

Visionary Insight

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Based on Brian C. McLaren *We Make the Road by Walking*, Chapter 51

Texts: Psalm 126 and Revelation 21: 1-8; 22: 16-21

The last book in the Bible (which really should be called a letter, rather than a book) is the Book of Revelation, also known as the Apocalypse (or unveiling).

Brian McLaren shares with us that,

Some people ignore it, wondering why such an odd composition was even included in the biblical library. Other people seem obsessed by it. They are certain that it is a coded 'history of the future,' telling us how the world will someday end.

That way of reading Revelation is based on a lot of assumptions that deserve to be questioned. For example, did God create a closed and pre-determined universe or a free and participatory one? Is the future a movie that has already been shot, so to speak, and we are just watching it play? Or is the future open, inviting us not simply to resign ourselves and adapt, but to be protagonists who invent, improvise, and help create the outcome as God's coworkers and fellow actors?

Eugene Boring in the *Interpretation* bible commentary adds, "no other part of the Bible has provided such a happy hunting ground for all sorts of bizarre and dangerous interpretations. Some people in practically every generation from

John's own to the present have understood Revelation to be predicting the last days of the world in their own time."

To be sure, Revelation is a tough book to understand. This is especially true given that it has been so misinterpreted, misused, misquoted, and just plain missing in the church's history. I don't know that I can clear up all the questions about Revelation, but I can say to you that this is a book, better described as a letter, was addressed to a specific context...and that context is not ours. While it has message and meaning for us, Revelation has nothing to do with how the world will end.

I'm not trying to be a professor here, but let's take a minute to look at the social location of the first readers/hearers of Revelation (Boring, p8ff):

"Asia is the name of the Roman province located on the western coast of what is now Turkey. Christian churches had been established there by Paul and his co-workers during the fifties of the first century, with the result that a tradition of Pauline Christianity extended into John's own time in the nineties...

The church was in a transitional and vulnerable situation, trying to find its way forward in the generation between the death of its apostolic leaders and the emergence of a firm structure and sense of self-identity. What did it mean to be a Christian, to try to follow Jesus as Lord, in such a place and time?

Our earliest tradition dates Revelation "near the end of Domitian's reign (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V.30.3) [Domitian was not a whole lot more stable than Nero. Certainly, someone to be feared – GW] ...There is

considerable evidence that John believed the Roman Empire was about to engage in a systematic persecution of all Christians.

[Meanwhile]...The earth itself seemed unstable. Earthquakes devastated Asia in the 60s. In 79, Vesuvius erupted, burying Pompeii, and neighboring towns and creating a widespread cloud of darkness, which caused foreboding and consternation throughout the empire.

...Christians were widely suspected of being unpatriotic, a group about which wild stories were told. After all, did they not speak of eating flesh and drinking blood (cannibalism!); did they not meet for private "love feasts" (incest! Orgies!); had not their leader been crucified by the government as a rebel and enemy of the public welfare (unpatriotic)?

[In a nutshell]: Rejected by Jew and Gentile alike, Christians faced a serious crisis of community and personal identity, and John's letter addresses this crisis among others. "Who are the People of God?" and "What is the meaning of belonging to the church?" ...were burning personal issues for John's readers.

That is the tip of the iceberg of the issues that were affecting John's community. I've said to you before those scholars believe this to be a letter to those Asian churches. McLaren shares, "In this light, Revelation was the very opposite of a codebook that mapped out the end of the world in the distant future. It addressed a crisis at hand. "What would you write to such a community? What would you say to challenge them? To uphold them. To comfort them. Now, when you get a chance, read the whole book of Revelation, and see if your understanding changes.

With all of this in mind, Revelation has a different purpose than to predict a distant future. If it isn't predicting our demise, what is it saying to us now? I think that McLaren is correct to tell us that:

What was true for Revelation's original audience is true for us today. Whatever madman is in power, whatever chaos is breaking out, whatever danger threatens, the river of life is flowing now. The Tree of Life is bearing fruit now. True aliveness is available now. That is why Revelation ends with the sound of a single word echoing through out the universe. That word is not *Wait!* Nor is it *Not Yet!* or *Someday!* It is a word of invitation, welcome, reception, hospitality, and possibility. It is a word not of ending, but of new beginning. That one word is *Come!*

While we don't have the same issues plaguing us as they did in John's day, we do have a lot to be worried and fearful about in our time. I don't have to tell you the challenges we face. What I am here to tell you is that Revelation is a book of hope, a book of challenge, but also comfort. It is for you as it speaks about a God who never leaves you and who is at work in the world. There is a code, but that was to protect the community from the Romans and other persecutors, but it is not a code about the end of the world. It also was intended to ask a question many people have, "Is God faithful?"

Here's how I think about the book of Revelation, with all its confusion:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming

down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'

And the Spirit said *Come!* Let everyone who is willing, *Come!*

Amen and amen.

