

Invasion of the Dead: Preaching Resurrection

Brian K. Blount

Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014. 156 pages. \$16.00

Can one engage pop culture's literary and cinematic renditions of zombie invasions, vampire slayings, and devastating natural disasters with the New Testament corpus? Brian Blount in his latest book, *Invasion of the Dead: Preaching Resurrection*, replies with a resounding "Yes." Blount's work - based on his 2011 Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School - responds to our "death-obsessed" culture by turning to the life-giving possibilities laden in resurrection theology. The meaning of life can be extracted not through death, but perhaps through life itself.

Blount turns to John's Revelation (Ch. 1), Paul's authentic letters (Ch. 3), and the Gospel of Mark (Ch. 5) to demonstrate the relevance of a resurrected Christ in contemporary forms of apocalyptic thought. Moreover, in positioning life at the forefront of the discussion, Blount aims to redirect the preacher's attention to paschal hope, a theme too often limited to the Easter season. Therefore, in chapters two, four, and six, Blount tests his overarching thesis by preaching God's invasion of life in Revelation, Paul, and Mark. Each of these sermons functions as a practical example for preachers desiring to implement God's promises of life and renewal throughout the liturgical year.

Blount contends that Christianity and popular culture alike tend to exhibit a myopic focus on death, suffering, and destruction because this trifecta of difficulties provides so much fodder for potent storytelling (xvi). Blount, however, is determined to reimagine and redefine apocalyptic eschatological thinking in terms of life. A Christian homiletic can offer an appropriate response to current understandings of catastrophic horizons. The astute preacher may be wondering: why is a shift in our understandings of apocalyptic eschatology necessary? Why are our current apocalyptic/eschatological hopes and their focus on the cross insufficient? By building primarily on the scholarship of Beker, de Boer, Boeve, and Gaventa and debunking Bultmannian demythologization, Blount makes a compelling case for the vital role of resurrection in a contemporary homiletic.

Resurrection is crucial because the ancient biblical witness declares that we, much like our predecessors, are “the living and walking dead” (11-21; 49-54; 88-94). Though we are enslaved to sin and infected with death because of Adam’s misstep, our zombie-like existence is minimized because of Christ’s liberation. John of Patmos casts a vision of a new Jerusalem and the resurrection of the slaughtered Lamb. Paul envisions a literal and bodily resurrection for the Corinthian community and preaches repeatedly “nothing but the *resurrected* Christ who had been crucified” (58, emphasis author’s). Mark narrates God’s invasive action not only in the empty tomb, but also in Jesus’ countercultural proclamation that God will revive us just as Christ was raised from the dead.

And yet congregations are not simply called to envision a future time of resurrection, Blount argues. A Christian homiletic centered on resurrection also aims to challenge the living dead to participate in enacting God’s redemptive work in the here and now. Having been made “vulnerable to God’s power and linked to the movement of God’s spirit...our task is to live as invasive representations of that future moment in the present” (68). Blount argues that if God can raise Christ from the dead, surely we can breathe life into deadened spaces (76). Rather than behaving viciously toward one another (52), we can choose to invoke transformation and change. We can participate in reviving the dead by imitating the justice-seeking work of the civil rights movement or enacting liberative praxis in oppressed communities (e.g. 29-32).

Blount brilliantly draws together the American pop culture world of zombies, vampires, and world wars with the biblical witness and so offers a fresh perspective on apocalyptic eschatology. In the midst of catastrophe and devastation, resurrection can breathe new life into arid spaces. Blount’s urgent and bold plea is sure to unsettle and shake up both the preacher and the congregant desperate for a new word in a world that often seems devoid of verdant life. Without trepidation, Blount critiques substitutionary atonement, demythologization, and exclusively confessional Christian modes of existence as insufficient understandings of the power of resurrection. Such challenges leave the reader eager to consider the critique of a theology centered solely on the cross, the possibility of a literal and future resurrection, and the inclusion of sociopolitical and economic realities in our faith experiences.

