

Book Review: *Revelation for the Rest of Us: A Prophetic Call to Follow Jesus as a Dissident Disciple*

McKnight, Scot, and Cody Matchett. 2023. *Revelation for the Rest of Us: A Prophetic Call to Follow Jesus as a Dissident Disciple*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. xiv, 221 pp. ISBN: 978-0-310-13579-1. Approx. 90.23 ZAR (5.00 USD). E-book.

Christians seeking to faithfully follow Jesus amid the Babylons of our modern world will find Scot McKnight and Cody Matchett worthy conversation partners. McKnight, a native of Illinois, is a New Testament scholar and historian of early Christianity. His colleague, Matchett, is currently the Scholar in Residence at First Assembly Church in Calgary, Alberta.

Responding to the growing ambivalence to the study of Revelation, which is seen as bizarre and confusing, the authors assert that erroneous readings and interpretations have made Revelation a turn-off to contemporary readers, resulting in the inhibiting of faithful discipleship. Contrary to popular interpretation, Revelation is not a database of prophecies concerning the future. Summoning the followers of Jesus to dissident discipleship, John shows his readers how to live as allegiant witnesses to the Lamb in the Babylon of the Roman empire (and indeed every system that opposes the rule of Christ).

Preoccupation with speculative interpretations about the antichrist, the rapture, and other sensational predictions distract believers from faithfully living in the present, causing an unnecessary focus on predictions of the future. Speculative, futurist readings miss Revelation's core message of dissident discipleship. Agreeing with Eugene Peterson, the authors assert that Revelation is "not prediction but perception," (Chapter 1). It reveals the deeper spiritual reality behind the events of the world. Readers are therefore invited to discern and resist the powers of evil.

To understand Revelation, one must understand the context. Occasioned by John's exile to the Island of Patmos, this prophet wrote to the seven churches in western Asia Minor who were struggling with faithfulness to Christ under the Roman empire which was seen as the "epitome of evil" by Jews and the early Christians. The Roman empire was, to John, the contemporary Babylon, a symbol of the powers of the world that was opposed to God and oppressive to the people of God. The recipients (the seven churches) were to understand it as a message of encouragement and exhortation to dissident discipleship that resists the ways of Babylon and remains devoted to the Lamb (Chapter 2).

Revelation uses apocalyptic imagery and language to reveal a deeper reality and call readers to action. The goal of apocalyptic literature is to stimulate the imagination and transform the reader's perception of reality. As the authors note, "Revelation excites our faith to imagine the victory of God over evil—and thus, how to live in our world *with* that kind of imagination." (Chapter 3). The highly symbolic and imaginative design demands that the readers engage their imagination while suspending pragmatism to access the revealed truths about God, the church, and the world.

To live as dissident disciples requires readers to develop a "Babylonian hermeneutic." This is the ability to discern the presence of Babylon (not a

future city or empire, but a present reality that the seven churches must navigate and resist) in our own contexts today (Chapter 4). Acquiring a “Babylonian hermeneutic” involves understanding key characters like the dragon, the wild things, and Babylon itself. The dragon represents Satan, the ancient enemy of God, who works through the wild things (corrupt political and religious powers) to establish the evil city of Babylon.

The Lamb, the key player in this cosmic battle, is Jesus Christ, the slain but risen Lord who will ultimately defeat the dragon and Babylon. Depicted in a variety of titles and attributes, the true King, the Lamb, is the one who is worthy to open the scroll and unleash God’s judgment on evil. The followers of the Lamb are called to be allegiant witnesses, even to the point of martyrdom (Chapter 7).

The authors outline the overall structure and narrative of the book of Revelation, highlighting the cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil. Revelation is “the story of everything” from creation and the covenant to Christ and the church, culminating in the final defeat of evil and the establishment of God’s kingdom (Chapter 9).

To live a dissident life that conquers the forces of Babylon, the faithful followers must adopt the practice of whole-life worship. Revelation, the authors argue, is filled with “nine spirituals,” that is, songs of praise, thanksgiving, and lament that interrupt the judgments on Babylon. The spirituals summon readers to worship the God on the throne and the Lamb, and this worship molds them into faithful witnesses. Worship is thus more than a Sunday activity. It is a deliberate active engagement in a life that resists the false gods of Babylon.

