Richard K. Emmerson

*Apocalypse Illuminated: The Visual Exegesis of Revelation in Medieval Illustrated Manuscripts*


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The name Richard Emmerson is familiar to students of the reception history of the Apocalypse, not least for the influential volume he coedited with Bernard McGinn, *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Cornell University Press, 1992). Emmerson’s own scholarship has focused on the relationship between medieval apocalyptic traditions and their visual reception in manuscripts, and this beautifully illustrated volume represents the mature reflections of his scholarly career.

Given the *embarras de richesses* among medieval illuminated Apocalypses, Emmerson’s volume is necessarily selective, both in terms of manuscripts discussed and of images highlighted, though the range is still impressive. His book is organized in broadly chronological terms, allowing possible genealogical relationships between images to be more clearly identified. The opening chapter sets the scene for the study of the book of Revelation, considering introductory issues of authorship and canonicity, before offering a broad sketch of the main patterns of Apocalypse interpretation in Latin Christianity and reflecting on the distinctive character of visual exegesis. In this regard, Augustine’s oft-cited theory of three levels of vision (corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual) is relevant. John’s Apocalypse is regularly treated by medieval exegetes as an example of the second type, though occasionally of the third, highest kind, *visio intellectualis*, given the book’s status as prophecy.

Like many other accounts of the reception history of Revelation, Emmerson gives particular prominence to the reading strategies established by Victorinus of Pettau and especially Tyconius of Carthage, both foundational for the dominant medieval approach, which read Revelation in an allegorical, recapitulative, and largely dehistoricized fashion. He then notes the shift to the *littera*, and to history, in the early second millennium, identified with such commentators as Bruno of...
Segni, Anselm of Laon, Rupert of Deutz, and especially Joachim of Fiore. But Emmerson also challenges a simplistic twofold division of medieval exegesis of the Apocalypse into pre- and post-Joachim, particularly for understanding the illuminated manuscripts, many of which depend on the commentaries of more marginal exegetes, such as Beatus of Liébana, Alexander of Bremen, and Berengaudus.

Subsequent chapters trace this visual reception from the early ninth century through to the Reformation. The journey begins (ch. 2) with the Carolingian and Ottonian Apocalypses: Trier, Valenciennes, and Bamberg. Much scholarship posits their dependence on now-lost early Christian archetypes. Emmerson’s interest, however, is less on origins than on the function and meaning of their images. Hence Trier, even without an accompanying commentary, offers a clear ecclesiological interpretation, with its frequent visual contrast between Synagoga and Ecclesia, Babylon and New Jerusalem. The influence of Bede’s commentary, which understood the Apocalypse as a visionary account of the trials of the Church, is strong.

Chapter 3 discusses the Beatus manuscripts, based on Beatus of Liébana’s eighth-century commentary. Beatus’s highly derivative commentary was lengthy and somewhat rambling. The colorful images in the later Beatus Apocalypses are, by contrast, often much more direct in their interpretation. Emmerson illustrates how all but one of the Beatus Apocalypses were designed for monastic use, as was the Spanish monk’s own commentary, and reflect the prominence of the Apocalypse in the Visigothic Mozarabic liturgy, where it was read annually between Easter and Pentecost. The visual emphasis is on the perennial monastic struggle between good and evil, the Church and Satan, read through the lens of Revelation. Hence, for example, the two witnesses in the Girona Apocalypse wear monastic habits and carry abbatial staffs, while the visual influence of the monastic cloister at Las Huelgas is evident in the image of the New Jerusalem in the Las Huelgas Beatus.

