Image, Polemic, and Salvation: Modes of Manifestation in the *Morgan Beatus*

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Abstract:

The *Morgan Beatus*, arguably Spain's greatest contribution to medieval illuminated manuscripts, contains several textual and illustrative examples anomalous to other *Beatus* manuscripts.

Considering Augustinian concepts of will and medieval ways of mnemonically using images to represent and remember concepts, I argue that the *Morgan Beatus* utilized these anomalies to manifest the divine. Moreover, the polemical nature of the work, along with its original purpose as a source of spiritual meditation, suggests that divine manifestation was a way of ensuring salvation in the face of the perceived coming Apocalypse. Correspondingly, I suggest that the need for salvation in relation to the Apocalypse prompted Maius, the scribe of the *Morgan Beatus*, to include himself in the textual program. Therefore, more than a source of spiritual meditation, the *Morgan Beatus* becomes, in the words of Mary Carruthers, a "machine of salvation."

Introduction

During the Middle Ages, many monasteries produced manuscripts—finely crafted and singular books usually made of vellum. Some were illustrated, that is, illuminated, and contained images relevant to their text. Most of these manuscripts were religious in nature and contained Biblical text or discussions of those texts called commentaries. Many monasteries produced illuminated texts from their scriptoriums, sometimes generating different versions of the same text. The text this essay addresses is the *Beatus Manuscript* from Northern Spain; it was produced dozens of times over. The *Morgan Beatus*, named for its current home in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, and the specific subject of this essay, was created at the end of the tenth century, two centuries after Beatus of Liébana wrote the original manuscript.

The discussion about this subject deals primarily with three concepts. “Polemic” means “an argumentation against [a] doctrine” (Simpson, 1989a). In this case, I believe the *Beatus* was written as a reaction to a conflicting religious belief called adoptionism. The word “manifestation,” refers to the idea of calling forth the spiritual in physical form (Simpson, 1989b). In my opinion, the *Morgan Beatus* was created with the intention of providing a tool that enabled certain readers to initiate contact with God through their theological understanding. The third concept, “salvation,” is to be understood in a Christian context, or “the saving of the soul; the deliverance from sin and its consequences, and admission to eternal bliss, wrought for man by the atonement of Christ” (Simpson, 1989c).

Arguably, medieval Spain’s greatest contributions to literature and the illuminated arts are the various illustrated copies of the *Commentary on the Apocalypse* composed by Beatus of Liébana (Williams, 1991). According to Williams, of the 35 known copies in existence today, 26 are illustrated. The *Morgan Beatus* is the oldest surviving *Beatus* manuscript. Of the 26 existing

copies of the *Beatus Commentaries* (Williams, 1994), the *Morgan* contains several textual and illustrative examples that are somewhat anomalous to other *Beatus* manuscripts. The textual examples occur in the colophon and at the end of the commentary proper, before the commentary of Daniel. The two to be explored in this essay refer to the illuminator in a way that goes beyond mere attribution (Williams, 1991). The implication within them is that the illumination of the *Morgan Beatus* by a scribe called Maius was used as a means of salvation (O'Daly, 1987).

The illustrative examples occur primarily within the color program of the *Morgan Beatus*. They are deviancies within a common Mozarabic color program called “varietas” (Bolman, 1999), and they occur wherever the Lamb of God, the Devil, or images of the damned or the dead are shown.

The anomalous uses of color are intended as focal points of meditation and contemplation, and they are intended to initiate a level of divine contact between the reader and God (Bolman, 1999). In her footnotes, Bolman mentions not only deviancy in color but also a thinner application of pigment than was typical of other manuscripts. That the illuminator intended this particular anomaly is a point I will address next.

“Machine of Salvation”

Steinhauser (1995) proposes that *Beatus* himself intended the commentary to lead the reader to a place of spiritual understanding. Taking my cue from Carruthers (1998) in her study of medieval mnemonics, I have theorized that the *Morgan Beatus* manuscript, with its distinct textual and illustrative anomalies, was created to be more than a book. It was a “machine of salvation” perceived as a “physical manifestation of the divine (p. 155). Carruthers refers to an entire illustrative program as a form of meditation. What informs my study is her use of the word “machine” in an almost literal way, especially in light of other ideas of representation, especially

color, which Schapiro (1977, p. 35) calls a “universal force,” to which he prescribes a character of its own.