Revelation promises that the Lamb will defeat the dragon and Babylon, and the new Jerusalem will be established. The new city represents God’s ideal for creation: a world of justice, peace, and the fullness of God. Dissident disciples live in light of this imminent reality by actively resisting the ways

of Babylon through speech and actions. This is an invitation to consider how we live in the present, discerning Babylon in our day-to-day spaces and faithfully witnessing to the Lamb. It is not about predicting the future, an evacuation agenda, or an escape from the world, but a transformation agenda, changing the world, with an assurance of victory in Jesus.

Revelation for the Rest of Us is an engaging and accessible reading of Revelation. The text effectively communicates complex theological ideas to a broad audience through its use of colorful imagery and metaphors. For example, its description of Revelation as “cosmic drama,” with characters as part of a “playbill” brings the text to life, stimulating the reader’s imagination and reception. The conversational tone that addresses the readers in the first and second person promotes a sense of inclusion and participation.

The authors demonstrate familiarity with the reader’s dilemma by anticipating some questions they might have and then proceeding to address them. One such scenario is in acknowledging the graphic and daunting nature of the “three times seven judgments” and conceptualizing them as “divine disciplines” as opposed to retributive punishments. This approach heightens the reader’s comprehension and engagement with the text.

The authors’ departure from the conventional approach of speculative and predictive readings is both refreshing and nourishing. The challenge to focus on understanding the text as a summon to “dissident discipleship,” first to the seven churches and then to the rest of us, launches the reader to a practical theological perspective that recognizes the value of lived experience in theologizing. The dismissal of other commentators’ preoccupation with decoding future events and identifying the antichrist brings back the core of the text to the practical understanding of theology as *habitus* by returning the focus on the faithful witnesses, often lost in the predictive speculative interpretations.

Their promotion of the imperative of imagination and discernment in reading Revelation is a welcome contribution to the interpretive ideas advanced by David Tracy (1998) and Walter Brueggemann (2001).¹ Their idea of a “Babylonian hermeneutic” is their freshest contribution to the conversation on interpretation. This novel idea shifts the focus from apocalyptic occupation to the centrality of worship and faithfulness to the Lamb. Also, by drawing insightful parallels between the “spirituals” in Revelation and the subversive slave songs of the American South to illustrate how worship can serve as a powerful act of resistance, they bring the core of Revelation to the ordinary practice of faith—living *coram Deo*.

Moving to some criticisms, the authors assume that the readers would discern and agree with their methodology and therefore fail to explain and justify their approaches in proper detail. For example, one of the epistemic groundings of the book is the idea of discernment and suspicion from which they develop their concept of a “Babylonian hermeneutic.” This is perhaps derived from Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of suspicion, and it would have been good to give the reader some background to this idea. A deeper theological interaction with the methodological deviation from prediction to imagination would help readers appreciate the epistemological grounding of the arguments. More details would have been welcome in explaining key concepts in Revelation such as “predictive, literal, premillennial, vindictive readings” (Chapter 1), and concepts like the tribulation, and rapture, to name a few. Also, while the authors deservedly criticize some of the political ideologies influencing the traditional interpretations, they mention names but fail to cite key texts that propagate those ideologies. They do well to expound on the historical and literary contexts of Revelation but fail to

exegete the contexts that bore the arguments they are refuting. This denies their readers the opportunity to appreciate the historical-contextual influences of the interpretations in question.

Overall, this book is very practical and relevant for anyone who is seeking how to live out their faith in the face of oppressive systems and ideologies that are resistant to God. This is not just an abstract theological analysis. It is a concrete and essential roadmap towards faithful discipleship in the contemporary world. The theopolitical-pastoral approach places this work tacitly within the ambit of practical theology and public theology. The language of dissidence and resistance is a refreshing perspective that moves beyond the simplistic narratives of the *left versus right*, and in so doing helps to cultivate a distinctly Christian political imagination that is rooted in the story of Scripture.

This is a priceless gift for students, pastors, ministry leaders, and all Christians who desire to be equipped or to equip their communities to effectively navigate the complexities of faith and politics in the current cultural climate. The accessible language makes the book an excellent resource for individual study or small group discussion.

1. See especially chapter 3 of McKnight and Matchett on the inner workings of John’s imagination.

Works Cited

- Brueggemann, Walter. 2001. *The Prophetic Imagination*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Tracy, David. 1998. *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*. New York: Crossroad Publishing.

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