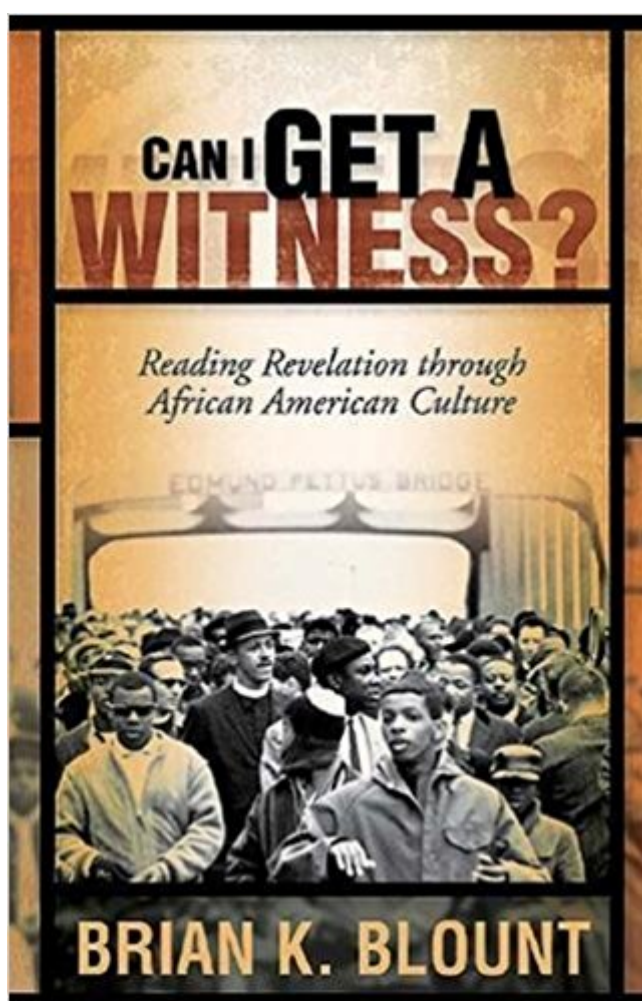


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Can I Get A Witness?: Reading Revelation Through African American Culture



Synopsis

In this accessible and provocative study, Brian Blount reads the book of Revelation through the lens of African American culture, drawing correspondences between Revelation's context and the long-standing suffering of African Americans. Applying the African American social, political, and religious experience as an interpretive cipher for the book's complicated imagery, he contends that Revelation is essentially a story of suffering and struggle amid oppressive assimilation. He examines the language of "martyr" and the image of the lamb, and shows that the thread of resistance to oppressive power that runs through John's hymns resonates with a parallel theme in the music of African America.

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Customer Reviews

Brian K. Blount is Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. He is the coauthor of "Preaching Mark in Two Voices" and "Struggling with Scripture"; both available from Westminster John Knox Press.

Very interesting read. Insightful to inspire thought as well as alternative perspective. Must be open to consider various questions. Can take you out of your comfort zone.

It's a good book, the author brings good information and points, and does a great job interpreting Revelation and communicating his information.

College level reading material but great info. Most people purchase this book for a grad course but if you think you can handle the book please read.

The Brother hit it the target. What's happen to the witness in daily life?!

Developing upon correspondences between the oppressive contexts in which the early Johannine and modern African American churches operate, Brian Blount's "Can I Get a Witness?" is a study of the book of Revelation from an African American perspective. According to Blount, John's aim in writing was to rouse up a church ardently "committed to the ethical activity of witnessing to the Lordship of Jesus Christ," a witnessing that had thoroughly political dimensions (ix). Blount begins in chapter one with an explanation of cultural studies, the framework that he approaches Revelation with. Eschewing the "quixotic quest" for the one "objective," trans-cultural reading of the text, a cultural studies hermeneutic recognizes that "all readings are culturally located and therefore on that basis 'equal'" methodologically (6, 12). To Blount, meaningful interpretation is an interaction between the culturally-situated contexts of the interpreter and the polysemous "meaning potential" of the text (23). Chapter two examines the ways which Revelation, in John's sociolinguistic context, calls believers to a "witness of active, nonviolent resistance to Rome's claim of lordship over human history" (40). From there, Blount analyzes three passages where the language of witnessing occurs, considering its implications in the lives of both its original readers as well as African American Christians today. For example, while the cries of slain souls under the altar in Rev 6:9-11 assured John's original readers of the coming of God's "transformative, liberating justice" against imperial Rome, it also steers the African American church away from a sense of passive victimhood in its struggle against racial hatred, and instead towards being "active witnesses to a transforming lordship that transfigures [them] and our world" in and through their witnessing (51, 59). In chapter three, Blount identifies the slain Lamb in Revelation as the exemplar of such active, transfigurative witnessing. Rather than a suffering sacrifice, for John the slaughtered Lamb is a paradoxically powerful "weapon," a homeopathic cure through which "nonviolence is extracted from violence and then set out as an antidote against it" (70, 81). Drawing from the Girardian observations of Theophus Smith, Blount finds this homeopathic dynamic modeled in Martin Luther King Jr., whose nonviolent vision and consequent violent assassination effected significant "intervention and reform" in many spheres of society (83). Finally, in chapter four Blount compares the hymns in Revelation to the various musical forms of African America, such as spirituals, blues, gospel and rap. Both, he

