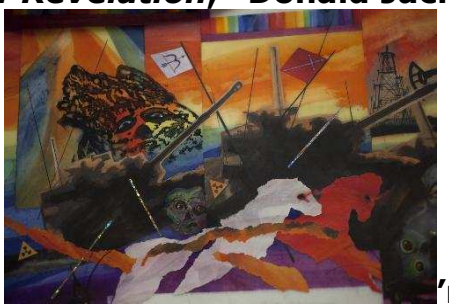
Compiled by Kay Miller (revised 9/30/11)

***"St. John's Bible, Book of Revelation,"* Donald Jackson, 2011, on loan**



'Four Horsemen' detail

Questions:

1. What is the first thing you notice in these pages (gold, bright colors, unusual writing, familiar ideas, unfamiliar images to familiar stories)?
2. What do you see in this document that reflects contemporary times? What might seem ancient?
3. What symbols do you see that might have come from Minnesota?
4. The word Lord is written in gold in 14 languages. Why do you think that the calligrapher and artist Donald Jackson might have chosen to do that? What visual and emotional impact does that have on you?
5. How is this Bible different from other Bibles or sacred texts with which you are familiar?
6. Why do you think a monastery/university might have chosen to spend 15 years and some $6 million to produce such a work?

Key Ideas:

1. Only hand-written and illuminated Bible commissioned by a Benedictine Monastery in the last 500 years – since Gutenberg created the printing press and mass-produced Bibles.

2. Project started when calligrapher Donald Jackson proposed it to the Benedictine monastery of St. John's in Collegeville 15 years ago. The project was formally announced in 1999, after the monks had discussed and discerned about whether it served their mission. The project was expected to take six years and cost $3 million. That stretched to 12 years and cost more than double the amount (St. John's officials declined to put a dollar amount on it.) [Star Tribune]

3. A total of 1,150 artful pages, sparkling with gold leaf and jewel-toned colors.

4. Donald Jackson, the project's artistic director, is senior scribe to Queen Elizabeth's Crown Office at the House of Lords. Best known for handwriting

the ceremonial marriage documents of Prince Charles and the late Princess Diana.

5. Purpose: to revive a monastic tradition in the modern world and create a work of art that will ignite the spiritual imagination of the world; glorify God's word, foster the arts. It was intended to celebrate the millennium in 2000 and serve as an inspiration and pilgrimage point through the next millennium.

6. Like St. John's monastery, the eponymous Bible's illuminations often deal with the excluded and underprivileged. The Bible is meant to be a voice for the marginalized in the true spirit of Christianity. The subjects that have been selected for illumination emphasize this. ["Illuminating the Word," Star Tribune]

7. Exhibit includes 11 (18?) pages from the 96 pages of ***Letters and Revelation. Revelation*** is the only book in the St. John's Bible written and illustrated solely by Jackson, now 74. He and his wife, Mabel, who live in Monmouth, Wales, delivered the last pages of the Bible to St. John's in the spring of 2011. Select illuminations include:

   - And Every Tongue Should Confess, which paints "Lord" in gold in 14 languages – Armenian, Chinese, Coptic, Gree, English, Grench Ge-ez (Ethiopian), German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portugese, Russian and Vietnamese.

   - Letter to the Seven Churches with the Heavenly Choir (Rev. 2:1-5) with crosses from different religious traditions with the words "Holy, Holy, Holy" written in Greek, Ge-ez, Latin and Spanish.
   - The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, depicting contemporary symbols of power, greed and exploitation.

8. Docent colleague Bob Brusic, an ordained Lutheran pastor and former Seminary Pastor at Luther Seminary, noted that two pages detail the grim action of Chapter 6, especially the four riders of the apocalypse. "He felt that the battle extends and overshadows chapter 7, which contains great words of triumph and hope. In fact, my colleague noted that the first part of the chapter used to be read as a text for All Saints' Day; and the material in verses 10-17 are words of hope that are still often read at funeral services. His concern - artistically and theologically - is that those words of hope and light do not appear in the illumination. He prefers to believe that the light and hope will outdistance the harsh reality of war and darkness. He wondered - as I do now - about what guided the choice of illumination in this case. And who made the artistic and theological decision." [From email questions from Kay Miller to St. John's PR folks, forwarded to Rev. Michael Patella, OSB, SSD, Rector and Professor of

New Testament at St. John's University School of Theology/Seminary, Saint John's Bible]

"You are most correct about the Book of Revelation. It is not a narrative of gloom and destruction, though there is plenty of that within the book; rather, it is the story of salvific restoration and the fulfillment of history in Christ. It is this very theme that we have hoped to convey to the reader and the viewer.

