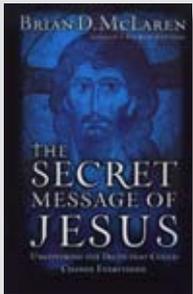


Book Reviews



The Secret Message of Jesus, by Brian D. McLaren. (242 pp., ISBN 0-8499-0000-X, Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006)

—reviewed by Ralph D. Winter

Brian McLaren is a superb writer. This book is just as interesting as his earlier books but is his most systematic and comprehensive statement to date. It is a richly rewarding must-read.

Part 1 describes the world in which Jesus lived. Part 2 engages Jesus' message specifically. Part 3 explores the contemporary significance of that message which he feels is usually misunderstood.

He interprets in a fresh, arresting way dozens of familiar passages. In Part 2 he describes the five stages through which a follower of Jesus should move to experience His full will: "Rethinking (repenting), believing, receiving, going public (baptism), practicing a new way of life." (p. 113)

The first four stages, despite the new terms, describe the basis for his greatest interest in the fifth. He writes eloquently of the freshness, newness, radical difference and wonderful things that a new life in Christ brings. For him it is not merely a sober, crucial struggle against evil.

However, in Part 3 he expositis his understanding of the Kingdom of God the way it ought to be, but demures when it comes to the use of the phrase itself. Instead he tries out on the reader a whole series of phrases each of which portrays certain aspects of the Kingdom without the use of that word. He prefers "The dream of God." He believes this phrase

...gives us the language to talk about evil and sin in the world: these are nightmares for God. In creating our world, God wasn't dreaming of prisons and kidnapping, child abuse and racism, greed and poverty, pollution and exploitation, conformity and chaos. God's dream was for freedom and creativity, kindness and justice, generosity and peace, diversity and harmony. (p. 141)

He now says that the dream "metaphor gives us a responsible and creative role to play." But that role is described as merely not "ruining" the dream, not as a role of fighting evil, which involves risk, cost, and sacrifice.

Note further that his list of the terrible things God was not dreaming about is a list that confines itself to evils men do, not the larger evil Satan does without man's help. For example, he mentions nothing about the violence in nature, nor, for that matter, the global damage and suffering due to disease germs. Accordingly, in the series of phrases he employs to describe what God was dreaming about there is no mention of health or the absence of pain. And he glosses over the mammoth event in which Satan turned against God and perpetrated all this damage to God's dream.

For the record I will list, with just a bit of comment on numbers 3 and 6, the highly creative metaphors McLaren suggests helpfully that more fully portray the purposes of God than the phrase Kingdom of God.

1. The dream of God
2. The revolution of God
3. The mission of God

Here a main point is that gaining relationship with God is more important than being on a mission for Him (but isn't that one way we gain a deeper relationship with Him?). He does speak of a "virus" (as a metaphor, not a real virus) that causes "violence... sexual aggression... lying... paralysis, and so on." (p. 144) And if a cure were found we would want the cure and want to share that cure with others. He adds, "A healing mission—where

you are healed so you can join in healing others—would be an apt metaphor for the Kingdom of God." (p. 144)

In this last statement he does not realize that destroying viruses is more strategic than curing those victimized by viruses. There is no Satan to fight against.

4. The party of God
5. The network of God
6. The dance of God

Here we find a beautiful example of McLaren's eloquence and high flying imagination.

The Father, Son, and Spirit live in an eternal, joyful, vibrant dance of love, honor, rhythm and harmony, grace and beauty, giving and receiving. The universe was created to be an expression and extension of the dance of God—so all creatures share in the dynamic joy of movement, love, vitality, harmony, and celebration. Electrons, protons, and neutrons—light, gravity, and motion—galaxies, suns, and planets—water, snow, ice, and vapor—winter, spring, summer, and fall—plants and animals, male and female—nations, tribes, clans, families, and individuals—art, sport, business, government, science, agriculture—every facet of creation had a role in the dance.

But we humans [note: not Satan] broke with the dance. We stomped on the toes of other dancers, ignored the rhythm, rejected the grace, and generally made a mess of things [humans created smallpox, polio?]. But God sent Jesus into the world to model for us a way of living in the rhythm of God's music of love, and ever since, people have been attracted to the beauty of his steps and have begun rejoining the dance. (p. 147)

How different this sounds from 1 Jn. 3:8,

The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that he might destroy the works of the Devil.

