

The Use of Art in Understanding Christian Teachings: How Albrecht Dürer's *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* aids in the interpretation of the Book of Revelation

Many people and cultures throughout history have taken great interest in the end of the world. For millennia, thinkers have asked various questions about this: Will all life one day come to an end? Will the earth and sky open up and swallow everyone and everything? Is there hope for eternal life? Christianity attempts to answer these questions and more in the final book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation. Artists from many different parts of the world and periods in time have used this apocalyptic text as inspiration for their works. In 1498, German artist Albrecht Dürer published a series of fifteen woodcuts depicting various scenes from the Book of Revelation. One of these woodcuts was *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (fig. 1), which, like many other depictions of the Apocalypse, can be used to more readily understand the teachings and beliefs of the Christian Church of the Middle Ages in Europe.

The Book of Revelation is an apocalyptic prophecy addressed to the seven principal churches in the Roman province of Asia, dating to roughly 95 CE. This work is commonly attributed to the Apostle John, a close friend of Jesus'; however, the author does not state that he was, only referring to himself as a "brother" who shared in the joint tribulations of the Christians.¹ John had been exiled or was forced to flee to the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea as a result of the persecution of the Christians. While on Patmos, John entered a trance while meditating in which he had visions of the Apocalypse. He wrote down what he saw and addressed it to the leading Christian

¹ Case, Shirley Jackson. "The Book of Revelation. I." *The Biblical World* 50, no. 3 (1917): 192–200. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3136409>, 194.

communities in Asia Minor, admonishing them to live correctly so that they may be ready for the end when it comes.²

The Book of Revelation is broken down into several parts: the introduction in which John introduces himself, identifies his audience, and calls people to respond to this word; a detailed look at the throne of God and the seven seals; the seven trumpets; the woman and the dragon; the seven bowls of wrath; the fall of Babylon and the return of Christ; and the new Heavens and new Earth. It is beneficial for those who attempt to understand and break down the meanings of John's revelations to look to other works of Christian scripture. Julia Kristeva coined the term *intertextualité* to describe the use of several statements taken from different texts intersecting in one space. Kristeva believes that every piece of writing and every image has references built into them that refer to other texts or images.³ John uses different pieces of scripture in terms of Kristeva's intertextuality.⁴ He builds upon the foundation of Christianity at this point, deepening his message's influence and impact on early Christians. Obscure and extravagant imagery has led to numerous interpretations of the symbols throughout the book, using different books of the Bible to deepen understanding.

Chapter 6 of Revelation discusses the Lamb opening the seven seals one by one. The opening of the first four seals unveils the renowned Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Each one is a portrayal of different events that will take place in the end times: war, pestilence, famine, and death. These figures are often viewed as harbingers of disaster and catastrophe. Revelation 6 begins with the emergence of the first of the Horsemen,

² Case, Shirley Jackson. "The Book of Revelation. I." *The Biblical World* 50, no. 3 (1917): 192–200. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3136409>, 195.

³ Vernon Hyde Minor, *Art History's History*, Second (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2009), 218.

⁴ Timothy Beal, *The Book of Revelation: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 47.

who rides a white horse and carries a bow (fig. 2). He is given a crown and rides out "as a conqueror bent on conquest." This Rider is often thought to be symbolic of pestilence or plague. The second of the Horsemen emerges on a fiery red horse (fig. 3). The rider of this horse is given a large sword and the power to take peace from the earth and make people kill one another, symbolising war. The third Horseman, Famine, rides a black horse and carries a pair of scales (fig. 4). The last Horseman is Death, and he rides a pale horse (fig. 5). Behind Death, Hell follows closely, and the two were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine, plague, and with the wild beasts of the earth. Artists like Albrecht Dürer commonly depict these creatures John writes about.⁵

The utilisation of complex and intricate messages and symbols in John's visions has been subject to various interpretations throughout history. The Apocalypse has continuously been a subject of great importance and fear for cultures around the world during many different periods in time. The end of the 15th century brought significant attention to these themes and saw a variety of artistic depictions of the symbols and icons found in Revelation.⁶ At the time of the production of his Apocalypse series, Dürer was living in Nuremberg, a city recovering from a complete transformation of almost everything in both Church and State, resulting in an eruption of disorder and a deep fascination with the Apocalypse. This influence was seen in a plethora of the art and literature produced in this time and place, significantly impacting the young artist.

Some of the depictions Dürer used as inspiration for his series were from late medieval Dutch block books.⁷ Dürer was initially exposed to examples of these block

⁵ Timothy Beal, *The Book of Revelation: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 16.

