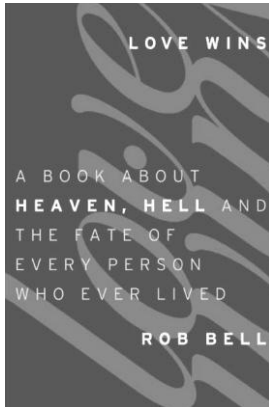


Cutting-Edge Obsolescence: Rob Bell's Reliance on a Long-Discredited Universalist Rendering of Matthew 25:46 in *Love Wins*



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In his new book, *Love Wins*, popular pastor Rob Bell repeats a number of familiar Universalist arguments. The present note focuses on one of these that is particularly problematic. It has to do with Bell's interpretation of Matthew 25:46, where Jesus concludes his teaching on the separation of the sheep from the goats by saying "Then they [the goats] will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (v. 26). Bell claims that "the Greek language" in that passage refers to "an *aion of kolazo*"¹ which, he says, ought to be translated not "eternal punishment" but "a period of trimming" or "a time of pruning." Bell asserts that the "word *kolazo* is a term from horticulture" and that it "refers to the pruning and trimming of the branches of a plant so it can flourish." Before getting started discussing Bell's proposed translation we need to set a few things straight in relation to what he seems to think is going in the Greek. In the first place, the word in the passage usually translated either "eternal" (e.g., ASV, NASV, RV, RSV, NRSV, NEB, NLT, NAB, NIV, ESV, The Message²) or "everlasting" (e.g., Tyndale,

¹ Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 91.

² Eugene H. Peterson, who, by the way, plugs Bell's book on its dust jacket, has Christ say in *The Message* that the fate of the goats is "eternal doom." Interestingly even the translators of *The Inclusive New Testament*, who felt compelled to discretely remove all gender references to the Whore of Babylon

Bishops, Geneva, and Great Bibles, KJV, NKJ, Goodspeed) is not the noun *aion*, as Bell seems to think, but the adjective *aionios*. The distinction is meaningful, but we won't be spending time on it in the present note. Also, the word he translates "pruning," "trimming" is not *kolazo*, which is a verb, but the related noun *kolasis*. Now that we have gotten the words turned round right we are in a better position to investigate the connection between Bell's statements and those of older Universalist sources. One source from the nineteenth century that comes to mind is M. J. Steere's 1862 book *Footprints Heavenward: Or Universalism the More Excellent Way*, which says:

The leading idea of the word *kolasis* is, then, that of pruning, correction. And I submit whether, to speak of endless *pruning* or endless *correction* of a *hopeless* soul, at the hands of the perfect God, were not *absurd*...Certainly, the punishment which is *corrective* cannot be *endless*. The word *kolasis* is used to express punishment, nowhere else in the New Testament. Under the definition above given, it takes the adjective, *aionion*, most naturally, as an indefinite modifier, merely expressing the fact that the punishment will continue, till its object is fully gained.³

Although Bell's interpretation was common among 19th century Universalists, he could also have gotten it from some more recent advocate of universalism like William Barclay, a writer well known for his popular Daily Bible Study Series. *Kolasis*, Barclay wrote,

was originally a gardening word, and its original meaning was pruning trees...*Kolasis* is remedial discipline. *Kolasis* is always given to amend and to cure...*Aiōnios kolasis* is therefore the disciplinary punishment, designed for the cure of men, which may last throughout many ages, and which only God can give.⁴

from their translation of the book of Revelation due to their conviction that "The offending phrases—'Whore of Babylon' and 'Great Prostitute'—are both sexist and genderist"—calling her "it" for example in 17:5—were still willing to consign the goats "to eternal punishment" in Matt 25:46 (Priests for Equality, *The Inclusive New Testament* [Oxford: AltaMira, 1996], xv).