After listing his six best metaphors illuminating the Kingdom

of God, he adds a few more unnumbered phrases:

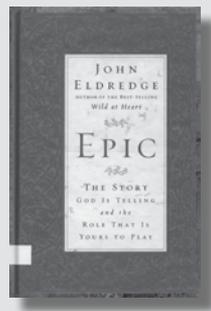
- The tribe of God
- The story of God
- The school of God
- The guild of God
- The choir of God
- The team of God
- The friendship of God
- The table of God
- The invasion of God
- The counter-insurgency of God

This last item has no accompanying comment but would certainly contrast sharply with premature dancing. Are we tempted to look ahead when “there will be war no more” and attempt to live as though this can already be the millennium? Are we not still in an all-out war when 6,000 Americans are being crushed to death every day due to two diseases alone (cardiovascular and cancer)? And when our U.S. health-care system is soaking up \$2 thousand billion annually? Cardiovascular disease alone is costing us in direct costs \$350 billion a year. Nine out of ten Americans is dying prematurely, etc.

McLaren does give some touching examples of good deeds. One is where some Evangelicals go out on the street and beat make-shift drums and instruments to attract a crowd of homeless people and then give food away. Another is where a prostitute is surprised with a birthday cake she had never before had.

These actions are heartwarming and all to the good but do not deal at all with root causes, as though those causes are unfathomable or incurable or can simply await the return of Christ. Where is dangerous mission in all this? Where in this “dream” is there emergency, corrective, intelligent fighting against the intelligent dark forces still rampant in our world?

Another book, *The Epic*, takes evil much more seriously.



The Epic, by John Eldredge (112 pp, 4.5x7. ISBN 0-7852-6531-7, Nashville: Nelson Books, 2004)

—reviewed by Ralph D. Winter

From the author of *Wild At Heart* comes this small book, which, like Brian McLaren’s, is very logically structured. In addition to the important *Prologue* and *Epilogue* it tells the story, the epic, of the entire universe in four “Acts.”

In the 16-page *Prologue* he insists that we must see the overall story, “the larger story,” if we want to understand the sub-plots.

Act One is where all is good and beautiful.

Act Two is the entrance of evil in the form of fallen angels. [Which, my guess is, at the moment in history when predatory life first appeared in the Cambrian era.]

Something happened before our moment on the stage. Before mankind came the angels... This universe is inhabited by other beings... Most people do not live as though the Story has a Villain, and that makes life very confusing... I am staggered by the level of naiveté that most people live with regarding evil. (pp. 30, 39)

He now quotes a famous passage from C. S. Lewis,

One of the things that surprised me when I first read the New Testament seriously was that it talked so much about a Dark Power in the universe—a mighty evil spirit who was held to be the Power behind death, disease, and sin... Christianity thinks this Dark Power was created by God, and was good when he was created, and went wrong. Christianity agrees... this is a universe at war. (p. 40)

Act Three is where, he says, the Biblical story begins in Genesis 1:1, after angelic powers went wrong.

This act begins in “darkness... is still under way, and we are caught up in it. A

love story, set in the midst of a life-and-death battle.” (p. 72)

Act Four gestures toward the final future in a brilliant, eloquent, imaginative flight of fancy which frowns on all human guesses of the grandeur of the future. He says playfully:

I’ve heard innumerable times that “we shall worship God forever.” That “we shall sing one glorious hymn after another, forever and ever, amen” It sounds like hell to me. (p. 80)

The *Epilogue* is a significant part of the book. He says,

First, things are not what they seem... the unseen world (the rest of reality) is more weighty and more real and more dangerous than the part of reality we can see.

Second, we are at war... We must take this battle seriously. This is no child’s game. This is war... a battle for the human heart.

Third, you have a crucial role to play... We must find our courage and rise up to recover our hearts and fight for the hearts of others. (p. 102)

Here we see talk of war. But, strangely, it does not speak of a war against a Dark Power and his works, but a rescue operation for human hearts. That is certainly a basic part of it, but to liberate the French from the Nazi yoke the dark evil of Hitler had to be eliminated first.

Here is a thought: theoretically if every soul on earth were finally born again we would still face a ravaged creation, riddled with violence (in nature) and disease. And God would continue to be blamed for all this evil—unless Christians were finally identifying it with Satan. However, that is precisely why this “thought” is purely theoretical: we CAN’T win everyone without destroying the works of the Devil in that very process. As long as hundreds of millions of mission-field Christians have eyes running with pus and incipi-

“Most people don’t live as though the Story has a Villain, and that makes life very confusing.”

ent blindness, as long as such horrors are blamed on God (for the lack of a Satan), WE ARE NOT GOING TO WIN MANY MORE PEOPLE. And, all those hundreds of millions of rural people and uneducated people we have recently won are eventually going to lose their faith just as they have in Europe and much of America. We are not winning very many educated people.

We must, it seems to me, accept it as our true mission to fight these horrors in the name of Christ. That is essential if we are to glorify God in all the earth, and that glorification is the basis on which we invite people to accept God as their Father in Heaven—and recruit them to help fight this war.

