

A FAMOUS BOOK

Its theft on 29 September 1996, from the Urgell Diocesan Museum and its recovery on 21 January 1997 made it more famous than ever. There are only 25 more or less complete in the world: in Girona, in Burgo de Osma, in Paris, in New York..... The one in Seu d'Urgell is particularly noteworthy for the quality and antiquity of its 90 illustrations, some double-leaf. The book has 239 parchment pages of 39 x 27 cm. Illustrations were made in the scriptorium of some monastery in the 10th century, maybe San Millán de la Cogolla. The Seu d'Urgell cathedral acquired one of the books, and has preserved it as one of its greatest treasures.

ITS CONTENT. WHY IS IT CALLED THAT?

The text of the book is a comment on the *Apocalypse*, the last book of the New Testament, and on the book of *Daniel* in the Old Testament. It starts with a reference to the Jesus bloodline, which is important because it stresses the historical, and not mythical, nature of Jesus's salvation. This comment was written by a monk in around 780 in order to combat the "adoptionist" heresy of bishops Elipand of Toledo and Fèlix of Urgell. The monk who wrote the work was abbot of Liébana, in Santander, and was known as *Beatus*. It is from here that the books which two centuries later transcribed a copy of the comment and which are decorated with so artistic miniatures, are given the same name as their literary author.

THE APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

The Greek word "Apocalypse" means *Revelation*. To reveal is to show something secret, to unveil the hidden. There are revelations of things or unknown facts which sometimes cause sensational news. The modern media know this very well. *And the greatest revelation for humanity is the one which refers to the deep sense of life itself and of history. This is the great question that men of all times have asked themselves and still ask themselves today.*

But who can draw back the veil? Men have tried to do so through religions and philosophy. *However, only God can give us the full response.* And he has done so with the word of the prophets preserved in the Bible, because along with very clear narrations and statements, others are sometimes used that contain a symbolic and poetic language that needs special sensitivity and interpretation to understand their meaning. The so-called "apocalyptic" genre uses this symbolic and figurative language.

THE BOOK OF DANIEL

The Israeli people had suffered great catastrophes. With their exile to Babylonia, they had one of the greatest tests. The Greek occupation in the 2nd century BC with a culture opposed to faith, was another terrible trial when believers were pursued. What liberation and what "Messiah" had they to expect? In this situation, a book was written *to control and give strength: the book of Daniel*. The memory of the youngster who, four centuries before Babylonia, had resisted amidst an idolatrous empire, became exemplary in these circumstances. His views and interpretations of history inspired courage; no matter how bad evil could be, it would pass. Those merciless governors would be succeeded by a kingdom of peace and justice. *Only God is the Lord and Judge of history.*

JOHN'S APOCALYPSE

Soon after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christians also began to experience severe trials: very violent persecutions by the Roman authorities along with certain religious attacks from Judaism opposing the new doctrine and the new faith. Towards the end of the first century, *the apostle John, or one of his disciples, wrote a book of consolation and hope: in Jesus, the Lamb, we will finally defeat all evil.* He uses the symbolic language of the apocalyptic literature of the Old Testament. Each narration, each image, each figure, each number means and "reveals" something else beyond what it says.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF THE APOCALYPSE

The number seven, as a symbol of plenitude (3+4), organises the whole into 7 parts: an introduction, five central blocks and a conclusion. Each block refers to a septenary.

In the first, John writes seven letters, one to each of the Churches of Asia, which represent all Christians, and ours too, inviting them to *fervent conversion*. In the second, Christ, the Easter Lamb, opens the book of the seven seals and follows a *view of the multitude of martyrs and saints*. The third septenary is that of the trumpets. Seven angels play them and *seven catastrophes* fall on earth, which also invite *conversion*. Everything will lead to a solemn celestial liturgy. The fourth block is that of the seven cups, the terrible content of which seven angels pour on man. Here is described the illness of the great prostitute: Babylonia, which is the figure of the Roman Empire. *The final victory of good is presented as the eternal marriage of the Lamb*. In the fifth and last septenary, there are seven visions of the final days: *the universal judgement and life in heaven*.

SO HOW DOES LIFE HAVE TO BE UNDERSTOOD?

There is only one key: *Jesus Christ and his saving work*. Without this “code” we would remain in doubt and in the deepest of uncertainty. In fact history, in each era, is a battlefield between the forces of “good” and “bad” between Christ and the Antichrist. This seems to dominate it and destroy it all and its outcome is terrible. History is filled with the experience of evil. *But God will have the final victory*.

AN EXTRAORDINARY BOOK VALID FOR THE 21ST-CENTURY?

It is understood that a book of such characteristics has to serve to strengthen the faith of believers, above all at the most critical times: in the first persecutions of the Christians, in the upheaval caused by the Saracen invasion and all of the difficult times in the centuries that followed. And hasn't the 20th century too been a century of different crises? Maybe today we can understand the Apocalypse and its language better. Modern art and surrealist art tune in very well with it. What illustrations Picasso could have made of it? At the beginning of a new millennium, the fears are deep: *When the Lord comes, will there still be faith on earth?* Today too, we urgently need a realistic message of consolation. Evil surrounds us wherever we go. ***THE LAMB, JESUS, CAN BE THE ONLY VICTOR!***