³ M. J. Steere, *Footprints Heavenward: Or Universal Salvation the More Excellent Way* (Boston: James M. Usher, 1862), 331-32.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Apostles Creed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998 [1967]), 189. Barclay describes himself as a "convinced universalist" in his *A Spiritual Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975),

Notice how Steere had stated that *kolasis* refers specifically to “punishment which is corrective,” and Barclay, to “remedial discipline...always given to amend and to cure.” Barclay explains the rationale behind this claim by appealing to Aristotle:

In Greek there are two words for punishment, *timōria* and *kolasis*, and there is a quite definite distinction between them. Aristotle defines the difference; *kolasis* is for the sake of the one who suffers it; *timōria* is for the sake of the one who inflicts it (*Rhetoric* 1.10).⁵

If *kolasis* referred to pruning *and* to punishment of a kind strictly limited to corrective or remedial action, then clearly Bell and the Universalists might well have a point about the way Matt 25:46 ought to be rendered. And there was a time when Universalists could confidently refer their readers to trusted non-Universalist sources for support. Should a late 19th century Universalist, for example, want to make the point Barclay and Bell are making all he would have had to do is point his readers to the 1882 7th edition of Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott’s massive and magisterial *Greek-English Lexicon*, where they would find the verb *kolazo* defined as “Properly, *to curtail, dock, prune*” and *kolasis* as “*a pruning or checking the growth of trees.*” He would also find in the entry for *kolazo* the following note on Aristotle which seemingly confirmed what Barclay would later say:

The difference between *κολάζω* [*kolazo*] and *τιμωρέομαι* [*timoreomai*] is stated in Arist. Rhet. 1.10, 17, to be that the former regards *correction of the offender*, the latter *the satisfaction of the offender*.

By the time the 9th edition of Liddell & Scott appeared in 1940, however, the situation had changed. The words “Properly, *to curtail, dock, prune*” were dropped from the definition of *kolazo*, to be replaced by “a drastic method of checking the growth of the almond-tree.” As for *kolasis*, the definition “*a pruning or checking the growth of trees,*” was shortened to read instead “checking the growth of trees,” with the additional clarification: “esp. almond-trees.”

58, where he also gives this same argument in defense of his Universalist position (p. 60).

⁵ Barclay, *Apostles Creed*, 189.

In addition to all this the entire reference to the distinction between *kolazo* and *timoreomai* (i.e., *timōria* and *kolasis*), along with its supportive appeal to Aristotle, were removed. This change of opinion reflected in Liddell & Scott signaled an apparent loss of confidence concerning an assumed historical connection between *kolazo/kolasis* and *kolos* (“docked”)/*kolouo* (“to dock,” “prune”). Liddell & Scott had originally derived their affirmation of this assumption from their German source, Franz Passow’s *Handwörterbuch der griechischen Sprache*. In the earliest edition of Liddell & Scott I have access to (1848), they are very confident about the connection, saying in reference to *kolazo* that it is “No doubt akin to *κολοῦω* [*kolouo*]” and as a result “strictly to *curtail*, *dock*, *prune*.” In subsequent editions the “No doubt” was downgraded to a “Prob. [Probably],” and then, ultimately, dropped altogether.

I cannot help but suspect that part of the difficulty lay in the fact that the only examples offered where there was any sort of clear horticultural connection with *kolazo/kolasis* derived from a single author, namely Theophrastus of Eresos (3rd/4th cent. BC), and in particular to a passage in a work where he used *kolazo* in a sense in which the concept of punishment appears already to be there. Consider Arthur Hort’s Loeb Classical Library translation of the crucial passage where *kolazo* is used: “Into the almond tree they drive an iron peg, and, having thus made a hole, insert in its place a peg of oak-wood and bury it in the earth, and some call this ‘punishing’ the tree, since its luxuriance is thus chastened (ὁ καὶ καλοῦσί τινες κολάζειν ὡς ὑβρίζον τὸ δένδρον).”⁶ More directly, that final phrase would read something like: “which some call ‘to punish,’ as the tree was running wild.” It is primarily this passage that provided the current edition of Liddell with its revised definition “a drastic method of checking the growth of the almond-tree.” And please note that Theophrastus’s language has more to do with *stunting* growth than, to recall Rob Bell’s words, “the pruning and trimming of the branches of a plant so it can flourish.”