Both of these two books brilliantly describe the restless pew. One of them actually speaks of war, not so much against evil as a rescue operation of humanity.

Thousands of writers and pastors are puzzling over the essential question of what a believer does as a Christian besides being religious and decent and active in (small) good deeds.

Is there something wrong with the DNA of American Evangelical congregations? Many leaders today are suggesting that we need new church pioneers with ideas so different that the very word “church” may not be ideal.

Both authors here are discontent with “normal” church life in America and in one way or another are groping toward something vitally different.

These two book writers, plus myself, plus a whole host of other restless, relentlessly inquiring Christian leaders today are aware that Evangelicals have never in any country of the world grown as prominent in national affairs, have never more closely approximated the culture of those outside of the church, and have never generated in reaction such a profound phobia of religious people taking over the country (witness the avid attention given to the *Da Vinci Code* book and movie which so skillfully throws doubt on the validity of the entire Christian tradition).

Here we see an outcry for something more, something different, something more serious. I believe what is lacking is a clearer idea of evil and what to do about it.

Muslims and the Gospel: Bridging the Gap, by Roland E. Miller (451 pp, ISBN 1-932688-07-2, Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2005)

—reviewed by Harley Talman

Roland Miller is the archetypal scholar-practitioner—a first-rate Islamic scholar who speaks from half a century of personal experience with Muslims. Unfortunately, many nondenominational evangelicals are not acquainted with this distinguished personage. Miller spent 23 years as a Lutheran missionary in Kerala, South India beginning in 1953. For the next 23 years he taught at the University of Regina and Luther College in Saskatchewan, and then at Luther Seminary in Minneapolis. He established Islamic and religious studies programs, the Saskatchewan Centre for International Languages, and the Malabar Missions Society. He also chaired the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Project for the Lutheran World Federation. Since retiring in 1999, Miller has been active in speaking, consulting, developing dialogue programs, and writing.

Muslims and the Gospel: Bridging the Gap serves as a companion to Miller’s manual on Islam: *Muslim Friends: Their Faith and Feeling* (Concordia, St. Louis, 1996). However, one need not read the first to understand and enjoy the second, which focuses on friendship as the critical factor in Christian witness. Friendship with God leads to friendship with others. But do not misunderstand—Miller is not advocating an uncritical sentimentalism that promotes dialogue with no gospel. Rather, he is convinced that friendship and gospel witness cannot “be separated one from the other without losing both” (p. 8). An authentic friendship is expressed in both word and deed in a spirit of “affectionately and anxiously sharing their good things” (p. 8).

The introductory chapter surveys the unity and diversity of Muslims as well as the challenges facing Christian witness: the immensity and mystery of Islam, the history of bad relationships, and mutual misunderstandings. Miller introduces deep friendship

as key to communication. Part I sets the Islamic context for gospel communication and reception. He enables the Christian to understand the essence of Islam with twelve foundational principles; correspondingly he identifies the pivotal factors for the Muslim understanding of the gospel (the Muslim view of sin, salvation, Jesus, Christianity and Christians). Part II looks at three bridges that connect the context and the task: (1) deep friendship, (2) a spirit of restitution for our poor past, and (3) bridges of learning (from Christians from the past who can instruct us in constructive paths of ministry to Muslims).

The practical issues of Christian sharing appear in Part III: our approach, connecting points, and methodology. Miller first draws a profile of what a sharing friend should be like—the necessary inner, relational, intellectual, and volitional qualities needed for productive sharing. The Christian approach must be one of “wholeness.” Christians must come as servants, evangel-sharers, reconcilers and conversation partners. The Christian himself is the connecting point. Acknowledging that contemporary Christianity is afflicted with “method madness,” Miller advocates a theology of method that adopts the mind of Christ, considers the mighty word of God as His method and the people of God as His means. Miller responds favorably to the contributions of Phil Parshall in contextualization, Greg Livingstone in church planting, and Bill Musk in folk Islam, but asserts that the newest challenge in methodology is the increasing Muslim presence in the West. He advocates an evangel-sharing methodology that is “person-related, sensitive and non-threatening, service-related, hope-filled, practical, and flexible” (330). Miller also discusses productive methods of conversation, all kinds of literature, music, poetry, calligraphy, painting, drama, and various audio, visual and electronic media (including the internet). Another chapter presents sensible answers to the

“hard questions”—the typical objections that Muslims have to Christian belief. Addressing issues of inquirers, new believers, conversion, baptism, and the church, Miller presents various Muslim and Christian perspectives and paths to choose from.

