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**Review**

**Brian K. Blount,**

***Revelation: A Commentary, New Testament Library***

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Brian K. Blount, New Testament professor and president of Union Theological Seminary—Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia, provides us with a commentary of Revelation from a well-balanced perspective: a balance between God's justice

and judgment, between God's judgment and human repentance, and between the eschatological now and the future. The fundamental thesis of Blount's reading is that John's community, faced with impending persecution by the Roman Empire, is to stand strong in faith by witnessing to the sovereignty of God, by not accommodating to the lure of the social and economic benefits of the Roman Empire, and by not bowing down to the lordship of Caesar. Blount goes on to argue that witnessing to the sovereignty of God can cost one his/her life, just as Christ (the Lamb of God) paid the price of dying on a cross. The affirmation is that God will deal with all chaos, idolatry, and injustice in the world through fair judgment. The imminent coming of the Lord is both assurance and warning to John's community, since some of them have already accommodated to the Empire. While John's vision of the end is foreseen throughout, the end is not the purpose of the apocalyptic drama; rather, because there is still time for repentance, the real emphasis is the call for the transformation of the world through active engagement with it.

In support of this thesis, Blount organizes the entire book into two parts. The first part (Introduction) deals with introductory matters such as authorship, dating, social setting, genre, outline, and structure. This part, while short, signals the book's direction and thesis. Placing Revelation in the genre of Jewish apocalyptic traditions and within the concrete context of a Christian community under Roman rule (probably during the emperor Domitian, 81-96 C.E.), Blount argues that John's Revelation is best understood through the eyes of non-violent resistance against, and active engagement with, the sociopolitical structures of the Roman Empire. John (as author and leader of the community) writes from the island of Patmos, where he is exiled due to his own witnessing. He is concerned about his community because some have already changed their loyalty from God to Caesar. John's message is that they should be faithful to the lordship of God, not to that of Caesar.

With this summary introduction, a long commentary section follows. The division of the commentary is made as follows: 1:1-8 (Prologue and Letter Opening), 1:9—3:22 (A Word from

the Lord: Ethical Instructions to the Seven Churches), 4:1—22:9 (A Series of Visions), and 22:10-21 (Epilogue and Letter Closing). Each division follows a general pattern and order: introductory notes, text, and verse-by-verse commentary. Overall, this section is well organized to support the thesis described above. Particularly notable is Blount's emphasis on an intertextual reading that traces back to the Hebrew Scriptures (to the prophetic books in particular). Without this textual background, the bizarre imagery and apocalyptic symbols would hardly be understandable to the modern reader.

In 1:1-8, Blount points out the grand theme and purpose of Revelation: "witnessing to the lordship of God." The content and the cost of witnessing to the lordship of God are explained through Christ's work of sacrifice. That sacrifice is not expiation (atonement); rather, it is the price of witnessing to God's lordship (i.e., embodying God's love and justice for the world). The revelation proclaimed by Jesus (1:1a), the word of God (1:2a), and the witness proclaimed by Jesus (1:2b) essentially point to the same fact that Jesus Christ risked his life by being obedient to the lordship of God.

In 1:9—3:22, Blount goes on to explain why the seven churches of Asia need to hear this revelation given by Christ. This section most clearly addresses a specific community context and the problems therein where accommodation to the Roman Empire has occurred. Although the situation of the seven churches is different from each other, the controlling theme of the letters is consistent: non-violent and non-accommodating resistance to the Roman Empire. The members of the community are exhorted to return to the lordship of God and to that of Christ.

In 4:1—22:9, Blount takes pain to explore a series of visions that deal with God's justice for the faithful and his judgment against the unfaithful, including the demonic powers. The point is not to foretell doom as such; rather, what is to happen soon is to be a moral and theological challenge to the community. Almost all of the apocalyptic visions, symbols, and terms are thoroughly explored in light of the Hebrew prophetic and wisdom traditions. This section does

not overlook the central claim of the book: God is in control of history and will vindicate those witnesses who acknowledge the lordship of God. On the flipside of this message is that the people are to repent now: the Lord is coming soon. Otherwise, there will be the irreversible consequence of eternal doom and death. This section takes ninety percent of the book. Although the symbolic language of this section (for example, the dragon's war and the final battle) is patently violent in nature, Blount carefully interprets such language, not by focusing on violence itself, but by focusing on the symbolic, political, and theological message of God's justice and judgment – a continuation of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition, in which God appears as a redeemer who liberates his people from the oppressors, and as a judge who brings justice to an unjust world by proclaiming both assured hope for the righteous and harsh judgment for the unfaithful.

In 22:10-21, Blount draws to a close by commenting on the theme and purpose of the book once again: faithful witness. Time is short. Be faithful to the lordship of God, regardless of the cost.

A few notes about this book follow. Blount's commentary witnesses again to the importance of biblical interpretation for modern life, in which many people are still without hope in God's justice and the love they need. Blount's reading of Revelation is both historical and spiritual. As readers we are asked: "How do you witness to God's lordship in the midst of all the forms of evil and injustices around you?" The answer, according to Blount, is not passive escapism from the world but relentless witness to the lordship of God in the world. In this way John's apocalypse comes alive for us today, not by determining the destiny of people as such but by testifying to the truth of God, which is God's love and justice for all people. I highly recommend this book to scholars, pastors, and students who are serious about studying apocalyptic literature in its historical context and in its relation to our life today. Revelation

proclaims the gospel of non-violent resistance against all the powers that would suppress God's lordship.