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# TEXT MESSAGES OF JOHN'S REVELATION DEPICTED IN THE NORTHERN ROMANIA CHURCHES

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## Abstract

Unknown wisdom of God and human expectance to fulfil the divine will is expressed in iconic style by the verbal message of prophets. The biblical message for the Christians in northern Romania was reflected in a particular way by mural iconographic representations. The wall monasteries of Moldavia and the wooden churches of Maramureş immortalized the interpretation originality of the last book from the New Testament by the local painters. The present study deals with Saint John the Theologian's vision contained in chapter 10 of the Revelation, where a mighty angel from Heaven offers as food a book. After the literary analysis of the text, it is evaluated the contribution of the painters from Suceviţa, Budeşti-Josani, Glod and Poienile Izei to the historical contextualization of the biblical message. We believe that, although isolated from the Byzantine iconographic tradition of the Judgment, painting the Revelation in northern Moldavia was an identification factor of the Orthodoxy as well as a way of interfaith and European communication.

*Keywords:* book, revelation, mighty angel, mural painting, wooden churches

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## 1. Introduction

Canonical text of Revelation, encapsulated by Christian Church in the New Testament, gained pictorial expression after the Council of Trullan (692). In 82 Canon Christ became visible in words and also in pictures. Beginning this moment, the holy persons and events described in the New Testament became more visible than the mental imagination. Starting with Beatus of Liebana (8<sup>th</sup> century AD) in Spain, and after 1000 AD like *terminus ad quem* moment, without fear but with prudence, the Revelation of Saint John was illustrated in the *scriptorium* of great Catholic abbeys. From the Tapestry of Angers (1373), or the miniatures of the medieval manuscripts, to the contemporary church painters, artists that have appropriated the Revelation can be recognized as authentic interpreters because they make to the text visible, especially when is

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continuously dealing with this subject. The miniatures of Matthias Gerung (1532) from the Ottheinrich Bible, the engravings of Bibles printed in the West by Albrecht Durer's (1498), Hans Holbein (1531) and Jean Duvet (1555) [1] have been also admired by Orthodox Christians, being transposed in the paintings of Dochiariou, Dionysiou and Filotheou Athonite monasteries. Chapter 10 of Revelation, that we shall present literally, after which we shall make a pictorial evaluation of four Romanian churches, uses both the terms 'to see' and 'book', allowing the interdisciplinary approach that is specific to religious art.

## **2. Intertextuality and inspired message of the biblical writing in Revelation 10**

The mystical experience of Apostle John, as visionary of celestial and future realities, represents an original aspect of the last canonical book of the New Testament. In the Old Testament, the category of revelatory appointment with God and celestial powers is reflected by John the Theologian, using sometime words with many connotations. Scholars in New Testament's exegesis search connections and quotation in John's Revelation text to trace distinction between Christ glorious presence and angels' figures revealed in the Old Testament [2, 3]. Chapters 10 and 11 of the Revelation book are interposed as a parenthesis between the sixth and seventh sound of the trumpet. In this section of Revelation, John interlinked allusions words of Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel - Old Testament's prophets - to reveal a new meeting with the celestial messenger. Before the seventh sound of the trumpet, an angel appears [4]. The angel from Revelation 10 sets one foot on land and one on sea. This mighty angel, "clothed with a cloud and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire" (10.1), is setting one foot on the land and one on the sea draws attention to the universality of the message sent to the whole Earth.

The mighty angel descends from Heaven, clothed in a cloud, sign of divine glory, having a rainbow over his head, a sign that the dark days of the cataclysm passed by. His face is like the Sun and his feet like pillars of fire, his right foot on the sea and his left one on the land. The elements of this image are borrowed from Daniel 12.7, where is mentioned the Archangel Gabriel (Daniel 8.16). The face of the Son of Man also has a luminous character. The image of a shining face was popular in antiquity with angels or heavenly beings, often described as having a face like the Sun (e.g. Daniel 10.6). Once more of importance in this context is the role of the shining face in mystical texts, where it indicates the glorious presence and the activity of the divine.