Of course, the idea of divine physical manifestation is not an isolated concept specific only to medieval Spain. Rather, the transfiguration of spirit into flesh constitutes one of the central rituals of the Christian Eucharist (Freedberg, 1989). Freedberg notes that at the time of the iconoclasm in the Byzantine East, the Eucharist was considered “the only true icon of Christ” (p. 393). It would be too presumptuous of me to draw a direct parallel from one culture to another; however, in both the East and West, general thinking about divine images has roots in Augustinian thought. Although there are other examples of divine manifestation that fall under the category of *anima*, which are outside the realm of this essay, all the examples used herein are concerned with the manifestation of divine spirit through a physical form, namely, text, book, and illustration, and not as an animated object.

The *Morgan Beatus* was conceived as more than an unadorned text. From the very beginning, Beatus considered his commentary a complete visual program. He even changed the illuminations along with the text when he revised his commentary in 784 and 786 (Steinhauser, 1995). Steinhauser notes, “These revisions cannot be understood unless both text and illumination are interpreted together” (p. 187). Moreover, Pacht, as cited in Steinhauser (1995) suggests, “One of the basic requirements of medieval illumination is to have a clear idea of how the miniature...is anchored in the organic structure of the book, both physically and conceptually” (p. 187). This establishes that Beatus was not working without precedent. Therefore, to understand the illustrative program of the *Morgan Beatus*, we must first study the historical, political, and religious reasons for the creation of the *Beatus Commentary*.

A Divine Reading

In 776, Beatus, a monk from the monastery of Santo Toribio in Liébana, northern Spain, wrote the original version of the *Commentary* (Mentré, 1996). He intended that the first two editions, written in 776 and 784 respectively, would be a manuscript called a “*lecito divina*,” literally, a divine reading. These were non-liturgical manuscripts designed for spiritual contemplation and meditation by monks. Published in 786, the third edition displayed a vastly different literary program than previous editions. Several illustrative and textual additions were made, the largest being an almost complete copy of Jerome’s commentary on the book of Daniel, consisting of an entirely new series of illustrations (Steinhauser, 1995). The other additions include illuminations of the evangelists, partially illuminated genealogical tables from Adam and Eve through the end of the Old Testament, an alpha and omega, a chapter entitled ‘*De antichristo*’ from Augustine, and Isidore of Seville’s ‘*De adfinitatibus et grandibus*.’ The reason for the additions was Beatus’ decision to change his commentary from a purely meditative work to a polemic directed at Elipandum, the Archbishop of Toledo. Elipandum adhered to what Beatus saw as a heretical belief called adoptionism. This belief viewed Christ as merely an adopted son of God and not the divine in human incarnation (Williams, 1991). The belief drew the ire of Beatus and his disciple Etherius, especially after Archbishop Elipandum called them “agents of the Antichrist” (Williams, 1991, pp. 18–19). In 785, Beatus responded to the attack on his character with the *Adversus Elipandum*, a two-volume response he wrote just before the third edition of his *Commentary*. Then, Beatus revised the third edition, which Williams (1994) said was heavily preoccupied with the Devil and the Antichrist. The preoccupation with the Devil drew on a growing apocalyptic fervor, and was also an attempt to demonstrate that Bishop

Elipandus was himself the Antichrist (Steinhauser, 1995). This idea draws on the commentary on Daniel written by Jerome, which illustrates Daniel's prophecies as the coming of the Antichrist.