Unfortunately some outdated works continue to exercise influence on New Testament scholars. If you go online for example to the Perseus Project and look up *kolazo* on their online version of the Liddell & Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, you will be told the old story about the verb probably being derived from *kolos*, akin to *kolouo*, and that it means “to *curtail*, *dock*, *prune*.” The reason for this is that even though Oxford University Press keeps reprinting that lexicon, it has not updated it since 1889. The Perseus Project version says the same thing as my own 1975 reprint. Both are derived from the 1882 full-sized 7th

⁶ Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants (Historia plantarum)* 2.7.6 (LCL).

edition of Liddell & Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon*, and both are out of date at this point.

Similarly older works that continue to exercise influence over interpreters of Scripture also continue to give currency to the older view. An example is Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, which again derives *kalazo* from *kolos*.⁷ Happily all three editions (1957, 1979, 2000) of the most authoritative lexicon of New Testament Greek, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG), says nothing about "pruning," nor for that matter about any sort of horticultural background for *kolazo* and *kolasis*. Nor do they assert a historical connection between these words and *kolos/kolouo*. Furthermore, the 3rd edition actually moved a step beyond the 2nd by explicitly addressing the appeal regularly made to Aristotle in order to establish, as Barclay said, that "*Kolasis* is always given to amend and to cure."⁸ That Aristotle's distinction implies what Barclay and older editions of Liddell & Scott claimed has always been conspicuously false.⁹ One need only recall statements using the verb or noun in cases where the total destruction of the individual being punished is in view in order to see this, as for example, when 4 Macc 8:9 uses *kolasis* as follows: "If you provoke me to anger by your disobedience, you will compel me to the use of dreadful punishments (*deinai kolasesin*) to destroy each and every one of you by torture."¹⁰ Liddell & Scott did well by dropping the claim about the Aristotelian distinction and it is somewhat disappointing to find that a scholar like

⁷ "κολάζω, κόλασις," TDNT 3:814.

⁸ William Barclay, *The Apostles Creed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998 [1967]), 189. Barclay describes himself as a "convinced universalist" in his *A Spiritual Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 58, where he also gives this same argument in defense of his universalist position (p. 60).

⁹ Liddell and Scott appear to have taken the claim over from Passow, who had written in his entry for *kolazo*: "Den Unterschied zwischen *κολάζω* u. *timwrew* bestimmt Arist. Rhet. 1,10,17. So dass *κολ.* von der Züchtigung zur Besserung des Fehlenden, *τιμωρέω* von der Strafe zur Aufrechthaltung des Rechts u. Gesetzes gebraucht wird." This Liddell and Scott translated as follows: "The difference between *κολάζω* and *τιμωρέομαι* is stated by Arist. Rhet. 1.10, 17 to be, that the former regards the correction of the offender, the latter the satisfaction of the offended." It does appear though that Liddell and Scott adjusted their translation to reflect more accurately what Aristotle said, the German focusing more on the maintenance of law and order generally, whereas Aristotle was actually speaking about the satisfaction of the wronged.

¹⁰ OTP 2:553.

Barclay was out of date in his discussion. In any case, as was said, the following clarifying comment has been added to the entry for *kolazo* in the 3rd edition of BDAG: “Aristotle’s limitation of the term *κόλασις* to disciplinary action Rhet.1,10,17 is not reflected in gener[al]. usage.”

There is of course much more that could be said about Rob Bell’s attempt to translate “eternal punishment” in Matt 25:46 as “a period of pruning.” Since the mention of “eternal punishment” for the goats there is followed immediately by a contrasting mention to “eternal life” for the sheep, we are left wondering how we are to translate the latter. Would Bell prefer that we render it “a period of life” to go along with “a period of pruning”? And if so what happens after that? Do the sheep and the goats trade places? Furthermore, how are we to correlate Bell’s suggested translation to the departure of the goats into the “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” a little earlier in verse 25? Should we regard that as a refining fire and look forward hopefully for the eventual salvation of the devil and his angels? Bell doesn’t say. Our point in the present note has simply been to attempt to demonstrate that Bell and his precursors have been working with information that has been known in some circles at least to have been inadequate for more than seventy years now, and this, we would suggest, weakens the credibility of their arguments significantly.