Muslims and the Gospel concludes with an assessment of the present and future. Miller asserts that secularization of the Muslim world and materialism are hurting—not helping—gospel witness. He sees fundamentalist movements as attempting to homogenize Muslim understandings, thus restricting Islamic tolerance and balance, and toughening their resistance to the gospel. Moreover, the violence of radical Islam presents a grave threat to peace-loving Muslims. But the probabilities of the future compel us to “work while it is still day.” With more Muslims responding to Christ than ever before, “if there is a problem in the present, it is not so much that of reluctant Muslims than that of the Christian mind” and “the church that tarries in Jerusalem is not one that has been clothed with power on high” (p. 423).

Though scholarly and hefty, Miller’s writing is clear, organized, insightful and effortlessly read. This volume is not merely academic, but has the practicality of a training manual, as Miller instructs Christians how to answer Muslim objections and includes practical thoughts on Christian sharing throughout the book.

Since 9/11 it seems that so-called “experts” on Islam abound and bombard us with their latest books. Miller finds himself in scarce company as one who is (1) scholarly, demonstrating a deep knowledge of Islam and Muslim and Christian authorities over a wide range of issues, and fairly representing Muslim viewpoints; (2) diplomatic, advocating friendship, dialogue, and building bridges toward Muslims—without glossing over difficulties, differences, and dangers; (3) evangelical, committed to sharing the gospel with Muslims; and (4) spiritual, calling Christians to biblical attitudes and obedience.

At \$35 *Muslims and the Gospel* seems quite pricey, but it is not so bad when we consider the amount of material in its 451 pages. At any rate, Christian workers among Muslims cannot afford not to buy it.

Unshackled and Growing, Muslims and Christians on Their Journey to Freedom, by Dr. Nabeel T. Jabbour, (246 pp., ISBN 978-0-9729023-2-5, Colorado Springs: Dawson Media, 2006).

—reviewed by Ralph D. Winter

As we go to press, I can hardly do more than mention this brand new very special book. But I know the author and I know his previous book, *The Rumbling Volcano*, in which this Middle Eastern thinker intriguingly proposes that the terrorists are, in many cases, those who are more ready to believe. This book starts out, “My dear Muslim friend, as we start on this journey together.” Chapter one is named, “Unwrapping the Gospel,” in which he tries to explain to both Christians and Muslims how thick the unbiblical wrappings are around the word Christian and the Christian tradition.

Some books are written for Christians about Muslims, and usually portray Muslims in a negative light. Some books are written for Muslims and continue to plead for the superiority of the Christian tradition with all its spots and warts. Few books are as profoundly knowledgeable of both traditions and try sincerely to be fair to both traditions. For that reason this is a very unusual and highly significant book. In part, its significance is that it allows Christians themselves to be unshackled by centuries of extraneous tradition. But in so doing, it clears the decks for true understanding between Christians and Muslims. It is truly a spectacular book. The book itself is printed by the Navigators under their own new publishing label, and is introduced by one of their most outstanding leaders, Jim Petersen. **IJFM**

Continued from Brown, p. 82

see Rick Brown, ‘Muslim Worldviews and the Bible: Bridges and Barriers; Part I: God and Mankind’, *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 23/1 (2006), 5–12.

¹¹ Judging from the Targums, at the time of Jesus many Jews personified the Word/Wisdom of God and the Spirit/Shekinah of God in a way that is similar to Trinitarian thinking.

¹² See the article by Tim James in this issue. He notes that a refusal to use the community’s preferred terminology implies “that there is little of worth in the host community, its people, language and heritage, and that all good things come from outside” (p. 66). This is, in fact, the reason given by some missionaries and church leaders for NOT using local terminology, music, customs, etc., namely that in their opinion there is no good thing in the community. Not surprisingly, the community itself immediately perceives this disdainful attitude as ethnic pride and prejudice, and it sees the “outsider” message as an assault on their dignity and worth. *By wrapping the message in the language of rejection, outsiders almost ensure rejection of the message itself.*

¹³ Presumably the missionaries’ denigration of the name ‘Isa was particularly offensive to someone who proudly bore that name in Jesus’ honour. Jesus himself is much more polite and incarnational in his approach. In his many appearances to Muslims, calling them to follow him, he identifies himself using familiar terms. In most situations this means identifying himself as ‘Isa rather than as Yezu or Yasu’.

¹⁴ It must be noted that this applies to Turkish but not necessarily to Persian or many other languages where Muslims commonly use a traditional name for God other than Allah. But even in these communities the people use set phrases that include Allah, such as *in sha’ Allah* “if God wills” and *al hamdu lillah* “praise to God.” For additional information on using Allah in various Bible translations, see the article by John Travis in this issue, and see Kenneth J. Thomas, ‘Allah in the Translation of the Bible’, *The Bible Translator*, 52/3 (2001), 301–305.