The interesting thing is that within the intricately constructed polemic remains the original program of spiritual contemplation; Beatus did not alter any of the original text or illustrations—he merely amended them. The central idea of the original commentary was that the entire library of scripture “could not be fully understood until [the Second Coming of] Christ” (Steinhauser, 1995, p. 190). In accordance with popular medieval thought, Beatus saw the whole of scripture as a book, which he compared to a man, dividing it into three parts: the letter/body of man, the metaphor/soul of man, and the mystical understanding/spirit of man. Therefore, the book constitutes an anthropomorphic entity. In addition, Beatus perceived the book of Revelation as key to understanding all other scriptures, which can only be fully understood through Christ (Steinhauser, 1995). The commentary on the scripture is therefore a mystical understanding of that scripture, and if the mystical understanding is equated with the spirit of a man, and that man is Christ, then Beatus could equate his commentary with a manifestation of Christ. To further reiterate this divine manifestation is Beatus' comment in his *Anversus Elipandura*, a polemic specifically directed at Elipandus and published before the third version of the commentary: “Thus, Christ is our book. Outside is the page and the letter, which is the man, both body and soul. Inside is divinity” (Steinhauser, 1995, p. 191).

The purpose of the commentary is therefore twofold because it is one type of literary text wrapped around a core text of a completely different stripe. The fact that the commentary is a “*lecito divina*” supporting a polemic makes the visual program doubly complicated. It brings the reader into contact with God while informing him of the events that lead to the eventual conquering of the Antichrist.

The Use of Text

The second type of manifestation is textual, and can be understood if we think of text in two ways: as a codified representation of speech and as a visual element. The colophon of the *Morgan Beatus* is what Williams (1994) calls “the most explicit declaration of purpose left by someone responsible for the writing and/or illumination of a Commentary” (p. 115). It reads, “So that those who know may fear the coming of the future judgment of the world’s end” (Steinhauser, 1995, pp. 191–192). First, the reference to “those who know” supports the fact that the commentary was meant to be read primarily by monks and clergy, for it assumes Biblical knowledge (Carruthers, 1998). From the Latin *scientibus*, Carruthers translates the phrase “those who know” as “those who are learned,” further emphasizing that the *Beatus* was not a book “for beginning students or illiterate laity. It is a book designed for monks remembering Hell and the Last Things” (p. 152). Second, the line acknowledges the coming Apocalypse. There is much debate concerning the importance of the final judgment on tenth-century commentaries. Relevant to this essay is that Maius is interested in the process of judgment and not the anticipated date of the Apocalypse. From this text, one can infer that Maius saw the commentary as an instructional tool that prepared people spiritually for the cataclysmic events to come.

I believe that Maius considered the manuscript to be more than a pedagogical and meditative tool and that the *Morgan Beatus* served as an appeal to the monks for prayer for Maius’ own personal salvation. The colophon further reads, “Remember me, servants of Christ, you who dwell in the monastery of the supreme messenger, the Archangel Michael” (Williams, 1994, p. 115). Here, the key word is “remember.” Maius is asking for prayers. He petitions for acknowledgement of his work as a “Good Work,” and the manuscript demonstrates his piety. This use of memory as a tool for Maius’ personal salvation takes other forms in the manuscript.

The *Beatus Commentary* proper, right before the Daniel commentary, ends on folio 233 verso with a rather large inscription that reads, “Maius Memento,” or Remember Maius (Williams, 1994, p. 115).

The way a medieval text was read and understood is quite different than today (Carruthers, 1998). The typical medieval pedagogy regarding text was to learn by memorizing a syllable at a time. Clusters of these syllables were stored in the brain, sorted by various mnemonic “*rationes*, or dispositive schemes,” (p. 136) and built on phonetically with successive memorization from letters to syllables, to words, to phrases, and then to complete sentences. This technique facilitated a way of thinking about the written word in terms of “constructs of syllables, not simplexes of meaning” (Carruthers, 1998, p. 136). This way of thinking caused knowledge to be viewed less as a language and “more as recombinant sets of design elements” that “make meaning rather than have them” (Carruthers, 1998, p. 137). This patterned way of thinking gave rise to the use of acrostics, such as the one at the beginning on folio 1 of the *Morgan Beatus*. In other words, the actual word was so integrated with the idea that it represented, that one could not be separated from the other. The word was the idea, and the idea was the word.

