

IRMA KORTE

THE APOCALYPSE OF ST. JOHN

ILLUSTRATED AND INTERPRETED



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TRANSLATED BY TARJA SAGAR

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Contents

Introduction: Images and interpretations	7
1.–3. St. John's task and the first vision	12
4. Heaven	16
5. The scroll and the Lamb	20
6. Four riders, the altar, and the earthquake	24
7. The wind dies down and the seal of God	34
8. Silence in heaven, fire from the altar, and the first trumpet blows	36
9. New trumpet blows: the bottomless pit is opened, locusts, the release of the angels, and the riders	43
10. The angel and the little book	50
11. Measuring the temple, two witnesses, the beast, and the Ark of the Covenant	52
12. The heavenly woman clothed with the sun, and the dragon	62
13. The beasts	70
14. The song on Mount Zion, harvesting, and the winepress of God's wrath	75
15. The announcement of the last plagues, and those who are victorious over the beast	80
16. The plagues from the bowls and the battle of Armageddon	82
17. The harlot of Babylon	94
18. The fall of Babylon	102
19. The victorious rider, the fate of the beast and the false prophet, and God's great feast	108
20. The dragon is tied for a thousand years, the return of the dragon, and the final judgement	117
21. New Jerusalem	124
22. Paradise	130
List of illustrations	140
Bibliography	146



INTRODUCTION: IMAGES AND INTERPRETATIONS

Especially during difficult times, many people compare conditions to the events described in the Apocalypse of St. John—so much seeming bad luck and death is contained in this last book of the Bible. The word “apocalypse” alone has come to mean destruction on a grand scale, although it originates directly from the Greek word meaning “to reveal” and “to disclose.” The biblical apocalypse, *The Revelation*, relates the visions of the prophet St. John the Divine. Taken literally, the visions include dreadful events. People die of plague, poisoned water, hunger, wars, as a result of encounters with the beasts of the earth... Vegetation is destroyed by hail, the sun turns black, stars fall down to the ground, earthquakes cause suffering to the people, ships sink... No wonder the beasts of the Revelation have become synonyms for horrors and fears.

However, visions are typically imparted as mythical images, and this allows for many different kinds of interpretations. If we study the characteristics of mythical thinking itself, we can read comforting and even inspiring messages from the Revelation. The book includes descriptions about how to undo our superficial beliefs about God, evil and the nature of reality, and how to relinquish our own narrow self. These kinds of inner processes often instigate anxiety in us, but afterward, our understanding of life deepens to a lasting happiness which enables us to withstand difficulties and outward threats. The biblical apocalypse describes moments of terror, withdrawal, rebirth and liberation.

I have written an extensive interpretation about the Revelation, which was first published in Finnish by Helsinki University Press, and later translated into English with the title *The Revelation of St. John—An Inner Journey to Liberation*. Because the original book and its translation are quite extensive, I wanted to create an abbreviated version of the core ideas of my interpretation, and include numerous images from old apocalypse illustrations. I have placed the illustrations so that each image is associated with the specific vision discussed. There is an abundance of historic illustrations of the Revelation, as St. John’s visions have captured the imagination of many artists throughout the centuries, drawing them into the tumultuous and enchanting world of these visions.

In the Middle Ages, illuminated manuscripts that were made for an interpretation of the Revelation by Beatus of Liébana—a monk who lived c. 730–800—form a magnificent sequence of illustrations. Beatus of Liébana lived in an area, which is now part of Northern Spain. The interpretation consisted mainly of quotations from texts by church elders, but

new illustrated copies were made of the interpretations periodically. The earliest illuminated manuscript is from c. 930 and the latest has been dated to c. 1230. Because there were no means to print either the text or the illustrations at that time, each copy is unique: the illustrations transformed with each copying. The names of all but a few artists have been lost. These so-called Beatus Apocalypses were usually made in monasteries, and sometimes commissioned by royalty or wealthy nobility. They were not used in religious services, and therefore, ordinary people did not see them. There are many known manuscripts of the Beatus Apocalypses; 26 of them are richly illustrated, but some of them are already quite worn out. The manuscripts and their illustrations typically vary greatly, and some have been clearly influenced by Arabic art. This Arabic influence, which shows particularly in the early Beatus illustrations, comes from the fact that different Arabic and Islamic regimes prevailed in the more southerly parts of the Iberian Peninsula at the time when the Beatus manuscripts were created in the northern Christian parts of the Peninsula, such as in the kingdom of León.

I have chosen illustrations for my book from eight different Beatus manuscripts, which are named in the list of illustrations. Today, these manuscripts are kept in museums and libraries in different parts of the world. Information about the specific institutions is included in the end of the book.

Illustrated Beatus Apocalypses were made on the Iberian Peninsula and in Gascony, in the southwest corner of present-day France, but the so-called Bamberg Apocalypse is also largely based on Beatus of Liébana's commentary. Its illustrations, however, differ in style from the most common Beatus illustration tradition. Many of its illustrations are rather simple and made as if with a broad brush, but some are generously gilded, giving them beautiful splendor. The Bamberg Apocalypse was made between 1000 and 1020 at Reichenau Abbey, now in present-day Germany. According to the custom of the time, it was commissioned by a benefactor, who was either Otto III or Henry II. The Bamberg Apocalypse was named for the Bamberg State Library, where it is currently housed.

Most of the illustrations in my book come from Beatus manuscripts. Furthermore, I chose about ten illustrations from the Bamberg Apocalypse in order to create a relatively uniform pictorial succession of the most important events in the Revelation.

