

Introduction

The Four Beasts of Revelation and the Gospels

He is the Way.

Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;

You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

—W. H. Auden, “For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio”

The Beasts hold this book together. Or they do so, particularly, as they bring their fierce witness to the Lamb in the center. Around the Lamb, in one important image of classic Christian iconography, amidst all the worshipping elders and saints, there is a Lion, an Ox, a Human Being, and an Eagle, each holding or representing its own book. These Beasts are there all together on the cover of this book, which reproduces one early-twelfth-century version of this image.¹ They also recur in this book’s subtitles and chapters, being especially discussed in chapters 1 and 8. The point is, of course, that the verbal image of the “four living creatures around the throne,” drawn from Ezekiel 1 and especially from Revelation 4 and 5, was taken, in the second century C.E., as symbolic of the Gospel books. These “living creatures,” these ζῶα, were already used in such a symbolic, metaphoric way perhaps a half-century or so after the Revelation

1. “Majesty,” folio 7, verso of the *Silos Beatus*, Add. Manuscript 11695, in the British Library, London, completed at the Santo Domingo de Silos Monastery, Spain, in 1109. See also John Williams, *The Illustrated Beatus I* (London: Harry Miller, 1994), 11. Note that in this image Christ enthroned is in the midst of the Beasts, the object of their witness. The Enthroned One is, of course, as much of a metaphoric image as is the slain-yet-standing Lamb, and exactly of the same sort. Jesus never sat on a throne, certainly not in his death. Faith sees him there. The presence of this image behind the title of this book represents the hope that the present inquiry into the Gospel books—the Beasts—may serve to illumine the hidden yet manifest presence in the assemblies of the living one, the one who was dead but is now giving life from the throne.

itself was written and only shortly after the time when the four-Gospel collection was coming to be widely recognized in the churches. It was not many centuries until the originally verbal image began to be drawn and painted, as it still is today, with the intention of setting out a visual icon of the Gospels and their function. If Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is the “Lamb,” the one who mediates God to us and the one who has the key to the book of God’s will, then, by this image-use, the Gospels themselves are as the “Living Creatures.” Or, they are the “Beasts,” to use the slightly archaic word of older English translations in order to emphasize that they are dangerous, not conventional, not tamed. The Living Creature that is “like a lion,” the first one (Rev. 4:7), is usually taken to stand for the book we call Mark, the one “like an ox” to stand for Luke, the one “with a face like a human face” to stand for Matthew, and the one “like a flying eagle” to stand for John.² The attribution of those names of the supposed authors of the books, of course, is not much earlier than the attribution of each of the symbolic creatures to one of them, both developments having occurred more or less in mid-to-late second century.

Say it this way: the Gospels, freshly read in the context of an assembly, are among the “rare beasts” that W. H. Auden rightly says one encounters when one begins again to follow Jesus Christ as the Way.³ Indeed, the Gospels also point to “unique adventures” in a needy yet beautiful world. And the paradoxes with which the Gospels are filled, their very inverting of words to mean new things and thereby bring us to see both God and the world anew, themselves make up a large part of Auden’s “Land of Unlikeness.”

While I think that the writer of the Revelation did not originally intend the Beasts to stand for the Gospels, there are four useful things about that writer’s version of this apocalyptic image when it is taken as a metaphor for the Gospels: the Beasts themselves are *not the Lamb*; they do their work *in the midst of an assembly*; there are *four of them*; and they call for *the riders of judgment to ride throughout the earth*. Thus, they are witnesses to and worshipers of the “one seated on the throne” and the “Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered” (Rev. 5:1, 6). They lead the assembly in its “Holy, Holy, Holy” (4:8) and its

2. Though the seventh-century Gospel book called the Book of Durrow, found in the Trinity College Library in Dublin, as well as some old Syrian traditions, has Mark as the Eagle and John as the Lion.

3. W. H. Auden, “For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio,” in *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York: Random, 1945), 466.

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“You are worthy to take the scroll” (5:9-10) and its “Amen” (5:14; 7:12; 19:4; cf. 14:3). They are diverse and yet united in their witness. And they call “Come!” (6:1-8) to the riders of “the four horses of the Apocalypse,” just as they also pass out the bowls “full of the wrath of God” (15:7). Much of this book will explore these metaphors: how the Gospels bear witness and give truthful praise to God and to Lamb; how the Gospels belong in the assembly; how they work differently and yet together; and how the assembly around the Gospels is called by them to address the social structures of the world.

Also: they are not tame. They still have surprising things to say.