argues, are veritable expressions of resistance towards the institutionalized evil Christians find themselves oppressed under, of "fighting music" sung when they "refuse to give up and give in" (117). All in all, "Can I Get a Witness?" is a provocative read that stimulates critical reflection on a host of issues. Through its creative reading of Revelation through the lens of African American culture, the book challenges deep-seated presuppositions that lie at the very heart of the modern academy. By employing a cultural studies methodology, Blount challenges the slavish academic infatuation with so-called "unbiased" historical-critical readings, which are in fact covert ways by which the "dominant cultural ideology" excludes readings "from below" and maintains the status quo (17). Thus the cultural studies hermeneutic, in contrast, is a dramatically democratizing process that affords political and ideological empowerment to marginalized interpretive communities. If taken seriously, the academic enterprise embodied in "Can I Get a Witness?" has significant implications on the discipline of biblical studies. For one, it serves as a critique of a certain trend in much contemporary scholarship, which seems to favor the retrieval of "interpretive fossil[s] from some dead community in the past" over and against the discovery of "instructive meaning[s] for some particular living community in the present" (5). The balance Blount strikes between Revelation's original sociolinguistic contexts and the cultural situation of present-day African Americans testify - to borrow Paul's words - to the importance of affirming both the "letter" and the "spirit" in the hermeneutical task. As scandalous as this may sound to the academic positivists or purists, may we not affirm both exegesis and eisegesis as vital, complementary aspects of good interpretation? By upholding the importance of figuring out what a text means "for us," is not the cultural studies hermeneutic doing proper justice to the living word of the "living God" (5)? Furthermore, the book's cultural studies paradigm raises pressing questions concerning the nature of scripture itself. While recognizing that biblical texts like Revelation are marked by the ideologies belonging to particular ancient socio-historical contexts, Blount goes a step further, stressing the importance of paying attention to "voices struggling for sound within the texts themselves" (25). For example, the sheer fact that ideologies like patriarchy, polygamy, or slavery find representation within the Bible does not necessarily mean that they ought to be affirmed in the present. The violence and misogyny found in Revelation, he emphasizes, are "ultimately themselves the targets of John's transformative vision, even though he was himself too caught up in that environment to see that" (115). More than affecting biblical interpretation, such an emphasis "transforms the very Bible" we interpret. For one, it poses a serious challenge to contemporary evangelical doctrines of inerrancy and infallibility: not everything that seems upheld or endorsed within the Bible ought to be taken as "scriptural truth." At the same time, it also expands our understanding of biblical inspiration, demonstrating that divine

truth can and often does come through fallen, misguided human institutions. Another strength of "Can I Get a Witness?" lies in its fluid integration of biblical exegesis with practical application. For instance, having demonstrated that the hymns in Revelation are a "celebration of confrontational resistance" which incited John's original readers to "politically charged worship and witness" under Roman oppression, Blount goes on to compare them to the rap of Tupac Shakur, who despite the difficulties and horror of his personal circumstances holds forth a trust that "God held the transformative key for human life" (107, 112). On the one hand, Blount must be commended for making an insightful connection that brings to life aspects of Revelation within an African American context. On the other hand, by showing how we can better appreciate the hymns of Revelation by studying "the resistant music of our own time," he opens up endless possibilities of seeking meaningful correspondences between scripture and popular culture, both of which can work together to inspire us to stand up "against the evils of the Rome of our own times" (114). Finally, I would locate the third and perhaps greatest merit of the book in the robust vision of witness ethics it presents. The language of "martyrs" during New Testament times, Blount repeatedly stresses, is essentially "prophetic, not martyrological," and calls for "active, nonviolent, engaged resistance" towards the demonic powers-that-be (47). To a large extent, this serves as a welcome corrective to the misunderstanding of Jesus' sacrifice upon the cross as a "passive life that had to be extinguished" -- rather than as a "provocative testimony that had to be given" (47). And whether under the idolatrous financial systems of capitalistic empires, the explicit religious persecution in communist regimes, or even the hardships of a loveless, abusive marriage - the understanding that Christian suffering ought to come as a result of positive witness (instead of as an end in itself) is surely necessary for a sense of vital, enduring purpose in contexts where Christian witness comes at a painful cost.

Blount reads Revelation through the context of African-American culture, particularly African-American church culture. Blount states that in Revelation, John is asking, "Can I get a witness?" and when the preacher in an African-American worship asks this, "The preacher wants you not only to hear what he is saying but to understand and then to act upon it" (37). In terms of literary context, Blount writes that at John's time, witness meant witness, not martyr. He sees parallel irony in the fact that just as Roman slaughter brought more witnesses, not less, the same is true for racial hatred directed at African Americans. Slaves were not permitted to have their own services; to do so was to express resistance. Blount likens the shouting out of slaves in worship to the shouting out of the slaughtered souls in Revelation (54). Similarly, Blount sees the dressing up

of African Americans at worship as related to the wearing of white robes by the slaughtered souls in Revelation. In Chapter 4, Blount interprets the hymns in the Book of Revelation through African-American music. Blount sees the hymns in Revelation as helping "John's hearers and readers to initiate such resistance on their own" just as "music has been a primary weapon black people have waged in their fighting back" (93). Blount sees the hymns in the African-American church and the musical genres of African-American spirituals, blues, and rap as being created out of oppression and an active resistance against it. He sees the hymns in Revelation as arising out of the same combination of oppression and active resistance. I highly recommend this book.

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