

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

Brian McLaren's 'Take' on the Book

Brian McLaren is a pastor, an internationally known speaker, and a highly respected thinker and writer. The following excerpt is from his book, *The Secret Message of Jesus*. This is a book about the true nature of Jesus' message, not about the Book of Revelation as such. But in it he refers to the Revelation of Jesus Christ. His 'take' on the Book of Revelation does not purport to explain the book in detail or attempt to interpret the symbols. He does not say that the threat from the Roman authorities is the *only* reason that the book was written in 'coded' language. But he uses some helpful metaphors to explain the nature of the book and debunk some of the far-fetched interpretations that have deprived the church of its message. Here's the excerpt:

'At this point, some readers will wonder about the book of Revelation, the last book in the Bible, which many people have read as a coded blueprint predicting the future. Let me offer this analogy to propose an alternative approach. If you've been to an old-fashioned zoo, you've seen a lion or elephant pacing a cement floor behind iron bars. If you stood at the rail of an old-fashioned zoo and watched the caged lion or elephant for a few years, you would learn certain things about it. But what you would learn would be miniscule compared to what you could learn if instead you went to Africa and watched lions and elephants in their natural environment over a few years. There, you would see their social lives, their sex lives, their hunting habits, and their migration patterns.

Similarly, if you put Revelation on a concrete slab behind iron bars, you will learn something, but you'll misunderstand its true nature unless you set it free in its natural habitat. What is its natural habitat? The book of Revelation is an example of a popular literary genre of ancient Judaism, known today as *Jewish apocalyptic*. Trying to read it without understanding its genre would be like watching *Star Trek* or some other science-fiction show thinking it was a historical documentary, or watching a sitcom as if it were a religious parable, or reading a satire as if it were a biography - or like thinking you knew all about lions because you watched one pacing on a concrete slab one afternoon.

But Jewish apocalyptic itself is part of a large ecosystem known as *literature of the oppressed*. When you read Revelation first in its native niche of Jewish apocalyptic, and then in its native ecosystem of literature of the oppressed, it comes alive and you see it in a fresh way. Instead of being a book about the distant

future, it becomes a way of talking about the challenges of the immediate present. It becomes a book of warnings and promises.

The original readers of Revelation lived in constant threat of religious oppression from the religious authorities and the Roman Empire. In that environment, you can't speak - and certainly can't write - a word of criticism against the government and other authorities; if you are caught with such subversive literature in your possession, you'll be imprisoned, maybe killed. But if you don't speak or write about your oppression, your oppressors have succeeded in controlling you, silencing you, intimidating you. Is there any alternative? Yes, and this is the genius of literature of the oppressed in general and of apocalyptic literature in particular.

Here's what you do: you tell the truth about those in power - that they're corrupt, bloodthirsty, and doomed - but you do so covertly. You don't talk about the "Roman Empire"; you talk about the "Beast." You don't talk about the corrupt religious authorities; you personify them as a false prophet. You don't talk about the emperor; you tell a story about a dragon. In this way, you refuse to be silenced in fear - and you don't create incriminating evidence that could lead to torture and death for the author and readers of the literature.

If Revelation were a blueprint of the distant future, it would have been unintelligible for its original readers, as well as the readers of all succeeding generations, and would only become truly and fully relevant for one generation - the one who happened to live in the one period of time it is prognosticating about. But if Revelation is instead an example of the literature of the oppressed, full of ever-relevant warnings and promises, it presents each generation with needed inspiration and wisdom and encouragement. In this light, Revelation becomes a powerful book about the kingdom of God here and now, available to all.

In its original context, the book of Revelation seems to say something like this:

Yes, the religious authorities and the Roman Empire are persecuting us. The emperor - the king of kings - thinks he is the ultimate authority. But we are part of the empire of God, the kingdom of God. Our King of kings will ultimately triumph. God's kingdom will last forever. The Roman emperor and the religious systems that collide with him will succumb to the forces of history, and the Roman Empire will run its course and eventually disintegrate. So let's remain faithful, even to death. Let's not be intimidated but rather be full of confidence and hope. Let's focus on the glorious reality of God's kingdom and see the current powers that be as a passing phenomenon. Instead of letting our imaginations be captivated by fearful scenes of

torture and death, let's fill our imaginations with another vision of reality that will allow us to endure with joy.

To say these things overtly would have been treasonous. But to say and read them in these covert ways would be courageous and liberating.'

Brian McLaren *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that could Change Everything* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006), 175-177.