

[MJTM 15 (2013–2014)]

BOOK REVIEW

J. Webb Mealy. *The End of the Unrepentant: A Study of the Biblical Themes of Fire and Being Consumed*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013. 258 pp. Pbk. ISBN 1620327104.

J. Webb Mealy, author of *After the Thousand Years: Resurrection and Judgment in Revelation 20* (Sheffield Academic, 1992), has produced an interesting book on the topic of hell and eternal torment. He writes for the interested lay-person and does so with a high degree of honesty and respect for the text, acknowledging that theological issues can be complex. Particularly memorable is that he urges readers not to embrace the following syllogism: 1. God wouldn't want us to be uncertain about anything; 2. Bible teachings that were difficult to understand would make us uncertain; 3. therefore, every teaching in the Bible must be easy to understand (2). He states that "Hell" does not appear in the Greek or Hebrew Bible but is the KJV's translation of *gehenna* and *sheol*, which represent two different concepts.

To interpret passages, Mealy draws on ideas of intertextual influence and intra-biblical reception history. Noting that Jesus is referring to Isaiah 66, he states that the Christian idea of hell is based almost solely on Mark 9:43–48 // Matt 18:8–9, which pictures what will happen to the bodies of those excluded from the Kingdom of God. He states that in Isa 65:11–15 people are wailing at the termination of their own lives in the face of the eternal life granted to the faithful. He also draws on Ps 112:9–10 and, with Isaiah 65, puts it alongside some punishment sayings of Jesus to suggest that the phrase "weeping and gnashing of teeth" denotes emotional rather than physical anguish. Further, not all passages regarding punishment of the unrepentant involve fire (Matt 8:11–12; 22:1–14; Luke 13:28), and Mealy maintains that these also entail emotional rather than physical pain. Mealy

notes the language is being applied to unfaithful followers/disciples as a warning. He states that furnace imagery refers to God irrevocably disposing of the guilty like trash. Mealy posits that punishment in the intermediate state is a conscious but bodiless existence, a “refusal of resurrection and consignment to the underworld of Hades—rather than resurrection from Hades for final judgment and punishment” (53). Hades is pictured along Greek lines, as an underworld abode for spirits of humans who have died. Mealy draws intertextual links between Rev 14:9–12 and Isa 34:9–10, which is a metaphorical passage, therefore suggesting the former passage is to be taken metaphorically as well. Further, the final judgment and descriptions of an eschatological battle are metaphorical representations of the event that results in the unrepentant being consigned to destruction.

The final chapter (chapter 8) is perhaps the most interesting. Here Mealy concludes that the majority of relevant passages in the Bible speak of annihilation of the unrepentant, while four speak of a long and painful process of destruction, and only two speak of unending torment (Rev 14:10–11; 20:10). These two are to be traced to Isaiah 34, which speaks of Israel’s safety from an eternally-smoldering Edom. Since Edom is no longer smoldering, Isaiah 34 is to be taken as a metaphorical reassurance to Israel, and Revelation must be read in a similar manner.

Mealy says that we cannot take some biblical language literally because it is metaphorical. But he also admits that he may be misinterpreting the metaphor and is limited to giving his best qualitative evaluation. Further, the social function of Rev 14:11 and 20:10 is to motivate Christians to be faithful to the point of martyrdom, which for Mealy mitigates a literal reading in favor of a metaphorical reading. He contends people commonly adopt a literal reading on account of cultural influences such as Milton and reiteration of literal readings by authority figures. Further, people have difficulty conceiving of themselves and others as completely ceasing to exist, and so everlasting metaphors are used to denote finality.

Apart from the book’s ideas, its organization has some problems. There is no place where Mealy’s main thesis is summarized. The introduction is overly brief and does not state his

whole case, and the conclusion is more a continuation of the argument. Many of the chapters lack summaries, which are interspersed throughout the book but not in predictable places. Mealy includes an index of the major themes he surveys, and there is also a very good Scripture index and a brief ancient source index. However, Augustine is missing from the ancient source index, which is unfortunate, as Mealy presents him as the popularizer of notions of eternal punishment. There is also no subject index or bibliography, limiting the book's utility to scholars or pastors.

That said, Mealy writes an interesting book with many laudable features. He demonstrates a strong commitment to Scripture and respects the intelligence of the reader. He expects readers to be able to understand the influence of earlier texts on later ones. He also demonstrates a concern for the laity when he provides Strong's Concordance reference numbers for Greek and Hebrew words so that one without knowledge of these languages may look up the words for themselves.

Another laudable feature is Mealy's hermeneutical honesty and concern for accounting for cultural influences on interpretation. He writes, "One of the most common ways of twisting the Scriptures is to oversimplify them for the sake of creating a nice, neat doctrine that can prop up a false sense of certainty. Some of the things I'm going to say are going to have some complexity, for the simple reason that the Scriptures themselves have some complexity. I don't need to apologize for that" (2). He discusses the importance of reception history, levels of meaning, and personal hermeneutical grids. He even discusses Milton's *Paradise Lost* and its influence on biblical interpretation. Mealy uses this to argue the importance of reading the passages on their own terms as authoritative Scripture.

The result is a work strongly oriented towards biblical theology and all its complexities, rather than a work that is superficial or simplistic in outlook. The downside of not explaining how earlier texts influence later texts—while having the advantage of not putting non-specialists to sleep—is that he has difficulty identifying any criteria for deciding which texts are to be taken metaphorically and which are to be taken literally. This means

his conclusions cannot be taken as firmly as they could be otherwise, requiring him to use psychological arguments in chapter 8 to argue that God's character would not allow eternal torment and that Jesus is the object of humanity's wrath rather than God's wrath. This can be problematic since, while humans are created in the image of God, drawing one-to-one mental correlations between humans and the divine risks incorrect inferences. One also wonders if Mealy is in danger of oversimplifying the atonement.

This book would make a good addition to a church library, or could serve well as part of an adult Bible study. It may also be a useful item for pastors to give to laity concerned about the fate of the unrepentant after death.

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