"Unfortunately, the way the exhibit is arranged, it is impossible for all the images from Revelation to show at the same time. Many of the hope-filled and glorious ones are on the backside of the folios currently on display. The result is that you and other viewers are getting a truncated view of Revelation and not the full presentation. In our treatment, the salvation theme begins in Rev 7 and builds as a steady crescendo until the very end of the book. Make sure as well to note the opening scenes with the seven churches; they are meant to be an encouragement to the ancient Christians as well as to us today.

"While the four horsemen of the apocalypse are not the most important part of the book, they do form some of the best known references not only in Scripture but also in civilization. If you look at those scenes carefully, you will notice a very strong theme of social justice and non-violence and what happens when greed, selfishness, and materialism takes hold of our souls." [Response from Rev. Pattela]

9. "Am I correct that in the Middle Ages, individual Benedictine monks would have chosen the passages that they would illuminate, based on their own lectio divina practice? Or would fellow monks - or even the monastery as a whole - had a role to play in that decision? Then, when that illuminated manuscript was completed, would it be used by the monastery or by that monk? Would an entire scriptorium have been engaged in a single illumination - or would the work on each page have been tackled by the individual?" [followupl question from Kay Miller to Pattel]

"Your question about the Benedictines of the Middle Ages is fascinating, and I would be interested in knowing where you heard that detail. To the best of my knowledge, the great manuscripts of that period were completed by members of the guilds of scribes who travelled to the various monasteries and set up shop within them. Often, individual monks and nuns would assist if they were talented enough, and many of them were. Keep in mind that many of the scribes were women, especially with the delicate illumination work, since their hands were smaller and more agile. It would seem at that point, a particular monk or nun might add his or her own flourish or sketch for the reasons you mention. I would have to check for accuracy, however.

"A single illumination could be the work of one individual or many, depending on the talent pool. Most likely, the master scribe sketched the image and performed the more difficult work and then told others how to complete it.

"Written works were so expensive that no monk or nun would personally own one; these books were in the library, and the community could use them, but books were considered common to the monastery. According to the Rule of Benedict, Benedictines have no personal ownership. All Bibles and such were used by the community in a common place, such as refectory, church, or library." [Rev. Pattela response]

10. Jackson is not Catholic or even a religious man by temperament. But writing the Bibles was a lifelong dream whose completion has been enormously satisfying – his friends say. [Star Tribune]

"When you have the whole Bible wash through you and then write it out, you are transfigured by it, too. He may not have been particularly spiritual in the beginning, but the words take over at the end, so in that respect is he is a changed man."
- ***Eric Hollas, St. John's official and longtime friend of Jacson***

***Jackson quoted*:**

***"Now that I have inscribed the final Amen, I realize that over the long years of this task, a boyhood dream, I have gradually absorbed an enduring conviction of the pin-sharp relevance of these ancient Biblical texts to the past, present and the future of our personal and public life and experience. These texts have a life of their own and their life is a mirror of the human spirit and experience."* [Saint John's Bible, news release]**

11. Written in the ancient manner – using goose-quill pens on 2-foot-tall sheets of polished calfskin – vellum – it reflects contemporary times. Paints hand-ground from precious minerals and stones, such as lapis lazuli, malachite, silver and 24-karat gold. Uses traditional methods from medieval monasteries. ["Illuminating the Word," p. 65
    - Minnesota dragonflies on delicate sprigs of Yorkshire fog grass
    - Modern tanks, oil rigs
    - Symbols of 21st century pestilence – cancer, AIDS virus, starving faces behind the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.
    - Golden angels soar over city of bejeweled glass.