The mnemonic connection between word and meaning was not simply phonetic; the text itself could be a visually mnemonic device. When teaching students how to read, monks would not allow them to read the same passage from different texts, “lest the overlapping images of the same written texts in different books muddle and confuse their memory” (Carruthers, 1998, p. 138). Thus, the memory of an idea was related to one specific text. By choosing to include the imperative statement “Maius Memento” to remind the reader to remember him, Maius sought more than simple prayer. I would argue that he was trying to integrate himself into the textual

and illustrative program, forever marrying himself or, rather, the textual manifestation of himself, with that of the commentary.

The Use of Color

The double purpose of the *Morgan Beatus* leads not only to interesting textual but also visual programs. The third example of the dual manifestation is visual and has a direct relation to the first edition of the commentary as a source of meditation. This is achieved mainly through the use of color. Schapiro (1977) referred to Mozarabic painting as “the art of color,” observing the use of color in manuscripts as having been “spiritualized to the last degree” (p. 35). The term “Mozarabic” remains controversial because it is so broad. It describes both Christians living under Muslim rule and those living near Andalusia. Although politically and historically the term is suspect, it has become more of a stylistic term and certainly in this essay will not be used in a sociological context (Mentré, 1996). As with the term Mozarabic itself, there are various theories regarding how much Islamic influence concerning color exists in Mozarabic manuscripts. Wixon (2002) claims that the program is based on North African apocalyptic traditions, while Manuel Gómez Moreno considers the color program an essentially Islamic derivation (Mentré, 1996). Whatever the source, there are several characteristics that typify color usage in Mozarabic manuscripts and distinguish them from other stylistic traditions: the use of pure colors, the use of flat planes of banded colors, and a lack of modeling with color.

As in other Mozarabic manuscripts, the primary method for color application in the *Morgan Beatus* was the thick application of pigment on parchment. The technique differed greatly from others in Europe, and it creates a striking and radiant effect (Mentré, 1996). Adding to the intensity of the effect is the heavy reliance on hot colors such as red, yellow, and orange, where the value of the hue was the principal factor in their organization (Bolman, 1999). To a

modern audience, the emphasis on hue can be somewhat disconcerting. For example, Bolman speaks of how the word “purpureus” could mean the hue purple as well as dark reds and blues. The word “red” could have signified brightness as much as hue. This reflects the influence of Isidore of Seville, who linked colors with heat and said they were “made from the heat and fire of the sun” (Bolman, 1999, p. 24).

It is a common belief that the colors of the *Beatus* manuscripts were divorced from the natural world and therefore have no basis in reality. This is partially true, as Bolman suggests that color choices are based on “ideas about nature” and not necessarily visually representative of nature itself (p. 26). For instance, stars are typically represented as red or white. Whereas this is not naturalistic, it is consistent and also adheres to Isidore’s thoughts about warm colors and the medieval practice of arranging color based on value. The stars are light, thus they are represented by colors thought to embody light. Colors with darker hues such as black, brown, blue, and sometimes purple, are used to represent darkness (Bolman, 1999). Color choices were not, however, always based on common ideas of perception in the *Morgan Beatus*. Often, the text dictated the colors used in illuminations, although at other times, it did not. In the illumination for Revelation 7:9, which describes a group of people wearing white robes, Maius chose to represent the garments with a few white lines surrounding multicolored robes. Bolman theorizes that the cause of these discrepancies is that the colors used were part of a mnemonic program that “incorporat[ed] parallels to verbal signs for color” (pp. 25–26). Another basis for color choices was symbolism. Here again is reliance on value. The depiction of various devils and demons almost exclusively utilizes the dark colors—blue, brown, and black. The same dark colors could also be used to render sacred figures, such as in a depiction of an angel casting the Devil into Hell. In this case, the angel’s wings illustrated on folio 153, and seen in Figure 1,

would be painted black, the same color as the Devil shown below him (Bolman, 1999, p. 27).

Thus, programs can be identified for both symbolic uses of color and the use of color to represent natural phenomenon. However, they are not consistent and they may vary within the illustrative program.