⁶ Cathy Leahy, Jennifer Spinks, and Charles Zika, *The Four Horsemen: Apocalypse, Death & Disaster* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2012), 4.

⁷ Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine and Death in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 6.

books in his godfather Anton Koberger's print workshop. In Koberger's printing office, Dürer would have had access to eight woodcuts illustrating the Apocalypse used in a Bible Koberger published in 1483. Despite being mediocre copies from a series from the *Cologne Bible* published around 1478 by Heinrich Quentell, they were energetically drawn and depicted a number of motifs lacking in earlier renderings of the subject (fig. 6).⁸ Dürer's interest in the *Cologne Bible* is evident in his use of the features found in these woodcuts that were absent in the traditional cycle, borrowing a dozen for his own use. Some of the details he incorporates include the Four Horsemen who ride in a uniformed diagonal line, each overlapping the other, and Death represented as a half-carcass. Dürer does not entirely emulate this work, as is evident in his decision to assign Death a trident rather than a scythe and depict the third Horseman, Famine, swinging his balance into the air, as opposed to the *Cologne Bible's* Rider holding up one scale of the balance.⁹

The *Beatus* manuscript is another example of a block book from the eighth century (fig. 7). This manuscript incorporates randomly inserted explanations borrowed from spiritualistic commentary, which results in the loss of much of the Biblical text employed in these depictions. Berengaudus, a ninth-century author and Benedictine monk, comments on this manuscript, focusing more on the symbols rather than the literal sense of the visual details. In his interpretation, he considers that the opening of the first seal signifies all that happened before the Flood. In the block book, one of the four Beings hands John a banderole with the inscription, "Come and see! that is, understand spiritually, the things which happened before the Flood and about which

⁸ Cathy Leahy, Jennifer Spinks, and Charles Zika, *The Four Horsemen: Apocalypse, Death & Disaster* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2012), 4.

⁹ Frederik van der Meer, *Apocalypse: Visions from the Book of Revelation in Western Art* (New York, NY: Alpine Fine Arts Collection, 1978), 283-284.

you now read.” Berengaudus interprets the white horse as the Church and the Rider as the Lord. In the image of the second Horseman, a caption near John's head refers to the opening of the second seal as signifying the just living after the Flood until the Law, or the Ten Commandments. There are several captions near the Rider, one of which refers to him as the Devil, another as a tyrant turning against the martyrs, and the last which says that the great sword the Rider carries signifies the waters of the Flood or the upturning of Sodom. A statement from the third living being reads, “Understand what you have read in the books of the prophets.” Near the third horse, there are several banners that talk about how the horse is representative of hypocrisy, the Rider is the Lord, and the people are governed by the Devil. The balance the Horseman carries signifies the justice of the Law, and Berengaudus interprets the third horse as the dark men of the Law. In the last scene, the opening of the fourth Seal signifies the prophets who foretold Christ. The final living being instructs readers to understand what Scripture says about the Law. The fourth Horseman, Death, is presented as the Lord, and the fire carried by the Rider is the Lord's wrath.¹⁰

Many Mediaeval theologians wrote commentaries on the Book of Revelation. These interpretations would have played a prominent role in Albrecht Dürer's knowledge of the Apocalypse and the Four Horsemen and shaped how he depicted this subject in his Apocalypse series. Andrew of Caesarea, a Greek theological writer and bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, is a celebrated and respected theologian who published a commentary of the Book of Revelation in 611 CE. His interpretation of this immensely challenging text is “a remarkably intelligent, spiritual, and thoughtful commentary that encourages the pursuit of virtue and confidence in the love of God for

¹⁰ Frederik van der Meer, *Apocalypse: Visions from the Book of Revelation in Western Art* (New York, NY: Alpine Fine Arts Collection, 1978), 275.

humanity.”¹¹ His exegesis was inspired by pre-existing written and oral interpretations of Revelation passages by earlier Church Fathers and anonymous teachers, alluding to the rich tradition of Apocalypse interpretations found in the Greek East during his time. Additionally, his commentaries became the predominant and standard patristic authority for the Greek East as well as the Slavic, Armenian, and Georgian Churches, and they had an immense impact on the textual transmission of the Apocalypse.¹² Andrew writes that in Church canon contemporary to his time, some have interpreted the opening of the seals as the life of Christ: the first in his birth, the second in his baptism, the third in the divine signs subsequent to this baptism, the fourth in standing before Pilate, the fifth in the cross, the sixth in the placing of Christ’s body in the tomb, and the seventh in the destruction of Hades. The translator of this text, however, points out in the footnotes that Oecumenius, whose interpretation Andrew bases his own commentary on, regards the fifth seal as the souls under the altar who were objecting to the treatment of Christ and the sixth seal as the cross, death, resurrection, and ascension.¹³