The illustrations of the apocalypses that I have mentioned above are small, because they were originally made for illuminated manuscripts. The Middle Ages, however, also produced one apocalypse illustration of

surprisingly large scale, the Apocalypse Tapestry, a set of tapestries in Angers castle, which were prepared in Paris between 1377 and 1382. The images on the tapestry are quite tall, and originally, they covered a length of over one hundred meters, and included about 90 illustrations of the apocalypse events. The weavers were extremely skillful: a later restoration of the work revealed that the back side of the tapestry was as good as the front side, and having been covered by a protective cloth, the back had retained its colors better.

The Angers tapestry suffered hardship over the centuries, but now restored, the remaining parts are beautifully displayed in Angers castle in a dimly lit hall with special lighting.

A grand undertaking like this large tapestry required a wealthy financier and patron, and this was the Duke of Anjou, Louis I of Angers castle. The style of the tapestry was derived from an illuminated apocalypse manuscript, which Louis I had borrowed from his brother, King Charles V of France. An artist, Jean de Bruges (Jean Bondol), a court artist for Charles V, designed at least some of the illustrations for the tapestry, but the specific apocalypse he used as a template has been lost. However, it is presumed that the style of the template represented that used in northern France and England at the time.

The Angers tapestry is such a notable apocalypse illustration that I felt it was important to include some of its illustrations, even though the small reproductions cannot do justice to the tapestry. Nevertheless, I hope the images I have chosen will impart at least some sense of this remarkable apocalypse.

In addition to the Middle Age illustrations, I wanted to include a few illustrations from the Renaissance to convey how the strongly stylized pictorial expression of the Middle Ages was transformed during the Renaissance to more closely reflect outward reality, along with the use of perspective having been introduced in visual arts. The Angers tapestry is part of the transitional stage in this development.

The first work that comes to mind from the Renaissance is the famous set of woodcuts by Albrecht Dürer, which includes fifteen illustrations of the events in the Revelation, a project which he began in 1495 after having returned from Italy. In general, I wanted to choose color illustrations for their enhanced expressiveness, but nevertheless, I included one black and white woodcut, which has been thought of being carved after one of Dürer's drawings. When I searched for pictures of all central figures and events in the Revelation, I could not find an illustration for the battle of Armageddon from the main sources I used. Eventually, I came across a

suitable picture on internet for this purpose. I found out that the picture had been published in the so-called *Liber Chronicarum*, which is one of the first printed books; published in 1493. The book is illustrated with woodcut prints and it discusses the history of the world, often set against a biblical background. The illustrations were produced in Nuremberg, in the workshop of Michael Wolgemut, during the time when Dürer was an apprentice at the workshop in 1486–89. The names of the artists who created the individual illustrations were not recorded in the workshop, and the works were not signed; therefore, it is possible that Dürer made the illustration I have chosen for the battle of Armageddon. The style of the drawing is much like a simplified version of Dürer's later illustrations for the Revelation. However, there is no universal agreement on the identity of the artist who created this image, and the image is listed under Wolgemut's name.

Of the early Renaissance color illustrations of the apocalypse, I chose in the end to include only two images from the Ottheinrich Bible, named after Neuburg nobleman, Ottheinrich, who funded the completion of the Bible. The production of this large-scale Bible had already been started in 1425, but the manuscript was not completed until the 16th century when a painter and woodcarver, Matthias Gerung, was hired for the project in 1530. His color paintings are already in the Renaissance style. The original Ottheinrich Bible is currently in the Bavarian State Library.

I wish to emphasize that the interpretation I present in this book is indeed an abbreviation. An extensive, detailed interpretation is, as I mentioned earlier, in the book titled *The Revelation of St. John—An Inner Journey to Liberation*, which is currently available in online bookstores. Although this book, with its references and bibliography, is well over 400 pages long, it, too, is actually an abbreviation. As it is, according to my interpretation, the events in the Revelation relate the spiritual life and the different stages of development of a human being as a synoptic outline. Everyone who turns inward to introspect and reflect on the nature of existence, experiences life in their own way, and of course it is not possible to describe fully the multifaceted nature of the experiences of each individual person.

In the broader book, I have striven to present my interpretation in ordinary language, which at times is theoretical, and I have chosen comparative examples from different periods and cultures, and even from the experiences and dreams of ordinary modern men and women. Some of

The Apocalypse—or the Revelation of St. John the Divine, the last book in the Bible—has inspired many artists over the centuries to present their own perceptions of its events and characters. What might a woman clothed with the sun, a dragon with seven heads, the harlot of Babylon, the New Jerusalem, and paradise look like? Irma Korte has gathered a collection of more than 60 such color illustrations here, made during the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance.

The images trace the events of the Apocalypse of St. John, rendering its central figures and episodes lifelike for us. They are accompanied by an insightful interpretation: Dr. Korte suggests that the Revelation deals with the most essential problems in religion, such as the nature of man, reality, and evil. As the visions proceed, St. John lives through a profound inner transformation. He gives up shallow beliefs and moves toward personally experienced spirituality, culminating in final liberation. St. John, like anyone who has traveled the same path, undergoes both anxiety and bliss, encounters beasts and enjoys the happiness of paradise.

The images and events of the Revelation are compared to the descriptions made by Christian mystics and saints, as well as to Oriental philosophy and yoga theory. These saints and *rishis* include, among others, St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, Ramana Maharshi, and Paramahansa Yogananda.

Mythical images allow for many interpretations. Readers may use these old and strangely captivating illustrations as a source of inspiration to find their own meaning in St. John's visions.

Irma Korte, Ph.D., has published several books and articles. She elaborated her interpretation of the Apocalypse of St. John in her earlier work *The Revelation of St. John—An Inner Journey to Liberation*, which is a detailed study of the Revelation. It offers more comparisons to the images of the Apocalypse of St. John from different cultures and time periods.

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