The inconsistent use of color can be explained partially by the utilization of a technique called “varietas,” which, as mentioned in the introduction, is common to most *Beatus* manuscripts. In the simplest terms, varietas is the use of a broad array of patterned color broken down into different design schemes. The schemes can be based on subject matter, shapes, and so forth. The important thing is that the schemes constitute an “aesthetic system” (Bolman, 1999). Bolman describes the various systems of varietas. She states that although color combinations were modeled on previous manuscripts, individual illuminators created their own color systems based on personal taste. According to Bolman, the *Morgan Beatus* displays four occurrences where the traditional varietas is abandoned and figures are depicted in pure color. They are the Devil, the damned, the dead, and especially the Lamb of God (pp. 29–30). Bolman proposes that one of the explanations for the aberrations in the color scheme is that color is a didactic tool relating to the end of times. With the Apocalypse approaching, Beatus emphasized the theme of heresy, and this solid use of color on folios 219 and 220 was the illuminator’s way of singling out false prophets and the people who are lured into worshipping beasts. Maius himself stated that the visual program was a way of “inspiring fear among the learned of the coming future judgment” (Carruthers, 1998, p. 152).

In medieval texts, mnemonic programs were developed from classical models, and they relied on the creation of memory systems based around images, particularly architectural ones. This allowed ancient and medieval thought to be categorized and indexed by way of image

recall, which would lead to the actual idea stored behind the image. Thoughts were stored pictorially because of the belief that “sight is the strongest of all the senses” (Yates, 1966, p. 4.) This means there was a strong link between thought and image. To the medieval mind, memory was everything; it was the repository of experience and thus the source of understanding; memory supplied meaning and meaning spurs creation. According to Augustine, whose works were at the foundation of the *lectio divina* (Mentré, 1996), “memory, understanding, and will” form one single substance, “the human mind” (O’Daly, 1987, p. 135).

This intertwining of image, experience, and existence informs the third type of manifestation in the *Morgan Beatus*, the Lamb of God. Mentré says Mozarabic paintings transport the reader “into a mode of seeing beyond the physical” and give a “capacity for spiritual sight before a vision of ecstasy” (Mentré, 1996, p. 203). In the *Morgan Beatus*, the Lamb of God functions as a spiritual focal point for meditative contemplation. Besides being a common image of Christ, the Lamb of God stands out due to Maius’ use of an intense, pure white (Mentré, 1996). Bolman (1999) points out that beyond subject matter, the difference between the monochromatic scheme and that of the Devil is the very lack of variation. The Devil is represented in various dark hues, but the Lamb is always pure white. Yet, as Bolman notes, the white also lacks the distinct opacity applied to other colors. In my opinion, the translucent application of pigment in representations of the Lamb is another reference to divine light.

Compounding this reference, in visual representations of the Lamb, one also finds a melding of naturalism and symbolism. The lamb is an animal that can be seen in the everyday world; it is not a fantastical beast. As a symbol, the lamb represents the divine. The Lamb is the Christ, the one who ultimately defeats the Antichrist. This symbolic animal as illustrated on folio 200 is perceived as the punisher and redeemer; it provides spiritual sustenance while crushing its

enemies. As represented in the *Morgan Beatus*, the Lamb is polemic and meditative, exception and rule, common and spiritual. Like no other figure in the text, it was designed to draw the attention of the educated reader, whom it assisted in being able to “transcend the literal” and move toward the divine (Mentré, 1996, p. 203). Augustinian logic suggests that the combination of memory, understanding, and will leads to a manifestation where the divine can be known. In a manner similar to the way that Augustine thought the human mind was formed by volition and self-knowledge, one can read the *Morgan Beatus* as a manifestation of Christ (O’Daly, 1987).

Conclusion

Constructed in response to the belief that considered adoptionism to be the harbinger of the End Times, the *Morgan Beatus* was meant to be more than a source of contemplation. In its illustrations, the divine was made manifest through transcendent, polemic, and mnemonic devices. In a time of impending judgment, the manifestation was intended to provide a source of salvation. In this way, the *Morgan Beatus* operated as a machine of salvation through which readers with the necessary spiritual knowledge could ensure their place in Heaven after the Apocalypse.

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