Andrew of Caesarea transcribes more to the teachings of the Church Father, early Christian bishop, ecclesiastical author, and martyr Methodius of Olympus’ teachings regarding the Apocalypse. Methodius’ teachings reflect his belief that “it is not necessary to think ‘that Christ himself is the one who has been born. For long ago, before the Apocalypse, the mystery of the Incarnation of the Logos had been fulfilled. John [of Patmos] is speaking with authority concerning the present and future things.’”¹⁴ In his

¹¹ Andrew Caesarea, *The Fathers of the Church: Commentary on the Apocalypse*, trans. Eugenia Constantinou (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012).

¹² Andrew Caesarea, *The Fathers of the Church*.

¹³ Andrew Caesarea, *The Fathers of the Church*, 90.

¹⁴ Andrew Caesarea, *The Fathers of the Church*, 91.

commentary, Andrew goes on to explain his interpretations of the Riders, focusing on the seals as representing Church history. The loosening of the first seal refers to the generation of the apostles who “bend the gospel message like a bow against the demons, leading them to be fatally wounded by the saving arrows of Christ.”¹⁵ The second living being characterises the sacrifice of the martyrs. According to Andrew of Caesarea, this refers to the second succession of the apostles, which is ultimately fulfilled through martyrs and teachers. During the period in which the gospel message was continuing to be spread, the peace of the world was abolished, and human nature was divided against itself.¹⁶ Andrew connects this to Christ’s statement, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace, but a sword.”¹⁷ This reference foreshadows and solidifies the use of a sword as the weapon of the second Horseman in the Apocalypse.¹⁸ Andrew goes on to explain that the black horse, ridden by the third Horseman, signifies the mourning for those who have fallen from the faith in Christ, and the scale the Rider carries is the examiner of those who have fallen. Lastly, Andrew determines the fourth living being to refer to the wounds from the divinely led wrath of God for the revenge of the pious and the punishment of the impious.

Another Medieval theologian who wrote a commentary on the Apocalypse is Richard of Saint Victor, a Mediaeval Scottish philosopher and theologian who was the prior of the Augustinian Abbey of Saint Victor in Paris. His approach to understanding the opening of the seals is also rooted in his belief that the seals are reflective of Church history. Unlike Andrew of Caesarea, he correlates the first seal with the first period of the church, the life of Christ. Richard identifies the second seal with the persecution of

¹⁵ Andrew Caesarea, *The Fathers of the Church*, 91.

¹⁶ Andrew Caesarea, *The Fathers of the Church*, 92.

¹⁷ Matthew 10:34 RSV

¹⁸ Andrew Caesarea, *The Fathers of the Church*, 94.

the church.¹⁹ The instrument of this persecution is the Roman Empire, which is inspired by the devil, who is set on destroying the church. Martyrs and those persecuted during this time inspired people to become Christians. The third seal represents the fight against heresy, which is “an inside job” as the devil hides and operates from within the church. Furthermore, the black horse’s colour is indicative of it representing hiddenness. The fourth seal features those who falsely pretend to be pious and are introduced by the devil to sabotage the church from within. Similarly, the pallid horse reflects the hypocrites who practice spiritual disciplines in order to hide their malice.²⁰

The Paris Mendicant Model is based on “the standard Parisian approach to the Apocalypse.”²¹ Thirteenth-century religious scholars often described the opening of the seven seals as one of the visions that dealt with all of church history in contrast to those who concentrated on the end time. The first seal is identified as the early building up of the church in the time of Christ and the apostles. It deals with the time of Christ’s direct interaction with the world while he was in it, and it can be extended to the building up of the church through the preaching of the apostles after Christ’s death and ascension into Heaven. The following three seals pertain to the hardships of the faithful: the second seal relating to the state of the church in the time of the martyrs, the third to the age of the heretics, and the fourth to the state of the false brothers.²²

Alexander Minorita, a thirteenth-century medieval religious commentator, interpreted Revelation as a history of Christian persecution under the pagan emperors, breaking with the scholars who saw the apocalyptic text as a prophecy of the Antichrist.

¹⁹ David Burr, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 49.

²⁰ David Burr, *The Book of Revelation*, 49-50.

²¹ David Burr, *The Book of Revelation*, 183.