The rainbow upon his head is a symbol of hope and peace, a symbol of an agreement (e.g. Genesis 9.13-16). The mighty angel is clothed with a cloud, as wisdom is, and had a rainbow upon his head, to represent the inner loveliness of Divine Wisdom, while his feet, as pillars of fire, represent the Divine powers flowing into the world, and acting upon the hearts and minds of the believers in Church. We can also 'read' this biblical passage in historical manner, but it's

dangerous to define or constraint the prophetic flow of Revelation. The angel is a pillar of fire because he is glowing with love. His legs, one on the sea, one on the land, show the extent of his power. Here there are also elements of the description of Man's Son (Daniel 7.13) and Yahweh (Ezekiel 1.26-28) [5]. Their feet, like pillars of fire, remind us of the pillars of fire that protected Israel in the wilderness, either from cloud or from darkness (Exodus 13.21-22). The fire image is used there as experiential reality, as numinous phenomenon of the divine revelation [6]. The pillars of fire are symbolic, meaning: God's Consuming Power. God will block, or destroy anything that tries to get in the way of God's Ministers.

The similarity of Ezekiel 2.1-10 and Revelation 10 becomes obvious when a divine being offers, by means of a hand, the book that the prophet has to eat and which is sweet in his mouth like honey [7]. The scroll was written both on the inside and outside and contained "laments, complaints and groans" (Ezekiel 1.10), which was to embitter the womb and the life of the prophet from the moment he began to preach, because he is told that those who would hear the message would reject it. The prophetic message that Ezekiel was to utter foretold the punishment for the people who remained in the country and over the Holy City. In the case of Ezekiel, God himself gives the roll, as direct communication with the prophet, sign of the authenticity of the message. In the case of the Revelation, the voice from Heaven commanded to John to ask the booklet from the angel sitting on the sea and the land. Clearly, this authorizes him and his book as a prophetic, inspired writing and imparting revealed knowledge. The mystical nature of this knowledge is emphasized firstly because not all privileged information is made known to the readers, and, secondly, that only John is given insight in it. In some cases John receives the mystical knowledge, but its aspects are inaccessible to him and even to all others [8]. The prophet himself takes the booklet and swallows it, taking it to his mouth with his own hands, experiencing the bitter-sweet change. The prophet's belly will become bitter, but his mouth sweet. The sweetness of honey symbolizes Jesus' victory (the victory of the Church over the devil) and 'the bitterness' - the persecutions endured by the Christians [9]. The John's manifest to swallow the book means that he accepts the mission to reveal the salutary message. He eats the little book. In contrast with the sealed book from Revelation 4, this booklet is not the Book of life, but can symbolize the message of Christ for the Church and unbelievers, as prophetic written. All prophecies have an overture since their fulfilment is illuminated by the Hidden Wisdom (e.g. 1 Corinthians 2.7).

The mighty angel "lifted up his hand to Heaven and swore". According Deuteronomy 32.40, the hand lifted to the sky is a sign of promise. God is witness (Genesis 21.23), the Creator Himself, a God who is responsible for the existence of all, "He that lives forever" (Daniel 12.7). In Revelation 10.6 we read: "there will be no respite". The angel's voice is solemn and ultimate. The angel's voice, roaring like a lion's and the seven thunders, underline the significance of the angel's oath. Yahweh's voice is described in the same way in Hosea and Amos 3.8.

### 3. The Apocalypse image in the northern Romania churches

Romanian Christianity is characterized by the Greek Orthodox faith. As an island among Slavic Orthodox peoples, Romanian Christian worship in a branch of the Latin languages. The multicultural diversity and confessional Christianity have permitted to inhabitants to preserve their identity in faith, customs and linkages [10]. In two districts of northern Romania, Suceava and Maramureș, four representative churches expose the message of John's Revelation, using expressionist and naive elements in mural paints. These churches are: Sucevita Monastery, Budești Josani wooden church, Glod wooden church and Poienile Izei wooden church.

