



Albrecht Dürer's New Jerusalem

Revelation 21-22

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AS WE NEAR THE END OF OUR CENTURY AND MILLENNIUM, WE ARE ALSO CLOSING in on the 500th anniversary of Albrecht Dürer's *Apocalypse*. Half a millennium ago, in 1498, Dürer published an edition of the *Apocalypse* with 15 woodcuts, so compelling in their artistic and spiritual power that they set their stamp on all subsequent generations of illustrators of Revelation.

Dürer's woodcuts were immediately imitated in books and Bibles and in the stained glass windows of Europe. His images were even incorporated into the pattern books used by iconographers in the monasteries of Mount Athos and so penetrated the post-Byzantine world of Eastern Orthodoxy.¹

Dürer's *Apocalypse* was a big book, and his woodcuts were large, full-page illustrations. The reproductions accompanying this essay are printed in reduced size and can only hint vaguely at the power of the originals.²

¹Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1955) 59. See also P. Schmidt, *Die Illustration der Lutherbibel: 1522-1700* (Basel: F. Reinhardt, 1962).

²A fine set of originals is on permanent display in the new art gallery at the Lutheran Brotherhood offices on Fourth Avenue in Minneapolis. The gallery is open to the public Monday through Friday. Richard Hillstrom is the very knowledgeable and hospitable curator and consultant of the collection.

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Dürer's Four Horsemen

I. DÜRER'S ARTISTIC ACHIEVEMENT

Dürer had many accomplished predecessors, reaching back at least as far as the ninth century when the earliest surviving illuminated manuscripts of Revela-



The Four Horsemen in the Nuremberg Bible

tion were produced. But his work owed little to painted illuminations and much to recent developments in the art of carving designs in wood.³

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, books began to be produced from engraved wood blocks. The “block books” are a kind of half-way house, holding a middle ground between handwritten manuscripts on the one hand and books produced from moveable type on the other.

One of the first illustrated books to be printed in the new block method was the Haarlem *Apocalypse* produced in the Netherlands around 1420. The Haarlem block book offers 50 pictures with short bursts of text filling some of the empty space inside the pictures.

However, Dürer’s immediate predecessor can be seen in the Nuremberg Bible published in 1483 by Anton Koberger, Dürer’s godfather.⁴ In the Nuremberg Bible the book of Revelation is illustrated with eight woodcuts. Even a cursory glance at those earlier woodcuts is enough to prove that Dürer both knew them and transcended them.

Dürer was a brilliant draftsman. The men and women inhabiting his scenes are not mere outline figures, like cartoons for stained glass windows. He did not

³On Dürer’s predecessors see M. R. James, *The Apocalypse in Art* (London: Oxford University, 1931), and especially Frederick van der Meer, *Apocalypse: Visions from the Book of Revelation in Western Art* (New York: Alpine Fine Arts Collection, 1978).

⁴Koberger presided over a large printing operation employing 24 presses and about 100 workers. Almost overnight printing had become big business. The Gutenberg Bible, published at Mainz in 1455, was the first in a flood of books to be printed using the new moveable type. With an eye on the explosion of books and resultant democratization of learning, Victor Hugo declared, “The Gothic sun set behind the colossal press at Mainz”; and we may add, at Nuremberg and other northern European cities. Carl Zigrosser, *Six Centuries of Fine Prints* (New York: Covici Friede, 1937) 21.

intend his woodcuts to be filled in with color after being printed in heavy black lines on white paper. He made exquisite use of hatching and fine cross lines to evoke a sense of light and shadow. His figures possess a three-dimensional quality not seen in his predecessors and rarely achieved by any in his train.

The energy in Dürer's pictures is astonishing. Previous generations had adopted classical forms and strove for quiet and calm, reserve and moderation. Such words describe neither Dürer's pictures nor the book of Revelation itself. The Seer's text is full of earthquakes and convulsions, terrible voices like peals of thunder or the sound of many waters or the blaring of trumpets, incessant chanting and ecstatic singing, uncontrolled weeping and triumphant shouts. The four living creatures of Revelation 4-5 bellow, snort, shriek, and cry aloud their awful chant, "Holy, holy, holy."

Instead of classical composure, Dürer does not hesitate to portray the deep stirring of human emotion: people crawl into caves or cover their faces with their hands in a vain attempt to shield themselves from impending horrors, eyes bug out in terror, arms are thrown up in a vain attempt to ward off angelic blows or deflect the hooves of the apocalyptic horses.

