

Everyone's APOCALYPSE

A Reflection and Prayer Guide

SECOND, REVISED EDITION



Donal A. McIlraith, SSC



**SAINT PAUL
SEMINARY PRESS**

SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA • 2024

Cover image: The Lamb and His Espoused Wife on Mt. Zion, Beatus Apocalypse,
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Cover design: Judy Gilats

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de Fernando I y Dña. Sancha, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid (VITR/14/2).
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The first edition was published in 1995 by the Pacific Regional Seminary in Suva, Fiji,
under ISBN: 978-982-342-001-1

Nihil obstat

Reverend Tupouniua Tutoe, STD

Imprimatur

Most Reverend Peter Loy Chong, STD

Archdiocese of Suva

May 1, 2024

Published 2024 by

Saint Paul Seminary Press

2260 Summit Ave., Saint Paul, Minnesota 55105

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024941255

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024941255>

ISBN: 978-1-953936-11-0 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-953936-61-5 (ebook)

spspress.com

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Preface to the Revised, Second Edition

T

HE APOCALYPSE IS THE INSPIRED WORD OF GOD. This book began as a series of articles in Fiji's Catholic newspaper, *Contact*. They were also taken up by *Taumua Leilei*, the Tongan Catholic newspaper. I had requests to make them available again, and this led to *Everyone's Apocalypse* which I first published in 1995. My hope was, and still is, to make this puzzling part of Scripture more easily accessible to people as requested by Vatican II (*Dei Verbum* 22). With this background, it had no footnotes and still doesn't. It has been twice reprinted and translated into Fijian and Samoan.

I was delighted with the request from the St. Paul Seminary Press to reprint it but asked if I could also revise it. Many serious commentaries on the Apocalypse have appeared since the first writing. We have the monumental Aune and Beale, the measured Prigent, Bauckham, Schüssler-Fiorenza, Boxall, Lupieri, the most recent commentary by Moloney, and many more. Having taught Apocalypse for many years and been helped by many of these, I felt some changes were in order, and thus I have added a bibliography.

It is the text that is inspired. I have started each section with the sacred text of the Apocalypse, so that you may read and reread it, and let it draw you into prayer as you contemplate our creator God, his slaughtered and Risen Son, the Lamb, as they guide history. I also pray that the Spirit may help you find your nuptial destiny of love.

My target audience is still the same: seminarians and "everyone" who has not previously experienced the wonders of Revelation. I continue to use the RSV—with grateful permission—as it is close to the Greek and I

am sure you will forgive me the few times I feel I really have to resort to Greek. You cannot get far when reading this book without referring to the Old Testament. To help with this, I append Fr. Ugo Vanni's synopsis of Old Testament allusions, verse by verse. Symbols are a major challenge in this book, and I try to provide help with these also.

Beatus (d. 798) was Abbot of the Benedictine Monastery of Liebana near Santander, Spain. The illustrations in his Apocalypse commentary are fascinating and have been copied in more than 30 manuscripts. I once had the great joy of personally examining the Pierpont-Morgan Beatus when teaching at Dunwoodie. In the original edition of *Everyone's Apocalypse*, I was able to use many of the illustrations (alas, in black and white) from the Museum of Madrid, thanks to the Spanish Ministry of Culture. We are grateful to include a selection of these in this revision as well.

My own studies on "love" in this book have brought me to see that the metaphor that dominates the end of the book, the Marriage of the Lamb, has implications for how we should read the entire book: as a nuptial rhetoric. Jesus is the Bridegroom and—helped by the study of Jewish marriage in the first century—I see the seven churches as his espoused Wife. And so, the Apocalypse is also a love story. Please enjoy it.

I thank my editor, Fr. Kevin Zilverberg, for his patience and untiring help. Thanks also to my Columban colleagues here in Suva for *enduring* my constant updates on the Apocalypse. The rector, Fr. Simon Mani, and staff of the Pacific Regional Seminary where I teach, have helped also, especially with typing. I have learnt most from my students, and one of them, Paula Suka, has given invaluable help in getting the final manuscript ready. May you all experience the joy of the Spirit as "you follow the Lamb wherever He goes" (14:4).

Fr. Donal A. McIlraith, SSC

EASTER 2024

INTRODUCTION



The Apocalypse: A Book about Jesus and his Bride

THE APOCALYPSE IS A BOOK about the Resurrection of Jesus and the implications of this astounding fact for humanity. In this it is just the same as any other book in the New Testament. They all begin with the Resurrection.

“But wait,” you will say, “what about all those dragons and beasts and fire from heaven. I get dizzy every time I try to read it!!!”

