

Introduction

Few books are as perplexing to modern readers as Revelation, and few matters within it as controversial as the nature of the millennium. As one commentator put it, “Judging from the amount of attention given by many writers to the first ten verses of chapter 20, one would think they were the single most important section of the book of Revelation.”¹ The three major millennial readings—pre-, a-, and postmillennial—divide on how to read the sequence. Both amillennial and postmillennial interpretations affirm that Christ will return at the end of the millennium and that there will be a single resurrection, whereas the premillennial interpretation anticipates Christ returning to *inaugurate* the millennium, raising (some or all of) the saints at that time and then raising all who remain at the end of the millennium for final judgment. This paper will argue that John did not in fact intend to establish a totally new doctrine of a millennium (of any sort) in this much-debated sequence, but rather intended to succor his audience with the hope of God’s faithfulness to his promises. That is: the millennial passage indicates not a duration of time—not even an indeterminate sequence as in some idealist or historicist readings—but rather depicts symbolically and numerologically the fulfillment of the promises made to the saints elsewhere in Revelation and the rest of Scripture. In particular, he draws on imagery and the recapitulatory pattern established in Ezekiel 37–48,² presenting the same conflict multiple times from different angles to emphasize the sovereignty of God and the surety of his salvation and vindication of his saints.

¹Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, ed. Gordon D. Fee, Revised Edition, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 360; commentators across the spectrum make the same point—see similar comments in M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, ed. James Luther Mays and Paul J. Achtemeier, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1989), 202; Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 39, The New American Commentary (B&H Publishing Group, 2012), 361, Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, ed. Moisés Silva, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002), 697, 716.

²Boring, *Revelation*, 207, 209; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 357; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, ed. Donald A. Hagner I. Howard Marshall, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).

Context

Revelation was most likely written by John the Apostle from exile on the island of Patmos in the early-to-mid-90s A.D., though it is impossible to be certain of either authorship or provenance.³ The churches which constituted John's audience—the seven addressees of the letters that opened the book—were facing a history of persecution and the threat of future persecution. As early as the 60s A.D., the church had faced serious persecution under Nero, and it continued to face varying degrees of opposition in the years that followed. The book served then—and has served the church ever since—as an exhortation to endure and an encouragement that whatever trials come, God will accomplish justice in the end and vindicate his saints.⁴

Although the purpose of the book is thus relatively clear, it remains difficult to interpret because of outstanding questions regarding its genre and structure. The book opens and closes in epistolary fashion; it declares itself to be a prophecy; and it is explicitly titled an apocalypse and bears all the hallmarks of the genre.⁵ As with many apocalypses, and like the Old Testament prophecies on which it is modeled and from which it draws, the book functions not merely as revelation, but also (and perhaps primarily) as exhortation—thus the epistolary frame and the consistent thematic warning against idolatry.⁶ As with apocalyptic literature in general, the book is heavy on imagery, metaphor, and symbolic representations. As such, it conveys its message at the three distinct levels of *visionary*, *historical* or *referential*, and *symbolic*.⁷ Leaping directly from the visionary to the referential level without considering the symbolic meanings will certainly lead to misinterpretation within the genre. Indeed,

³Although some evangelical scholars contest the date, and many critical scholars have suggested other authors, the textual evidence points most strongly to traditional authorship, with a late date. So Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2001)], 26–38; and see also the exhaustive (though inconclusive) summary in David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Ralph P. Martin, vol. 52A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1997), lvi–lxx.

⁴Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb into the New Creation* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011), ch. 2, §Prophecy, ¶6. EPUB.

⁵Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, lxxi–xc.

⁶ibid, lxxxvii; Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, ch. 2, §Prophecy, ¶6–9. EPUB.

⁷Gregory K Beale, “The Millennium in Revelation 20:1-10: An Amillennial Perspective.” *Criswell Theological Review* 11, no. 1 (2013): 29–62, 31; Benjamin L Merkle and W Tyler Krug, “Hermeneutical Challenges for a Premillennial Interpretation of Revelation 20,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (2014): 210–26, 224.

the book itself indicates that it conveys its message primarily through symbols.⁸ Thus, right interpretation of the text must respect literary convention and take care not to leap from the content of John's vision to a proposed referent without considering how symbolism may be at play.