12. Returns to the monastic roots of the practice of ***lectio divina*** – reading the word of God slowly. The earthly image most frequently used to describe it is that of a cow chewing the cud. Ruminating on the Bible rather than analyzing it is the key. The **reader pauses whenever a word or phrase strikes**

him. **He sits with that word, letting it sink in**. Reading passes into contemplation, which passes into prayer. ["Illuminating the Word," p. 108

13. A team of Benedictine scholars and theologians at Collegeville advised Jackson and picked out passages to be "illuminated" with images and elaborate lettering. There was a tension between the oversight that comes with patronage versus artistic freedom – where was Jackson free to do his own thing? ["Illuminating the Word," p.114]

"The Committee on Illumination and Text (=CIT), composed of scholars of Saint John's Abbey and University chose all the content for artistic interpretation within The Saint John's Bible. We selected the passages for illumination as well as decided to what degree they would be portrayed (half-page, quarter, full page, etc.) Finally, we provided the theological oversight to Donald Jackson and his artistic team. In the end, the CIT had final approval of all content." [email from Rev. Pattella]

14. An international team of about 20 calligraphers and illustrators helped Jackson prepare the English text using a special calligraphic style or "hand" that Jackson designed just for the Bible. They gathered at Jackson's scriptorium in Wales to learn the script, but did much of the work off-site.

15. State-of-the art computer technology was used to create and manage page layouts, as well as employing contemporary scripts and illumination. They used the New Standard Revised Version (NSRV) of the Bible. Because the St. John's Bible was such a huge undertaking, the layout for every page had to be determined before any writing could take place. One reason for this careful formatting was the set of exacting requirements demanded by the NSRV committee that holds the copyright. In order to parcel out pages to individual scribes on the team, the text had to be fixed, down to each line break. This also allowed pages to be written out of sequence.

16. The 1,150 pages eventually will be bound in seven volumes that comprise a single Bible. Right now, the pages are loose for easier display.

17. In addition to the single copy of the Bible, the project has spun off coffee-table books, posters, note cards and bookmarks. Exhibitions about it have been presented at museums, galleries and other sites in the U.S., Canada and England. St. John's is producing full-scale, near-Facsimile versions – known as the Heritage Edition. Only 299 copies will be made. Initially priced at $115,000 in 2006, those books have gone to more than 40 collectors, libraries, universities and churches, including the Vatican Library and Museum in Rome and the Morgan Library in NYC.

Process:

1. A medieval monastic scriptorium was made up of people who lived, ate, prayed and worked together. Their writing naturally held together because they rubbed shoulders day by day. ["Illuminating the Word," p. 77]

2. Jackson used precious black ink sticks with fine gold Chinese writing stamped on them. These had to be ground in water in a slate ink stone to make each day's portion of writing ink. Jackson had more than 100 of these sticks from a shop in Camden Town, London, called Roberson's – where old-fashioned artist's color-men had been in business since 1810. When Jackson bought the sticks in the '60s and '70s, the proprietor was already old. The sticks had been brought over from China by sail with shipments of tea in the time of his father. Jackson bought a large supply of ink sticks at two shillings apiece. But that was not enough to complete the 7-volume Bible. The ink sticks turned out to be extremely valuable collector's items. There was no way they could afford to buy more.

   During one presentation, Sally Mae Joseph, the project's senior artistic consultant, showed a picture of the stick ink and talked about its unique qualities and problems of supply. From the back of the room a voice spoke up "I think I have some of those sticks." It was a calligrapher who had worked with Jackson years before. He had given her some of the sticks, but she never used them. She donated them to the project. Later, two other calligraphers to whom Jackson had given ink sticks donated theirs as well. Those sticks sat in drawers around the world waiting to come home to complete the Bible.

3. The vermillion Jackson uses comes from another artist's supplier. The firm which manufactured the vermillion cakes closed in 1867 and the shopkeeper who had this rare supply was wary of parting with too many at a time.

   "I used to go in and buy just enough not to arouse his suspicion. Then, I'd send one of my friends in to buy some. But then you had to wait a decent time before going in again, or he would refuse to sell you any." ["Illuminating the Word," p. 48]

   Eventually, when the shop was to close, Jackson offered to buy the lot at seven-and-sex per cake and was refused. After the shop closed Jackson tracked down the whereabouts of the remaining stock to find that the old man had been hoarding over 2,000 cakes of the precious color and he was able to buy the lot fro a fraction of the original cost.

These cakes were exquisite, Brilliantly red-orange, they were pressed into molds and were as clean and shiny as mint coins. Each was carefully wrapped in paper. Jackson has enough in reserve to last the remainder of his professional career.

4. Jackson's scriptorium in Wales is unlike any other. In fact, there are no scriptoria like this and haven't been since the invention of movable type revolutionized book production in the 15th and early 16th centuries.

