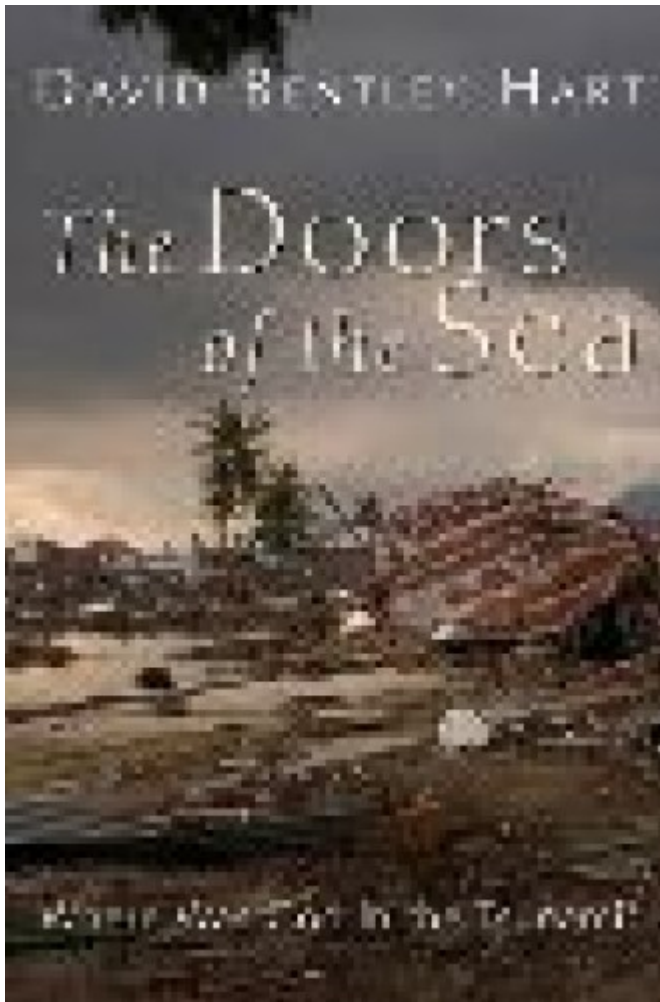


The Doors of the Sea

reviewed by [Willis Jenkins](#) in the [October 4, 2005](#) issue

In Review



The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?

David Bentley Hart
Eerdmans

December's Indian Ocean tsunami forced a haunting question to emerge anew: how could an omnipotent God permit such evil? In the midst of editorials expressing

incredulity at faith in God in the face of such unmerited suffering, theologian David Hart wrote articles in the *Wall Street Journal* and *First Things* insisting that not God but rebellious nature is to blame, that Christians share everyone's revulsion before suffering, and that only theology finally vindicates that revulsion as the shadow of hope. Hart appropriated the world's horror at the tsunami to proclaim the assurance of God's victorious love, upon which genuine outrage relies.

Hart guides the conversation away from morally perilous debates in which Christians suppose that they are competent to measure God's blameworthiness—or worse, in which we, like a friend of Job, discount our neighbor's suffering by trying to explain it away as part of some greater good. Hart borrows his title from Job 38 and repeats the greater part of the moral of Job's story: creaturely experience can claim no purchase on God's power. But Hart makes tellingly little of the moral implications of God's sarcastic wonder at hearing a creature complain about the planet's workings.

This volume bears Hart's trademark: searing, scintillating rhetoric deployed to celebrate a divine attribute over against some nascent modern blasphemy. This time the attribute is God's omnipotent love for creation over against a modernist failure to make meaningful distinctions between God's will and earthly experience. That failure, says Hart, tacitly refuses our creatureliness, facilitating accusations against God as well as the inadequate theodicies that try to answer them. One can read Hart's commentary just for the therapeutic exercise of remembering why most theodicies concede all the important ground from the start.

However, says Hart, we cannot simply skip over such debates in knowing disdain, for they are animated by something right and, at root, Christian: "an undoubtedly authentic moral horror before the sheer extravagance of worldly misery, a rage for justice . . . and unwillingness to be reconciled to evil." That moral protest relies, however unknowingly, on Christianity's "counter-history" of salvation, in which death has no meaning and suffering no purpose. Hart warns theology against cheapening this story by trying to recuperate evil by way of some logical process or ontological progressivism, which not only impoverishes God's providence but rationalizes our neighbors' suffering by making it less absurd, more intelligible, even necessary. That sort of theology gives us less reason, Hart forgets to say, for solidarity with the suffering, for offering ourselves to them in the hope and charity that allows a negative event to come to mean something in spite of itself.

I suspect that Hart forgets to say what is missionally fitting because he is eager to outdo the press in denouncing nature. Curiously underplaying the resources of his own Eastern Orthodox tradition, Hart only vaguely affirms that creation must be an “ecstasy of spiritual intelligence and desire.” Because he spends himself impugning nature’s vicious ways, he leaves readers unsure how the verdant earth simultaneously expresses the “yearning of all things for the goodness of God” and grotesquely spasms after a “blind, thrusting, idiotic heliotropism.” Knowing this would make a difference in how Christians regard seismic cycles—which, Hart recognizes, sustain our atmosphere—in distinction from the suffering they cause.

Instead Hart writes geographical descriptions that make Indonesia seem like Tolkien’s Mordor. Beneath those lands (largely bereft of Christian faith, Hart finds need to observe) “lies an elemental violence” that is “vast, convulsive, unpredictable, perennial, and destructive,” its nearly demonic power manifest in “those grim volcanic islands” that are the products of “savage geological ferment” and “an immense seam of unquenchable fire.” When by “imbecile chance,” in a “horrendous paroxysm of nature at her most murderous,” those tectonic plates cause a tsunami, even the deceptively lovely waters terrorize us with a reminder “that something enduringly hideous and abysmal must abide in the depths of life.”

All those frightening adjectives implicitly prove theology’s supernatural hope. They also suggest Hart’s confessed nearness to gnostic cosmology. Hart sees real warfare in the biblical encounter of creation and glory: God triumphs over nature’s futile rebellion, while microcosmic humans are rent by the crosscurrents. The tsunami represents the violent penalty, received in the earth’s own body, of primordial sin. Hart’s earth seems overrun with quasi-demonic threats, possessed only of an arcane secret foretelling a different realm that is glimpsed by those with spiritual aptitude for seeing the mystery.

Hart surely has theological resources for defending the goodness of creation within his reading of the biblical cosmos, but his adjectival petulance relies on obscuring some usual distinctions. Despite privileging reference to rational creation, Hart muddles together moral evils and incidental privations (murders and tsunami drownings), failing to offer meaningful distinctions between human sin and nonhuman phenomena. Instead, he seems to let creation’s groaning serve the presumption that the continents ought to move for human convenience (thus missing Job’s lesson). If so, Hart may facilitate another tacit refusal of creatureliness: his *Wall Street Journal* readers’ own vain, paroxysmic protests against creation. If

they were actually looking at the waters, they might have taken notice when the tides strangely receded. And they might understand the relation of sin to flooded coasts in more complicated ways.

For an essay so self-consciously of the moment, the strangest omission is Hart's failure to remind the church to steadfastly succor the victims. If charity is indeed the only possibility for creation's hope, how else to conclude than by recalling us to its practice? That would seem authentically Christian rhetorical opportunism: telling the world's newspapers that Jesus embraces people in their jeopardy, and calling the church to enact that bodily mission. Whatever horrors and whatever glories this earth bears will be discovered only in that context.