Exegesis

The millennial passage does not stand alone, but is part of the final, conclusive judgment cycle, beginning in 19:11 and concluding at the end of chapter 20. The sequence is comprised of five “And I saw...”⁹ sequences, which begin in 19:11, 19:17, 20:1, 20:4, and 20:11. The millennium itself is introduced in 20:2–3 and discussion of the millennium carries on through the final defeat of Satan after his release “when the thousand years are ended” (20:7).¹⁰ After God's final crushing victory over Satan, the scene turns to eternal judgment at the great white throne. Throughout the entire final sequence, he draws heavily on the narrative, language, and imagery of Ezekiel 37–48. Thus, John's cycle of judgment passages leads directly into a discussion of the new Jerusalem, just as Ezekiel's judgment sequence leads into his lengthy treatment of the future, eschatological temple.¹¹ Finally, John synthesizes these images from both Ezekiel with eschatological language from Isaiah, combining the two great visions into a unified whole. This pattern, and the imagery layered throughout, should both caution the reader from interpreting the sequence in strict chronological fashion—Ezekiel's treatment is expressly recapitulatory¹²—and suggest that John's intent may be comment and synthesis rather than the formulation of a wholly new doctrine.

19:11–21: A Climactic Battle with the Beast and the False Prophet

John opens this final section of the book with two visions. The first (19:11–16) is an image of Christ as the divine warrior, the Word of God, whose word destroys the enemies of God. The second (19:17–21) is of the defeat of those enemies and a

⁸Beale, “The Millennium in Revelation 20.”, 30.

⁹καὶ εἶδον; author's translation. On καὶ as sequential vs. conjunctive, see *ibid.*, 32.

¹⁰Unless otherwise noted, quotations are from the English Standard Version.

¹¹On the fourfold pattern of both Ezekiel and John, see Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 976–977.

¹²Beale, “The Millennium in Revelation 20.”, 35–36.

horrifying feast—the dreadful inverse of the wedding supper of the Lamb.¹³ Here is the first of several significant clues that the millennial passage that follows *recapitulates* rather than *follows* this battle. Throughout the book, with the sole exception of the appearance of nations in glory in the conclusion, “the nations” (τὰ ἔθνη) appear to the rebellious nations in contrast with the saints¹⁴—and the nations are *completely* destroyed here. The beast and false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire (19:20), and “the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse” (19:21). The deceived nations that join Satan in Satan in his post-millennial war must be understood in light of this destruction.

20:1–6: The Millennium—Satan Bound, Saints Reigning with Christ

In 20:1–3, John describes an angel binding Satan and locking him in an abyss for a thousand years. In vv. 4–6, he describes the “first resurrection” and the thousand-year reign of the martyrs-and-saints with Christ.¹⁵ On the one hand, the language used here for binding Satan seems fairly strong: the angel binds him, then shuts him in the Abyss and seals and locks it.¹⁶ On the other hand, this is not the first place where the New Testament speaks of Satan’s being bound (cf. especially Mark 3:27 and the parallel in Matt. 12:29, Luke 19:17–18, John 12:31, Col. 2:15).¹⁷ Nor is it the first place where angelic forces defeat Satan and restrain his power (cf. Rev. 12).¹⁸ The angel binds Satan, and the point seems to be the *effect* and *efficacy* rather than the *extent* of the binding: to prevent Satan from deceiving the nations and from

¹³Osborne, *Revelation*, 687–688; Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, ed. John J. Collins, vol. 38A, The Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 767.

¹⁴Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, 536.

¹⁵The identity of the martyrs/saints is primarily significant for premillennial readings. In any case it seems most likely that John has martyrs in view, but as representatives of *all* the saints. So Osborne, *Revelation*, 704; Koester, *Revelation*, 771; and contra variously David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Ralph P. Martin, vol. 52C, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 1104; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 365–366; Patterson, *Revelation*.