5. Monasteries of the Middle Ages were places where books were made. In some periods they were the only centers of book production. Since the printing press, the tradition of hand-written manuscripts has been almost entirely absent from the Christian world. This Bible revives the link between monastic communities and the hand-made book. The project throws light on workshop practices and craft techniques.

6. See Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts: http://www.artsmia.org/education/teacher-resources/fivefacts.cfm?v=36

7. In cloistered monasteries of the Middle Ages, the Monks' practice was called ***"lectio divina"*** - "divine reading." They were interested in reading the Bible and biblical commentaries and church fathers, both for their own spiritual practice and for greater spiritual knowledge. [This and all the following from tour by Lauren Mancia, a PhD theology candidate at Yale, at the Cloister's in NYC: "The Art of Thought"]

   This process was **personal and universal**. So these monks, in doing this ***"lectio divina"*** *are* ***creating study guides for other*** monks to *do* ***lectio divina.*** They creating biblical commentaries. **They're choosing to illuminate certain books and not others because they find them more fruitful for their own goals.** Remember, the goal of the monks in the monastery**. They want to get to heaven. And it is their longing for heaven and their desire for God** – this is name of a very famous Medievalist book – that gets them into thinking in this way.

   The prescribed curriculum in the monastery is the Bible first and foremost. There are some texts that most monasteries have before the 12th c., such as Gregory the Great's *"Moralia on Job,"* a biblical commentary done by an incredibly famous champion of monasticism. But, in a monastery in France, you don't have the '*Moralia on Job*.' It's not like the New York state standard curriculum. They do what their own individual monastery was allowing them to do.

   This is very important: Before the 12th c. most monks are finding out ideas of Gregory the Great through other texts that are quoting Gregory the

Great or through texts that are excerpts of Gregory the Great. So if they sit down, even to read the Bible – they're not reading Genius first, then Exodus.

They don't have a codex of the Bible like we do. They have maybe Leviticus and Genesis and they're learning the Bible through the liturgy. **So the liturgy – what they sing in church – is how they learn the Bible.** So how they learn the great church fathers is in part through quotations. So they might be quoting **Jerome** but do not themselves have the full letter that was quoted from.

These individual monks are piecing together what they have at their fingertips – and what they themselves are interested in their ***"lectio divina"*** practice. There are all these levels of investigation (by monks).

Right here, we have a commentary on the Apocalypse by a Spanish monk that originated in Spain in the 8th century by a Spanish monk named Beatus of Liebana. [Compare style of this Apocalyze illumination with that of Donald Jackson's *Revelation*.]

Leaf from a Beatus **Manuscript**: the Fourth Angel Sounds the Trumpet and an Eagle Cries Woe, ca. 1180 – Cloisters - Heilbrunn

Beatus wrote this manuscript out in Latin – just the text of the Apocalypse - and has next to the text **all these full-page illuminations**. You can see one here. And he wrote this text in the 8th century. This particular manuscript is 300 years later. His text commented upon the Bible by the way he's illuminating the manuscript. It's the way he sees it. His text is then copied by monks around Spain and around France and even around England. So, his ideas about the way this looks is being transmitted as canonical by the 11th century, as the way this looks. The Beatus manuscript in the Morgan Library – the expression of the fish in that stream – their expressions of the fish are exactly the same as the expressions of the fish in the stream from the 10th c manuscript – from the many hours across Spain – lives in the Morgan right now. [His illumination became the standard in illuminations.]

In the sphere of Spain, you could say *Beatus's Commentary* and they would know what that meant. It's hard to know how they perceived it. It's entirely possible that they liked the way his Apocalypse looked. **We can't image the six angels appearing in any way but having the river flowing through the center of the page, having an image of the Sun of Man in the corner**. Maybe that's just the way they thought it looked. It's hard to entirely know. It's what many of the manuscripts looked like in Spain.