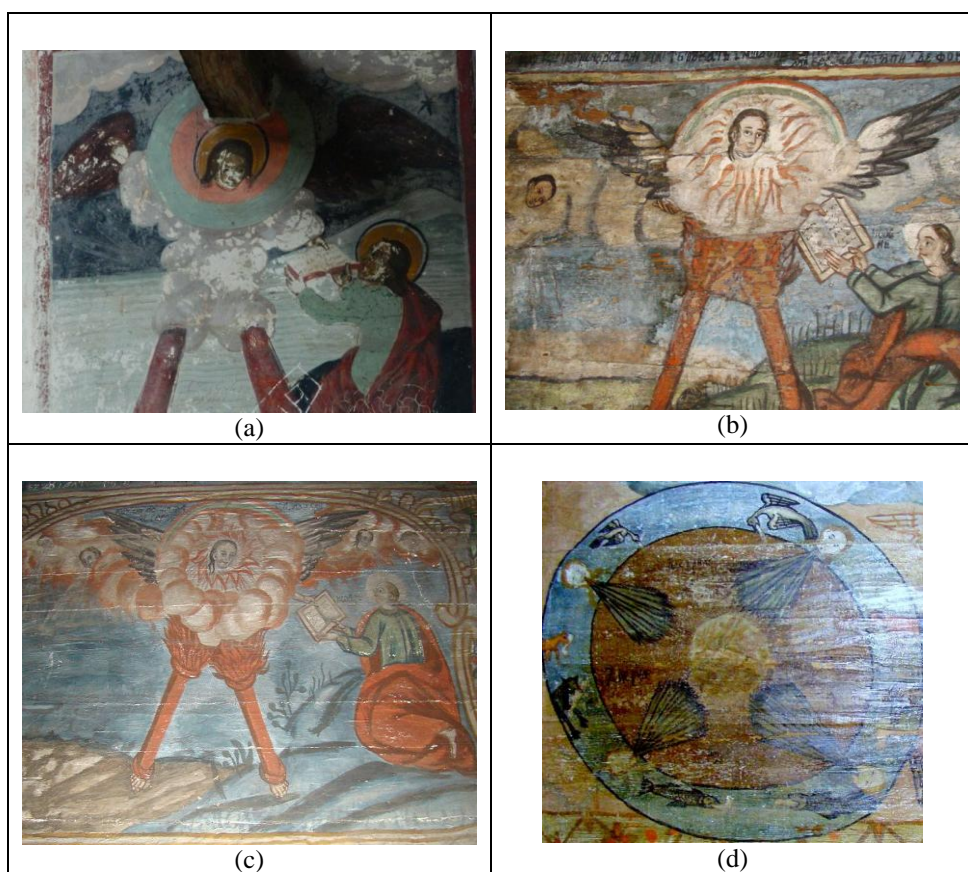
#### 3.1. *The Sucevița Monastery, Suceava district*

Sucevița Monastery, built and testified by the Movilești family in 1585, was adorned with two porches, interior and exterior painting as well as with a defence wall by Prince Ieremia Movilă, after 1595. The interior painting, made in fresco technique by John and Sofronie brothers, is compartmented in scenes as a miniate book, surpassing the canonical disposition of Herminia of Dionisios from Furna. The exterior paint of church is remarked by the climax of virtue, on north side. Christ is on top upstairs, Michael on bottom and monks in ascetics' effort try to ascent. Also on the north side is a porch ornate with zoomorphic and geometrical motifs. To the south porch, where ample scenes of Revelation are painted, by anonymous author came from a neighbouring region of Moldavia [11], Revelation's 10 chapter are showed in the middle part of the east façade from the southwest pillar of the porch (Figure 1a). The book has Greek characters, different from the Slavonic fragments that separate biblical scenes. The body of the heavenly messenger is enshrined in a cloud and the rainbow is painted in green, red and yellow. The right hand is raised on red background of the wing, having two fingers raised as if in a vow. The feet of the 'mighty angel' consist only in red cylindrical, with no fingers at the lower extremity. With his left hand, he gives the book to the Apostle John, who is stunned and swallows from the bottom right corner. The book has no frames, being written in a single column on each page.

