

I R M A K O R T E

THE REVELATION OF ST. JOHN



**An Inner Journey
to Liberation**

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IRMA KORTE

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Translated by Tarja Sagar and Patricia Taylor

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**The Bible quotations are taken from
the New King James Bible
unless otherwise mentioned.**

INTRODUCTION: REVELATION AND ITS INTERPRETATION

“I, John. . . your brother. . . was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, saying. . . ‘What you see, write in a book.’” (Rev. 1:9–11.) These words in the beginning of Revelation are practically all we know about the author of the book and how it came about.¹

Although the origin of Revelation by St. John the Divine is unknown, the text has continued to fascinate its readers for nearly two thousand years. As a text, Revelation lends itself to innumerable interpretations.

In this book, I assume that Revelation contemplates the central problems of man’s spiritual life in a pictorial, so called mythical language. The word ‘myth’ is often used in colloquial language to refer to an untruth, but this is not the sense in which I apply the word. Myth, in the sense I use it, represents pictorial thinking which deviates from our normal thinking and language, and whose nature I will soon clarify. Whether the message we read into a myth is truthful or not, depends on the interpretation we give to it and our values.

Some of the problems, which I read from Revelation are philosophical by nature. They explore the very essence of reality and man, the riddle of evil and its existence, the significance of externally adopted religious beliefs, and of genuine spirituality. These eternal questions include ones about the spiritual lives of human beings with their different stages—not just in theory but as they personally experience them. I see the Book of Revelation as imparting an understanding of man’s spiritual liberation beginning with the dissolving of the mental blocks and ending with the highest states of consciousness.

To support my interpretation, I will present many comparative examples from Christianity and other religions, mythology, philosophy, and from the dreams and experiences of modern man. The way I interpret these images is close to the explications of so called Jungian psychology, although I transcend the boundaries of psychology.

In my interpretation, I will emphasize the development of the problems I see as central, and so I hope the book can be read for the problems discussed in it.

Before offering a detailed interpretation, I will clarify the nature of Revelation as a myth, contemplate more closely the interpretation of myths, relate briefly different historical interpretations of Revelation, recount some personal experiences which have influenced my interpretation, and consider some textual problems. The interpretation of Revelation, however, stands well alone, and the reader interested mainly in this aspect of the book may bypass the introduction or refer to it later.

Revelation as a myth

Should Revelation truly be based on the visions by the prophet St. John the Divine, it represents a type of vision: the pictorial vision. A pictorial vision is sometimes seen as if it were a part of outward reality so that the visionary may not even realize at first that what he has seen is a vision and not a part of outward reality. More often, however, a pictorial vision rises in such a way that, for a moment, man's consciousness withdraws inward and he sees the vision with his 'inner eyes' as a sudden, bright picture. This kind of a vision is seen 'inside the head' in the same way as dream, mental or memory images, but unlike dreams, the visionary is awake and, unlike mental and memory images, the visions are spontaneous and include a strong sense of meaningfulness.²

The most commonly described subjects of visions in religious literature are saviours, saints, and different religious symbols, and the visions may include relatively few events. But the pictorial visions can also consist of long series of pictures, even as the visions by the Old Testament prophets often did. These kinds of visions can also be seen as a momentous flash, so that many things in them happen in one instance. Based on my interpretation, the essential point is that the rich pictorial language of these visions wells up, in large part, from the unconscious. For this reason, they are reminiscent of dream images, and dreams are part of mythical thinking. As I see it, should Revelation be a genuine vision, it is this kind of a serial-image vision and therefore mythical in nature.

Revelation's nature as a vision, however, has been sometimes questioned; instead it has been simply thought of as a literary work. For example, some researchers believe that one person has edited the book based on several sources, even fragments, whereas others suggest there have been several authors from different time periods.³ These views find support in the fact that many of Revelation's images are derived, nearly as such, from the Old Testament or some other Judeo-Christian literature, and have, in places, connection even to the Babylonian and Greco-Roman sources.