Dürer's *Four Horsemen* (Revelation 6) are far from exemplifying that classical serenity and antique costuming so dear to the hearts of the artists of the Italian renaissance. Dürer's riders are contemporary human beings of flesh and blood. The first is a prince wearing his tiara around a tasseled conical hat and staring ahead at some hapless target of his armed and ready bow. Next comes a heartless warrior brandishing a terrible sword. The third horseman is a smug usurer or tax collector decked out in a fancy jacket, sporting an ostentatious necklace, his ample girth surrounded by a decorative belt, swinging his scales like a weapon against the poor. Bringing up the rear is death, a gruesome Father Time, raking people with his pitchfork into the monstrous jaws of hell.

And the victims, too, are an anguished cross section of German society: cardinal in fancy hat, housewife with sewing kit tied to her waist, well-fed burgher with chubby jowls, peasant staring uncomprehendingly at his impending fate, bald-pated monk face down on the earth, utterly defeated. Each is an individual, and each is believable. Even Dürer's horses are alive, a far cry from the Haarlem block-book horses or those of the Nuremberg Bible, which are as stiff as carved wooden relics from some abandoned carousel.

II. DÜRER'S SPIRIT

The generations have been unanimous in applauding Dürer's artistic achievements, but interpreters have diverged wildly in their estimates of his spiritual posture and program.

1. *Pietist or Social Revolutionary?*

Generations of pious believers have seen in Dürer a fellow pietist, the artist who gave them "The Praying Hands" (*Hands of an Apostle*), an otherworldly spirit safely distanced from the politics and social currents of his time.

Dürer certainly produced a large body of devotional work including two cycles of woodcuts illustrating the passion of Christ and a life of the Virgin Mary, favorite themes with Dürer. But he also executed works we would call secular, illustrating the comedies of Terence, instructional manuals on the art of perspective, a volume on military fortification, and a book on the proportions of the human body, among many others.

Instead of a pietistic practitioner of inward devotion, Rolf Chadraha finds in Dürer the exact opposite: a social-political revolutionary. He notes how light breaks forth from above in Dürer's woodcuts and thunderbolts hurl downwards from the throne of God. But the strong horizontal lines (as in *The Four Horsemen*) indicate that God's apocalyptic program will be realized only by the most strenuous human initiatives, including, if need be, even social revolution.⁵

2. Lutheran or Catholic?

Lutherans and other reformation Christians have discovered a kindred spirit in Dürer, partly on the basis of words which the artist entrusted to his diary. When Dürer heard about Luther's teaching that salvation is a free gift of God in Jesus Christ, to be received by faith, he wrote of his desire to meet this Luther so that he might engrave his portrait "as a lasting memorial of the man who has helped me out of great anxiety." Upon learning how Luther stood accused before Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms, Dürer compared the reformer to Jesus before Pontius Pilate. Dürer and Luther probably never met. Certainly Dürer never painted or engraved Luther's face except in the words of his diary.⁶

Two large paintings, over life-sized, of John with Peter in the background, and of Paul with Mark behind, have been called Dürer's pledge of allegiance to the reformation. He gave these paintings in 1526 to the city of Nuremberg, which by then had gone over to the reformation. Dürer's friend Pirckheimer had turned his back on the reformation, repelled as Luther's teachings were given a radical twist and interpreted as justification for iconoclasm, polygamy, and the peasants' revolt. Dürer was no radical but he did not waver in his loyalty to Luther.⁷

On the other hand, Frederick van der Meer praises "the engraving of the good Catholic Dürer" in contrast to "the clearly Protestant caricatures of Cranach,"

⁵Andreas Bee, "Apocalypsis cum figuris: Die Apokalypse Albrecht Dürers," in *Apokalypse: Ein Prinzip Hoffnung?* ed. Richard W. Gassen and Bernhard Holeczek (Heidelberg: Edition Braus, 1985) 63-74, takes issue with Rudolf Chadraha's social-revolutionary interpretation offered in the monograph, *Dürers Apokalypse* (Prague: Verlag der Tschechoslawakischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1964) which was not available to me. Chadraha has contributed a fine history of the illustration of the Apocalypse to the *Lexikon der Christlichen Ikonographie*, ed. Engelbert Kirschbaum (Rome: Herder, 1968) 1:124-140, in an entry bearing the title "Apokalypse des Johannes."

⁶Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950) 128-130, 191-192, offers quotations from Dürer's diaries to illumine the artist's posture relative to the reformation. Dürer may not have drawn Luther, but he did execute portraits both of Frederick the Wise and of Philip Melanchthon.