#### 3.2. *The Budești Josani wooden church, Maramureș district*

In Maramures district, on road to Tirgu Lapus, is situated the church of Budești Josani, dedicated to Saint Nicholas. This wooden church was built by the village community in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and was painted by Alexandru Ponehalschi [12] around 1762. Since 1999, it is included in the UNESCO World Heritage list. The scene of Revelation's 10 chapter is painted in the altar, in the second row, above the table of oblation (Figure 1b). The mighty angel's face is framed by a rainbow, rendered by three colours. With his left hand, he gives the book to Prophet John while his right hand is not held up with

two raised fingers as a sign of oath, but open to the sky, as if in a prayer for mercy. The feet, painted in three segments, have the upper part painted with wings famed feathers and tongues whereas the middle is made up of cylindrical columns. John, painted on the Earth, receives with both hands the open book without any intention of being swallowed. Opposite the Apostle, in the clouds, an angel blowing towards the Earth is painted as simplification of the idea of angels mastering the four winds. Near the left leg of the angel we see ships with set sails marked by crosses. The inscription in Romanian, rendered in Cyrillic, towards the exterior of the scene, has the following message: "behold a mighty angel from Heaven clothed in cloud, like a rainbow and his face was like fire". In the inner part of the scene, only the abbreviation of John's name appears.



**Figure 1.** (a) Sucevita Monastery, (b) Budesti Josani wooden church, (c) Glod wooden church, (d) Poienile Izei wooden church.

### ***3.3. The wooden church in Glod, Maramures district***

Who travel in Strâmtura, on the valley of Iza, finds in the village Glod a wooden church dedicated to Saint Nicholas. This special cultic space was documented in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century [13]. The interior painting was

done by the priest Vasile Tivadar in 1829, who introduced in the iconographic scenes of the altar [14] the representation of the angel that offers the book to Prophet John (Figure 1c). John receives the book with his hands, without the intention of swallowing it and the mighty angel is surrounded by four heavenly servants, suggesting that they are the masters of the winds (Revelation 7.1-3). The book is open, with the text framed by a border. The legs of the angel are formed of three segments bounded by rings: on the top, there are flames burning towards clouds, in the middle, some circular columns and on the ground toes of a human foot. The sky and the sea are rendered in blue and, to mask the wrong positioning of the prophet (above the blue sea), stylized plants were painted. Above the scene, there are the following words: "he saw behold the angel of the clouds, clothed in the clouds". The Romanian inscription, written in Cyrillic characters, continues within the scene: "as the rainbow was and his face shone like the Sun".

### ***3.4. The wooden church of Poienile Izei, Maramureş district***

The church dedicated to Saint Parascheva, also known as the wooden church from Poienile Glodului, was by the villagers built in 1632 [15]. The church painting, done in 1794, by a local painter, is remarkable for our study regarding the four angels, masters of the wind, appearing in a medallion, on the western wall of the nave (Figure 1d). They are portrayed as four winged heads, inscribed on the edge of a circle, within which they blow strongly, destroying everything.

In this religious picture the mighty angel is not represented, as in Sucevita, Glod and Stramtura churches. On middle is only the Earth, with the humanity submitted to celestials wills. The four angels are represented with human face, without wings. These suggest a dynamic mission charged by God in the ordinary cycle of creation, contrasted with the extraordinary apparition in front of helplessness humanity.

## **4. Conclusions**

Stages of picture representations concerning the message of Saint John's Revelation are expressed in Romanian Orthodox murals and miniature books. Verbal icons of biblical text shown in ecclesiastical paint are genuine and combine many symbols.

With biblical revelations, word becomes image, the prophet becomes predictor, God's truth is offered for contemplation on heavenly stage, the relative teaching of the historical becoming of humanity is allowed to be deciphered in a series of symbolic paintings whose meaning seems almost inexhaustible. The continuity in Orthodox faith, the novelty in pictured expressions of Romanians churches, joins the European dimension of artistic representations. Mural painting had a great momentum in medieval Moldavia and Transylvania in the 15-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, even if Ottomans and Austrian leaders

tried the submission of Orthodox values in these small countries. The art of painting contributed to the education and emancipation of Romanian faithful. Mural painting in wooden churches represent a visual and artistic wealth that connects Romanian culture in an expression of its own to the great European cultural manifestations.

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