texts meant exactly what the mainstream tradition maintains—eternal separation from God. But, equally, the universal salvation texts—contrary to the claims of the mainstream tradition—*really do* teach universal salvation. So to hold the traditional view of hell would be, in Robinson’s estimation, to reject a significant dimension of the biblical witness.

How does one hold together two contradictory sets of witness? One option is to say, as many “hopeful universalists” do, that each set represents a *possible* future—which possible future will be actualized is, in the end, down to human free choices. (In this book the article by Thomas F. Torrance in Appendix 2 represents this perspective, although Torrance does not refer to it as “hopeful universalism.”) Robinson will have none of that! The Bible does not say that God *may* be all in all, but that God *will be* all in all!

So how does Robinson navigate the contradiction? By appeal to his theological claim that eschatology is actually about what must be the case in the light of the present encounter with God-in-Christ. Given that God encounters us in *this* way and, in Christ, reveals himself to be *this* God then we must speak of the future in *this* way. Once that move is made then Robinson has a way to handle the hell texts. They describe the *real* destiny of any who reject God-in-Christ. Such an existential stance towards God alienates one from eternal life and, if that route is plotted into the future, the only consequence can be eternal hell. The person confronted by the gospel faces two real paths with two *real* destinies associated with them—life or death! New creation or hell! But *from God’s perspective* it is absolutely impossible that any will fail to embrace salvation-in-Christ in the end. Universalism is the only possible end. Now, I have admitted that this is not my own way of holding the two sets of texts together but I have to confess that I often find myself returning to Robinson’s route and pondering it afresh. I do find it fascinating and, in many ways, deeply attractive. And, who knows,

9. See Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*. Eugene: Cascade, 2006 / London: SPCK, 2008.

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perhaps one day I will own it as my own. But for now I am very happy to commend it for the reflection of readers.

It should be clear that there are aspects of the book that I feel uncomfortable with. To those already mentioned I could add Robinson's discussion of theology as "science" and his depreciation of *chronos* time in apocalyptic literature. Nevertheless, I have found myself impressed afresh at the enduring relevance and value of this little work and I really do hope it finds a new and enthusiastic readership in the twenty-first century.

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Author of *The Evangelical Universalist* (Cascade, 2006) and editor of *"All Shall Be Well": Explorations in Universal Salvation and Christian Theology, from Origen to Moltmann* (Cascade, 2010).

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