²² David Burr, *The Book of Revelation*, 196.

He determines the opening of the first six seals to tell the story of Christian martyrdom under the Roman rulers from Gaius to Domitian.²³ Alexander highlights the shortcomings of the interpretations of other theologians who assign the meaning of the first seal as the Lord's incarnation, the second his nativity, the third his passion, and the fourth his resurrection.²⁴ One of his critiques of this interpretation regards how these exegetes do not uphold their interpretation of each seal, changing their explanation of the red horse to be persecutors of the martyrs rather than as Christ's nativity, the black horse not as the Lord's passion but rather heretics, and the fourth seal not as Christ's resurrection but as false brothers. Furthermore, each of these Riders is consistently referred to as the devil throughout their interpretations.²⁵

Because of the vast debate on what each of the Four Horsemen represents among scholars, Dürer likely used different elements of the various interpretations he knew when depicting the Four Horsemen. Dürer could have drawn upon teachings like that of Andrew of Caesarea, Richard of Saint Victor, the Paris Mendicant Model, and Alexander Minorita. Andrew of Caesarea details the meaning and reasoning behind each of the Horsemen's weapons, which Dürer uses as identifying factors in his print rather than the colour of the horses. For example, Andrew's interpretation of the fourth Horseman centres on it, referring to the revenge of the pious and the punishment of the impious. Similarly, in Richard of Saint Victor's commentary, the fourth seal features those who pretended to be devout and saintly but were guided by the devil to sabotage the church from within, and the pallid horse represents the hypocrites who performed righteous acts in order to hide their wickedness. Dürer's fourth rider and horse are depicted as

²³ David Burr, *The Book of Revelation*, 149.

²⁴ David Burr, *The Book of Revelation*, 148.

²⁵ David Burr, *The Book of Revelation*, 149.

emaciated and withering figures. Following the teachings of Richard, Dürer may have done this to highlight the decay that comes with the deceit of dishonestly acting righteous. The pallid horse is shown trampling a man dressed in fine garments with an ornate crown, who could also be interpreted as the hypocrite about whom Richard writes (fig. 8).

Alexander Minorita highlights the shortcomings of other scholars who contradict themselves in their interpretations of the meaning of the seals. One of his primary points is that theologians from the Middle Ages consistently refer to each of the Riders as the devil, often not following their broader explanations. Alexander does not align his beliefs with these commentaries, and Dürer seems also to steer away from using this interpretation in his depiction of the Horsemen. Dürer's print *Knight, Death, and the Devil* contrasts how he depicts the Fourth Horseman and the Devil (fig 9). The Rider appears as he is seen in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, a withered and wretched man, whereas the Devil is pictured as a pig-snouted beast rather than as a human-like figure.²⁶ This decision indicates that Dürer, like Alexander, does not regard any of the Horsemen as the Devil in his work and represents them as distinct individuals.

Each of the interpretations of the Four Horsemen from the Mediaeval theologians and Dürer's depiction characterise the Horsemen as harbingers of chaos and violence in a way that was not seen to the same extent in many earlier illustrations found in block books and manuscripts. Fear of the unknown and the end of the world was prominent during the Middle Ages and at the turn of the 15th to 16th century, which can be traced back to the teachings of the Church that deliberately triggered imaginative

²⁶ "Albrecht Dürer: Knight, Death, and the Devil," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d., <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/336223>.

fears of and hopes for the afterlife.²⁷ Dürer revolutionised the way the Horsemen are depicted and popularised the idea of illustrating them as bold and violent figures, reflecting the intentions of the Church in instilling religious fear among the laity.

²⁷ Peter Dinzelbacher, *Angst Im Mittelalter: Teufels-, Todes- Und Gotteserfahrung: Mentalitätsgeschichte Und Ikonographie* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1996), 295.

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Fig. 1, Albrecht Dürer, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. 1498, woodcut. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 2, Albrecht Dürer, detail of *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. 1498, woodcut. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 3, Albrecht Dürer, detail of *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. 1498, woodcut. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 4, Albrecht Dürer, detail of *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. 1498, woodcut. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 5, Albrecht Dürer, detail of *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. 1498, woodcut. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 6, The Four Horsemen from the *Beatus Manuscript*, 8th century.



Fig. 7, The Four Horsemen from the *Koberger Bible*, 1483, woodcut.



Fig. 8, Albrecht Dürer, *Knight, Death, and the Devil*. 1513, engraving. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 9, Albrecht Dürer, detail of *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. 1498, woodcut. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.