Reminding us that death is not the sole means for attaining life, Blount demonstrates God’s invasive action through Jesus’ transformational ministry. Blount is correct in demonstrating that the Markan Jesus is in the business of saving lives long before his death and resurrection. Blount alludes to an imperial context by noting that Jesus’ cruciform death takes place on a Roman cross. To his incisive reading we might add how Mark situates Jesus in Roman imperial contexts in order to portray Jesus’ attempts to reverse deadly imperial damages. Jesus brings resurrection to those enslaved by disease, demonic possession, death, and poverty, which are all typical and deadly symptoms of oppressive systems like the Roman Empire.¹ One of Mark’s primary foci is revealing God’s life-giving promises through God’s commissioned agent. At the same time, how might the

preacher handle passages in the Markan gospel that imitate colonial aims of violence and death? For instance, in Mark 5, Jesus decimates a large herd of swine that represents a Roman military legion.² Such a story of revenge envisions deadly consequences for oppressive powers rather than peaceful reconciliation. Missing in Blount's analysis is an engagement with problematic texts that reinscribe imperial rule. Such inconsistencies in the gospels serve to strengthen Blount's claims as they remind us that it is difficult to respond in love when encountering matters of life and death. All too often we respond in hostile and combative ways as we seek justice. And so, although Blount employs bellicose language to evoke congregational response,³ Blount is not arguing that we should imitate the oppressor's insatiable thirst for violence. Instead we are empowered by God to respond with modes of resurrection. For Blount, the resurrected Christ reminds us that love is a tool far more powerful than fear or intimidation.

As I read Blount's book, I couldn't help but think about theologies of resurrection found outside of the New Testament texts. Notions of resurrection first emerge most clearly in the aftermath of the Maccabean crisis in the 2nd century BCE. While some Jews responded to Antiochus Epiphanes' oppressive rule through compliance, others responded by taking up arms. Still others fled and hid in caves. Some resisted by refusing to comply with imperial orders and instead opt for martyrdom. For instance in 2 Maccabees 7, a mother and her seven sons willingly lose their lives because they confess that God's faithfulness lasts beyond death. God will reward the righteous with resurrection because of God's covenantal promises (2 Macc 7:9, 14, 23). In other words, a hope for resurrected bodies was active before Jesus' death on a cross. Influenced and informed by the Jewish traditions of future life and renewal, John of Patmos, Paul, and Mark reach back into these earlier narratives for notions of God's resurrection promises. Neither are the biblical writers or the character of Jesus denying or remitting their Jewish traditions but rather reigniting and reinforcing them within their present contexts. Providing explicitly these theological and historical contexts would only enhance Blount's persuasive thesis. After all, resurrection was not and is not an exclusively Christian response to those facing crisis in their lives. For Christians, Jesus provides a critical lens for understanding resurrection even as that hope is imbedded in our culture's many yearnings for vibrant life in the midst of oppressive death.

Blount provides a timely and crucial word given our current sociopolitical climate. Recently, thousands of migrant children have crossed the US-Mexico border to escape gang violence, drug warfare, and unspeakable poverty in Guatemala, Honduras, and other Central and Latin American nations. These children have bravely risked their lives with the audacious hope that they (and we) might outrun death. Will we, as a faith community, take Blount's challenge seriously and respond appropriately to these walking dead? If we not only preach but *practice* God's promises of resurrection, we may just see that death fails to have the final word.

Maziel Barreto Dani
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Notes

1 Cf. Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001), 1-11, 79-80.

2. See Brian J. Incigneri, *The Gospel to the Romans: The Setting and Rhetoric of Mark's Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 190-194.

3. e.g. “God’s primary weapon is resurrection” and “enlist as a fighting member of the advance forces who prepare for the resurrection dawn” (Blount, 26) or “join God’s war effort” (Blount, 32).