Review: **JAH500**

POLITICALLY CORRECT AFTERLIFE

a book review of
The Five People You Meet in Heaven
by Mitch Albom
(Hyperion, 2004)

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In a song titled "Thank You" by Christian songwriter Ray Boltz, a Christian dreams of going to heaven and watching as a friend meets many people whom he (or she) influenced for good through such simple acts as teaching a Sunday School class or making a donation. In *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, author Mitch Albom creates a similar vision, except Jesus is absent and "God" is a nebulous figure who plays virtually no role in the novel.

Albom is a journalist for the *Detroit Free Press* and the author of *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Albom's touching account of his conversations with his former teacher, Morrie Schwartz, put *Tuesdays with Morrie* atop the nonfiction bestseller list. With *Five People*, Albom has now duplicated that feat in the fiction rankings. In this new book, Albom tells the story of "Eddie," an 83-year-old amusement park maintenance worker who is killed while trying to save a child from being crushed by a malfunctioning ride. Eddie finds himself in "heaven," where he is told that he will begin his eternal journey by meeting the five people who had the most profound influence on his life.

Albom is undeniably a skilled storyteller. He masterfully weaves together scenes of Eddie's experiences in the afterlife, flashbacks to Eddie's mortal life, and views of a friend arranging Eddie's affairs after his death. Albom's engaging style does not, however, erase questions about the religious propositions he implies in *Five People*. In the book's dedication, Albom tells readers, "Everyone has an idea of heaven, as do most religions, and they should all be respected." This theme of religious tolerance, surprisingly, is never again directly mentioned in the book, nor does Albom clearly refer to any particular religious system. Albom does not attempt to present a coherent doctrine of salvation or the afterlife, and it is unlikely that he intended to. Eddie's meeting with five people is merely a vehicle for Albom's primary message of the relational interconnectedness of all persons, a theme with which all Christians would agree. Christian theology teaches, for example, that one of the consequences of sin is that it can affect the lives of those around us; and Christians can certainly agree, as Boltz relates in his song, that the tiniest acts of generosity or kindness can touch the lives of people living on the other side of the globe, or ripple into eternity.

The reader, nevertheless, will find in *Five People* clues that Albom is committed to a principle of tolerance apart from any considerations of religious truth or consequences. The clues are in the questions that Albom does not answer but that lead to a conclusion that Albom thinks the truth or falsehood of what we believe is irrelevant; what matters more is that we eventually understand our place in the world and come to terms with it. There is no mention of any standard or rule of judgment that determines a person's eternal fate. The Bible is mentioned, but only as an accessory during a funeral (p. 49) and as part of a brief allusion to Adam (92). God makes only a cameo appearance (191), uttering a single word ("Home") that emerges from a choir of human voices in a way that is almost pantheistic. Eddie is told that he can always talk to God and that God knows where he is (171), but nothing in the novel indicates that God is someone with whom individual

humans have (or need to have) any significant relationship. During his life on earth, Eddie prays in a time of trouble (69, 105), but stops praying when it appears that his situation is hopeless (71). The phrase "Kingdom of Heaven" (111), furthermore, is used as a vague reference to the state of the afterlife with no obvious relevance to the biblical use of the phrase as a reference to God's ideological rule over humankind.

The closest Albom gets to describing a theology of salvation is when Eddie asks another character if he can go back to earth and work to improve his lot in the afterlife: "'Is there something I can do? Can I promise to be good? Can I promise to go to church all the time?'" The other character replies, "'You have peace…when you make it with yourself'" (112–13). Albom's theory of salvation seems to be that heaven is a state one achieves with understanding. Heaven is not a specific realm ruled by God; rather, it is an experience of "many steps" with the purpose of "understanding your life on earth." One of Eddie's "five people" says: "'This is the greatest gift God can give you: to understand what happened in your life. To have it explained. It is the peace you have been searching for'" (34–35). Once one has met his or her "five people," the second step is to live in a realm that is one's own heaven. Eddie's first person, for example, a circus performer, found his greatest happiness during specific years of his career, and his "heaven" is a living snapshot of those years when he was happiest. The "heaven" of Eddie's third person is a roadside diner, while his fourth person's "heaven" is a "world of weddings," based on her fondness for weddings and diverse cultures.

Albom deals with the problem of evil in a perfunctory and almost disturbing fashion; for example, Mickey, a friend of Eddie's father, nearly rapes Eddie's mother while in a drunken stupor (134). Eddie's third person explains Mickey's actions by pointing out that Mickey had just lost his job that same afternoon and was under serious stress. Mickey was "coarse, but he was not evil" (137), and he "acted on impulse," committing an "act of loneliness and desperation" (138). Albom certainly is not implying that all acts of moral evil can be explained in a similar way, but the ease with which he constructs such explanations leaves the reader feeling awkward about how Albom regards the problem of evil. There is no hint of the existence of a hell in Albom's story and no indication of how (if at all) God deals with human evil. One is tempted to wonder, therefore, whether, in Albom's heaven, a brutal dictator might meet five people who would help him "understand" his shortcomings, whether he might be described as someone who was "coarse, but not evil," and whether he would go on to a subjective paradise where his autocratic desires were completely fulfilled. Who is to say, apart from any clear notion of moral justice, what cruel dictators or barbaric criminals will find in their "heaven"?

I do not mean to imply that Albom would excuse the actions of dictators or criminals. His book is fiction and he likely had no intention of presenting a coherent theology of sin and salvation. It may be too much, therefore, to expect his book to answer questions such as, In Albom's world, what would happen to an evil dictator such as Stalin or Pol Pot? Albom, nevertheless, hints at how he thinks sin should be atoned for — not via the blood of Jesus, but through corrective action. Eddie's fifth person, for example, turns out to be a child whom Eddie unwittingly killed in wartime when he set the child's house on fire. The child has Eddie clean the burns on her body (190), apparently as a means of atoning for this error. Albom then hints that Eddie's entire life as an amusement park maintenance worker was planned — Eddie was where he was "supposed to be" (191), keeping children safe. Albom thus establishes an interconnectedness, not only among people who are on earth, but also between those who are on earth and those who are in "heaven."

Albom's implied message that there is an assured afterlife, a just means of atonement, an eternal purpose in the smallest actions, and that "all lives intersect" (48) resonates deeply with readers who are hungry for assurance, meaning, and community. These very needs are met in Jesus Christ. Jesus promises those who believe in Him forgiveness of sins (Rom. 5:10–11), a community of faith in the body of Christ (Rom. 12:5), and an eternal home with His Father (John 14:2). The Bible also assures us that "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God" (Rom. 8:28 NASB). Albom's book should remind us that the good news of the gospel is exactly what spiritually thirsty people desire most. Those who read Albom's book may find his message briefly comforting, but only the message of Jesus Christ can forever satisfy their spiritual thirst (John 4:14).

— reviewed by James Patrick Holding