Well, first of all, there is only one dragon in it. The other New Testament books refer to him as the devil (as does the Apocalypse: check it out, 12:9). John saw the devil in a vision as a great red Dragon.

So, what is strange about a New Testament book saying something about the devil? In fact, this book tells us he wages war to try and keep people away from Jesus. But it also reminds us that Jesus has won this war. He conquered through the Cross. The book invites us, urges us, to join the winning side and let Jesus share his conquering—his victory—with us. Persevering in a profound love for Jesus, based on faith in him together with a love for our neighbor is how we can do this, the book says.

The central character of the Apocalypse, after God, is the Risen Jesus. Some people seem to have read the book and never found him here. Perhaps they were confused because of his disguise. Jesus in the Apocalypse is heavily disguised: as a *Lamb*. John writes, “I saw a lamb standing as though it had been slain, with seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth” (5:6). Even the Lamb, you will notice, is heavily disguised with seven horns and seven eyes.

“Ugh, I told you so,” I hear you say, “what sort of lamb has seven horns and seven eyes?” But, friend, we are dealing with a symbol, not an animal.


John's book uses the lamb symbol to talk about the Risen Jesus. And if the number seven stands for completeness and horns mean power and eyes mean the Holy Spirit, then John is telling us . . .

I have to warn you! The Apocalypse does not tell us *when* the world will end. But it does tell us *how* it will end. Listen to this: "The marriage of the Lamb has come and his wife has prepared herself" (19:8). Wow! The marriage symbol dominates the end of the Apocalypse so we will spend a lot of time on this. This book ends with a marriage, just as a marriage opened the Bible.

The Apocalypse is a book about the Risen Jesus and what he is about in this world. And what he is about is preparing a Bride for himself, some-

When was the Apocalypse Written?

There are two major theories:

1. About AD 95. St. Irenaeus says it was written at the end of the reign of Emperor Diocletian (81–96).
2. About AD 67. Other writers think it was written at the end of the reign of Emperor Nero (54–68). 

one he can make happy for all eternity. This is the happily ever after story to beat all happily ever after stories. But you must go through the Cross to get there. Oops. A happy ending but a tough journey. This is the great story of love.

This book is just full of symbols. Most of them are taken from the Old Testament or, as

we sometimes say, the First Testament. We will need to visit the Old Testament a lot. Lack of familiarity with the Old Testament can make reading the Apocalypse a bit of a maze. I wrote *Everyone's Apocalypse* to help you through this marvelous maze.

As we move through the Apocalypse, I will draw attention to the major symbols and how to read them. Besides realizing we are dealing with symbols and the Old Testament, we also need to grasp the structure of this book. In this we are blessed. I studied under Fr. Ugo Vanni, SJ, who did his doctorate on the structure of the Apocalypse (under the great Vanhoye). He studied the original Greek text (we must always refer to this) and clearly showed the twofold structure of the book with its repeating sevens. I include this for you in a sidebar and you may notice that the index also follows Vanni's structure of the book. I have used every commentary I could get my hands on to help me understand this book. I do not burden you with these, but the major ones are on view in the bibliography at the end.

We must also keep the following in mind when reading this book:

1. The Apocalypse must be first interpreted through the Apocalypse.
2. The Apocalypse must be read in the light of the Old Testament and the biblical world of the Ancient Near East. We need special familiarity with the prophets, particularly Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, but this book ranges through the entire Old Testament; for example, it takes up imagery from the Exodus. The visions and symbols we find in the Apocalypse would have been more familiar to the people of Jesus' time. They were somewhat familiar with apocalyptic books like 1 Enoch that did not make it into the Bible. (See sidebar and Appendix).

3. The Apocalypse must be read in the context of the Roman Empire and the Jewish world of the first century. Seeing what it may have meant to them will help us to see what it can mean for us.

4. The Apocalypse must be read in the light of the entire Bible and of the living Tradition of the Church.

5. The Apocalypse is an intensely liturgical book written for a liturgical community, and this must be kept in mind at all times. If the liturgy here helped them through the Roman persecutions, what can it not do for us today?

The Structure of the Apocalypse (Vanni)

Prologue. 1:1–3

PART I. 1:4–3:22

Letters to the Churches

a. 1:4–8. Liturgy

b. 1:9–20. Vision

c. 2:1–3:22. Seven Messages

PART II. 4:1–22:5

The Visions

a. 4:1–5:14. The Throne Visions—the Lamb

b. 6:1–7:17. The Seven Seals

c. 8:1–11:14. The Seven Trumpets

d. 11:15–16:16. The Three Signs

e. 16:17–22:5. The Seven Bowls

f. 22:6–21. The End Section/Epilogue 