⁷Panofsky interprets the artistry and politics of these paintings (*Life and Art*, 229-235). Fedja Anzelewski, *Dürer and His Time* (Washington: Smithsonian, 1967), calls these paintings Dürer's "vow of allegiance to the Reformation."



New Jerusalem on Clouds, Nuremberg Bible

pointing to the way each portrayed Babylon the whore (Revelation 17).⁸ It is a fact that Lucas Cranach trumpeted his religious convictions by depicting the whore as wearing the triple crown of the pope in Luther's *September Testament* (1522). Frederick the Wise protested, and the December edition appeared with the three tiers reduced to one. The Dürer of 1498 was a "good Catholic," but by 1522 his sympathies were clearly with Luther.

3. German Humanist

Who is the real Albrecht Dürer? Lutheran or Catholic, otherworldly pietist or political revolutionary? Something else entirely? He was certainly no alienated artist, railing at the vices of his age, full of scorn for the basic institutions of his land, hoping with every breath for the early overthrow of kings and prelates.

He was in fact on the best of terms with the most powerful figures in Germany. Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, was Dürer's admirer and patron from 1496. Emperor Maximilian I commissioned work from him and eventually bestowed on him a pension, which was confirmed by the new emperor, Charles V, in 1520.

The renaissance in Germany was dominated by two powerful streams: romantic cultural nationalism and the spirit of religious renewal.⁹ Dürer's *Apocalypse* may show heads crowned with the insignia of church or empire tumbling into the maw of hell beneath the feet of the four riders or paying homage to the dragon and the beast. These are not, however, expressions of anti-papal or anti-imperial sentiment or of revolutionary propaganda. They are rather traditional themes of the *memento mori* and of the need for all Christians, including the highest, to remember that they will one day die and face their Judge.¹⁰

Italian contemporaries of Dürer ridiculed his anachronistic costuming and architecture. Artists knew how to portray the clothing and dwelling places of the

⁸Van der Meer, *Apocalypse*, 31.

⁹Such is the thesis of Lewis W. Spitz, *The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1963). The northern renaissance, so different from the renaissance south of the Alps, was infused with the spirit of Christian reform and renewal.

¹⁰In 1505 Dürer drew an eerie portrait of a crowned Death riding a thin horse. The drawing displays the legend "Memento mei."



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ancients, but Dürer deliberately drew the manners and habitations of his beloved Germany. *The Four Horsemen* is not a study in the history of the first century but a realistic rendering of northern Europeans of the late fifteenth century. And in the final woodcut in the series, *The New Jerusalem* is not some fantastic, otherworldly metropolis with gates fashioned of huge pearls but a scrubbed and tidy German city.

Dürer believed that the New Jerusalem was in the process of being built by the efforts of the religious renaissance of the north, as leaders like Maximilian and Frederick lent their prestige to the humanistic program of Erasmus, Celtis, Pirckheimer, Mutianus, Melanchthon, and Luther.

It may be symptomatic that Dürer signed his work so unmistakably. It seems so natural now to see the familiar D inside the distinctive A. But it was a novelty for artists to sign their work in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. And Dürer's initials may be related to yet another innovation. In earlier illustrated Apocalypses, artists customarily depicted John the Seer in every scene.¹¹ Dürer, however, introduces the Seer only when he is mentioned in Revelation as one of the characters in the narrative: at the feet of the exalted Christ (Revelation 1), caught up into heaven (Revelation 4-5), eating the little scroll (Revelation 10), and viewing the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21). So John appears in only four of the woodcuts, but the artist's own initials occupy the lower foreground of every single woodcut without exception. That signature, so prominently drawn, replacing the portrait of the Seer, reveals a new consciousness of self. Dürer saw himself and his fellow artists as the inspired mediators of godly visions and energies, taking their place alongside (even displacing?) priest and prophet and mystic.¹²

"Apocalyptic" today usually means "deeply pessimistic." Dürer's *Apocalypse*, however, is full of the young artist's optimism. He was convinced that the struggles of his time were leading not to doomsday and meltdown, but to the dawning of a new historical era for the people of Germany and all of northern Europe.

The optimism expressed in his *Apocalypse* would be sorely tested, but it would never be defeated. It was rather to be transmuted into resilient hope, as Dürer came increasingly under the spell of the reforming energies emanating from Wittenberg.

¹¹Dürer is following the Nuremberg Bible in omitting the Seer from most scenes, but the earlier Bibles do not carry the signature of the artist.

¹²Michael Camille, "Visionary Perception and Images of the Apocalypse in the Later Middle Ages," in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. R. Emerson and B. McGinn (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1992) 276-289.