

*The Heavenly Jerusalem*, fresco, c. 1090-1100, Artist unknown

Commentary by Hovak Najarian



In the Book of Revelation, John's description of The Heavenly Jerusalem includes the following:

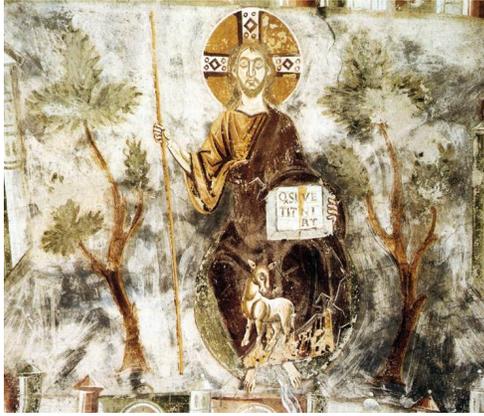
[The holy city Jerusalem] had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed. On the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. (Rev. 21: 12-13)

[John was shown] the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city, also, on either side of the river, the tree of life...] (Rev. 22: 1-2)

John's description above is illustrated in a literal manner in a fresco painted on the eastern vault of the Basilica of San Pietro al Monte (Saint Peter in the Mountain), Civate, Italy. In keeping with the description, the unknown artist has depicted four walls that surround the New Jerusalem. Each of the walls has three arched gates and each represents one of the twelve tribes of Israel. An angel with the name of one of the twelve tribes of Israel is placed

within the arch of the gates. [Because of faded color and damage to the fresco, only a few of the names are discernible.]

In the center of the fresco, Christ is the focal point. He is framed by the four



walls and in accordance with his importance, is depicted much larger in scale than anything else in the painting. Christ is sitting on a throne with a Lamb at his feet and a staff in his right hand. His left hand is holding an open book with the words “Qui sitit veniat” (Let him who thirsts come). Between Christ’s feet is the river of life flowing from the throne. It spreads out to become four rivers that symbolize the Gospel is preached to every

corner on earth. A tree of life is placed on either side of Christ.

In Italy during the eleventh and twelfth century, the Byzantine influence remained a factor in art. The perspective is awkward in *The Heavenly Jerusalem* and it would be several centuries before changes brought by the Renaissance would take place.

The basilica of San Pietro al Monte is on a mountain about an hour’s climb upward from Civate, Italy. It is not certain why it was built in such an isolated place, or the exact time of its construction. According to one legend its construction was the result of Lombardy King Desiderius’ dream in which he was told if a church were to be built at that location, the eyesight of his son, Adelchi, would be restored. [His son lost his sight during a boar hunt.] In another account, it is said the church was built as a *thank you* for his son’s sight being restored.

After the Basilica of San Pietro al Monte was built, King Desiderius asked



the pope to provide relics for the church. He was given the right arm of Peter and links from the chain that bound him to his two guards. [Bones, said to be those of Peter have been found but whether they are actually his is uncertain.]

Chains said to be the ones that bound Peter