Even if Revelation were a literary work, compiled or edited in some manner, and not a genuine vision, we can still interpret it as a myth. To begin with, it is based on the plentiful revelatory literature of the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean region, and presumably these writings have originally risen from the visions of the prophets. Secondly, mythical thinking and its intuitive understanding may be such strongly developed abilities in human beings that the editor or editors of Revelation have been able to compile the text so that it functions as a myth in a meaningful way.

It is also possible that Revelation was born as a result of a combination of processes mentioned above. Quite clearly, the original creator of Revelation has internalized the Judeo-Christian pictorial world. Perhaps he has additionally pondered the problems in Christianity so much that he has seen them, and solutions to them, in a deeply inward state as a series of mythical images. In writing down the visions, he may have even 'edited' his text according to his own intuition, knowledge, and literary sensibility. Nor can we exclude the possibility that there were—at least at times—more than one author; for example, the twelfth chapter of Revelation differs from the rest.⁴

Problems in interpreting a myth

Conceptual and mythical language

A myth follows a different logic and different laws than our conscious, so-called conceptual thinking. We express this thinking through ordinary language, which I will call conceptual language in the following.

Conceptual language is based on using conventional words that directly relate to reality; that is, in a particular linguistic association, a

particular word is used to refer to a particular thing according to an established agreement. For example, the word 'fire,' in the English language, means the natural phenomena resulting from the burning of some substance: according to convention, fire is the name of that phenomenon.

Mythical thinking is the language of our subconscious. Along with other uses, it is the language of our dreams, and it is based on analogy. The creator of the myth intuitively finds analogies between different events and phenomena and uses mythical images to express what he sees. In my interpretation, a particularly important source of mythical images is formed by the analogies seen by different individuals between outward states and events and inner experiences and movements of the mind. For example, in the mythical world, fire can be both a phenomenon in outer reality and an inward state of consciousness that is experienced as hot and burning.

Mythical language has, presumably, been the earliest form of human conceptualizing, but over time, based on it, actual conceptual language was born, and at the same time the spontaneous understanding of the mythical language has faded. Mythical thinking, nevertheless, still lives in conceptual language as metaphors; generally, we do understand the meanings of metaphors without having to ponder them too deeply. For example, the mythical meaning of fire shows up in such expressions as fire of love, a fiery spirit, and burning desire. When I rely on different analogies in my interpretation, I try to present them so that they will be as easily understood as possible with the help of the metaphorical nature of language and common sense alone. Additionally, I support my interpretations by quoting literature where the particular pictorial language has been used in the sense I suggest.

An important difference between conceptual and mythical language is that the conceptual language, in its purest form, is extensively differentiated. Fire, indeed, is just that natural phenomena which the word 'fire' refers to, and many, even very theoretical, names have evolved for the 'inner fire,' such as, spiritual energy, fervour, desire, instinct, libido and so on. Typical to mythical thinking, on the other hand, is a holistic attitude; a mythical image is always experienced as broad and undifferentiated. Fire, for example, can be experienced within mythical thinking to include all those associations which, as a picture, it evokes.

Could the Revelation of St. John inspire us even today in our own spiritual quest? Yes, answers Dr. Korte, an author of several books and articles interpreting myths and the Bible, as she reads man's spiritual transformation in St. John's visions.

Irma Korte questions the common view of Revelation as a prophesy of horrors and God's revenge, and instead invites the reader into man's inner world. Here, St. John contemplates in pictorial, mythical language the most essential problems in religion, such as the nature of man, reality, and evil. As the visions proceed, St. John himself experiences a profound inner change. He gives up alienating religious beliefs and moves toward ever deeper spirituality, culminating in the final illumination.

Interpreting the visions much like myths are analyzed in Jungian thought, Dr. Korte compares the images in St. John's visions to those from other religious texts, psychological and philosophical theories, mythology, and yoga literature, as well as to dreams and experiences of present-day men and women. The many quotations from the works of Occidental and Oriental mystics testify that they have used images similar to those of St. John in recounting their own experiences. These mystics include, among others, St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and Paramahansa Yogananda.

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