Chapter 4 sketches the transition from primarily monastic usage to the provision of illustrated Apocalypses for new readers, including royal patrons and members of the mendicant orders. This period, beginning in the early twelfth century, also marks the transition from the Romanesque to the Gothic style and sees the expansion of images of the Apocalypse to the Bibles moralisées. Again, Emmerson’s examples are well chosen. He illustrates the perpetuation of traditional ecclesiological readings in the early twelfth-century Haimo Apocalypse, where the woman clothed with the sun has the dual identity of Ecclesia and Mary. He also explores the complex reading strategies found in the Bibles moralisées, designed for lay readers, which despite their title contained more than moral or tropological interpretations. Other examples from this period include five illuminated manuscripts of the Apocalypse commentary by the Franciscan Alexander of Bremen, which visualize Alexander’s linear, historical-prophetic interpretation.
Perhaps the most famous illuminated Apocalypses, the Anglo-French manuscripts of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, are the subject of chapter 5. The discussion includes a lucid treatment of complex scholarly debates about possible archetypes and groupings, issues beyond the expertise or even interests of most biblical scholars. Yet again Emmerson shows his preference for function and exegetical approach over questions of origins and antecedents. He includes a substantial treatment of the Apocalypse commentary of Berengaudus, excerpts of which appear in a significant number of the Anglo-French Apocalypses. Berengaudus’s eclectic method, combining ecclesiological and prophetic interpretations with some moral and historical elements, is reflected visually in the manuscript tradition. Examples of this diversity include the retention of Augustine’s view of the millennium as the time of the church; the prophetic understanding of the two witnesses as referring to the future coming of Enoch and Elijah; the interpretation of the first four seals as stages in Old Testament history, from Noah to the prophets; the correlation of the seven heads of the beast with seven vices. By contrast, those manuscripts containing an anonymous Anglo-French gloss, probably influenced by mendicants, prioritize the moralizing interpretation of Revelation, emphasizing preaching and warnings against bad prelates.

Chapter 6 brings the story up to the late fifteenth century and beyond, considering new formats of visualization in altarpieces (e.g., by the van Eyck brothers and Memling), books of hours (e.g., the Bedford Hours and the Hours of Isabella Stuart), and woodcuts (e.g., Dürer and Cranach the Elder), ongoing interest in the antichrist, exemplified by Luca Signorelli’s Orvieto fresco, interest in apocalyptically related traditions about the two witnesses, or Gog and Magog, and an optimistic strand of apocalypticism associated with Columbus. Locating the artistic output against the wider backdrop of late medieval apocalypticism leads to some illuminating proposals. These include Emmerson’s suggestion that Dürer’s decision not to include a separate illustration of the two witnesses in his 1498 *Apocalypsis cum figuris* may be related to a desire to avoid controversial subjects, given that Rev 11 was central to contemporary polemics regarding the antichrist.

Readers who are biblical scholars may find aspects of Emmerson’s book overly technical, especially the discussions of possible visual archetypes and rival attempts to group manuscripts into families. Yet these sections are rare, given Emmerson’s primary interest in how these manuscripts function as visual exegesis of the Apocalypse, paralleling and at times moving beyond the written exegetical tradition. His well-chosen examples, accompanied by beautifully reproduced images, illustrate the breadth of exegetical possibilities. A good example is the visualization of the four horsemen of Rev 6. The visually stunning double-page depiction in the Saint-Sever Beatus envisages interaction, and some dissension, between the horsemen, the second rider wielding a sword against the rider on the white horse, the latter clearly identified as Christ. The Douce Apocalypse shows clear influence of the Berengaudus commentary, which identifies both the first horseman and the white horse he rides as symbols of Christ. In the Douce image, the rider has a crossed nimbus, while a gold cross appears on the horse’s bridle. Albrecht Dürer’s classic image effectively rules out earlier
christological or historical interpretations, transforming the horsemen into “the well-known symbols of Pestilence, War, Famine, and Death” (185).

Those already familiar with the main streams of medieval apocalyptic thought will also learn much from Emmerson’s judicious treatment. For example, he frequently warns against the tendency to conflate medieval apocalyptic interest with millenarianism, particularly when analyzing manuscripts designed for monastic use. Emmerson cites approvingly Mary Carruthers’s observation about the Morgan Beatus being “a book designed for monks remembering Hell and the Last Things” (quoted on 74). Indeed, Emmerson makes a strong, cumulative case for the centrality of apocalyptic thought and imagery for medieval Christians in general, not simply those living in a situation of “crisis.” But it is his sympathetic grasp of how the images function, grounded in an extensive knowledge of the manuscripts and the subtle nuances of medieval exegetical traditions, which makes this book so compelling. Readers will find in Emmerson a trustworthy and illuminating guide, like the interpreting angel of John’s Apocalypse or the ever-present figure of John himself.