In ***lectio divina*** practice, they want you to abide by a sort of canonical understanding of the way you read scripture. There **are four folds of scripture** to a monk. This is an idea that started by origin and then continues for out of antiquity and into today. So you have 1) the **literal level**. So, for example: Mary is a woman, who is the mother of Jesus – literal level of Mary. 2) The **allegorical level**: Mary is the second Eve, Mary is a symbol of the church. 3) the **anagogical level** [A mystical interpretation of a word, passage, or text, especially scriptural exegesis that detects allusions to heaven or the afterlife.] – the idea that Mary is pointing to something in the end of time. Mary is LIKE the woman clothed in the sun that comes up in the Apocalypse. Mary is pointing to something that will happen at the last judgment that foretells something such as the 2nd coming of Christ. 4) **tropological level** [biblical interpretation insisting on the morally edifying sense of tropes in the Scriptures], which is the moral level: Mary is keeping Christ within her the way that a good Christian finds Christ within. Mary is submissive, Mary receives God's desires and allows them to go forth into the world. It is a metaphor for how you live your life as a Christian.

That way of thinking, when you're in a monastery, you cannot interpret Mary as the anti-Christ, right? There are parameters. You yourself have heard the commentaries that are in the readings at meals, that are in the liturgy. **That are in the excerpts that they have chosen from other commentaries.**

There is a way in the monastery that is training and conditioning your way of thinking. However, when you yourself are reading these manuscripts – and these illuminated manuscripts here are very beautiful – some of the uglier, non-illuminated manuscripts that survive from the Middle Ages – are **marginal notations, have underlines.** They are texts that mattered to **a** monk.

Most were given a single book and we're not entirely sure if that is a whole book, or a piece of a book [a little like the Jewish 'portion' ?]. They were given one thing to read during Lent that they had to read over and over and over again. They describe what they read as **chewing their cud.** As reading the same words over and over again. Depending on the way they felt, they would go through the four folds of scripture. While they were reading, they would hear hymns [in their heads] that they sang in church. They were also probably feeling a certain way on a certain

day. Or feeling particularly deprived, or in need of something, and having moments of an epiphany.

There are **miracle stories** – these monks will tell of moments like this – where they are reading and something comes to them. Mary, in the annunciation scene, is usually seen in iconography as reading a Psalter – right? She's usually shown practicing reading. So women in the monastery are allowed to read. **Mary is practicing. She's singing. She's praying.** She's also practicing ***lectio divina.*** [Reminiscent of "Master of the Embroidered Foliage"] She's reading a psalm that she probably read over and over and over again. And that meditation is what Gabriel interrupts her in doing. That was the perfect image of the woman. Or the perfect image of the Christian.

So these manuscripts that you have here are made by monks. You have monks who are in the *scioli* class – and they hand-writing these words of the Bible. So they are internalizing the Bible in a different ways- by writing them down. So **they sing** them in church, they **read** them, probably with **the lips moving** to encourage this kind of meditation. And encourage the **literal chewing of the words** that needs to be done.

And then they go to the scriptorium and hand-write the books. And some of them will illuminate the books**. These are all different ways of getting the words in their body**, which is totally intentional on their part. They need to preserve knowledge. But they also choosing the text that they are writing. As a monastic community, if there is a clamor for JOB they go into inter-library loan and get another copy of Job from another monastery. They literally go walk to the nearest monastery to see if they have a copy of Job. And get it from that exemplar. And return it. Or not. Sometimes they don't, which is interesting.

All these prophets are carrying scrolls with accurate, highly abbreviated Latin quotations of their words, prophesying the coming of Christ. So you have to understand how much Bible text these monks were consuming in the liturgy. Literally the abbreviations are A. B. – I have no idea what that meant. But when these monks saw – "A.B." and they could tell us exactly what it meant. They could sing it. And they could tell us what its significance was.

So you can see the **short-hand** these monks are using to **trigger these ideas**. Around the prophets are the four symbols of the evangelicals – the lion, the eagle, the winged man and the ox. So you have here a very literate, very Bible text filled image. That is asking you to practice that allegorical, topological reading. BUT it is also asking you to **engage personally** with it.

Resources:

"Illuminating the Word: The Making of the Saint John's Bible," Christopher Calderhead, Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, 2005.

"The Art of Thought from 1000 to 1500," Tour of The Cloisters, NYC, by Lauren Mancia, PhD student at Yale University (principle area of study: medieval monastic devotion. Dissertation topic: devotional culture of the 11th century Benedictine monastery at Fecamp in Normandy), May 14, 2011.

"Amen! Historic St. John's Bible is Finished," Minneapolis Star Tribune, Mary Abbe, Sept. 16, 2011.

Saint John Bible: News Releases, Sept. 15, 2011. For more information, contact: www.saintjohnsbible.org