¹⁶So Osborne, *Revelation*, 701–702.

¹⁷Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 985; cf. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 361 and Osborne, *Revelation*, 702.

¹⁸J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation: Introduction, Translation and Commentary*, ed. David Noel Freedman and Raymond E. Brown, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975), 330.

assaulting the saints, until the climactic final battle.¹⁹ It also establishes God's rule: Satan is powerless to resist.²⁰

After describing Satan's binding, John turns his attention (another "and I saw") to saints sharing in the first resurrection. Notably, these saints are seated on thrones, and John has used the language of martyr-saints and thrones before (see 6:9ff).²¹ The word "throne" appears some forty-seven times in the book, and apart from references to Satan's or the beast's rule, all of them (save perhaps these) unambiguously refer to heaven, *not* earth.²² The link strongly suggests that the scene is not the earth in some future age, but heaven, and reinforces the notion that John is recapitulating material he has covered before, rather than continuing sequentially from what preceded in the text.

John's language of the "first resurrection" (20:6) and the ingressive use of preterite ζάω, "They came to life..." and "the rest... did not come to life" (20:4–5) are perhaps the strongest arguments in favor of a premillennial reading of the passage. The language suggests bodily resurrection, and indeed it is unusual for the same word to be used first of spiritual and then of physical resurrection only a few phrases apart.²³ However, there are reasons within the text itself to think this is not John's point. The first resurrection here includes all of, but only, the righteous; and the second all of, but only, the unrighteous.²⁴ Similarly, and more conclusively, the *second death* that parallels the (implied but never mentioned!) second resurrection²⁵ is at least primarily spiritual, while the first is clearly physical; it is therefore possible the inverse is true of the resurrections.²⁶ The kind of "coming to life" on display here is

¹⁹Koester, *Revelation*, 785.

²⁰ibid, 783.

²¹Osborne, *Revelation*, 706.

²²Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, 537; Merkle and Krug, "Hermeneutical Challenges for a Premillennial Interpretation of Revelation 20.", 224.

²³Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 366. See also the comments on ἀναστάσις in Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1004.

²⁴Koester, *Revelation*, 775. This assumes that the martyrs here represent in synecdochal fashion *all* the saints; see Osborne, *Revelation*, 704–705; and Koester, *Revelation*, 771.

²⁵Boring, *Revelation*, 208; Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, 539–540.

²⁶Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, 1089–1090; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 370 notes the inversion of the universality and selectivity of the resurrection and death, but not the spiritual/physical duality.

thus not *necessarily* final resurrection, but spiritual life in the interval between Christ's comings.

More broadly, the literary tenor of the passage warrants caution beyond even that already suggested by the apocalyptic setting. The passage is saturated in symbolism and imagery: "chain," "key," "Abyss," "dragon," "ancient serpent," "locked," and "sealed" are all certainly images representing realities, rather than literal depictions of those realities.²⁷ Given ten's association with completeness or perfection, the use of its third power is clearly symbolic as well.²⁸ Moreover, John here draws on imagery that was already prevalent in the apocalyptic literature that formed the context of his audience's expectation. The notion of a Messianic millennium was not his invention, though he did bring it to bear in a unique context within the Christian canon.²⁹ To suggest, then, that these "thousand years" *must* be taken as a literal depiction of time, regardless of how often John repeats it, is to mistake the literary context and John's intended meaning.³⁰ *All* the numbers in Revelation appear to have a figurative rather than literal referent.³¹ Indeed, any directly literal approach to the millennium is necessarily "an incredible way to treat numbers in an apocalypse!"³²

Thus, a symbolic reading of the thousand years seems best—and not only in the sense that the time period in view is not literally one thousand years, but also in the sense that it points to something other than a physical reign of the martyr-saints on earth entirely. One of the functions of the millennium, on any reading, is to demonstrate both Satan's and the nations' lack of repentance. Neither does a thousand years of being restrained chasten Satan whatsoever, nor does that interval

²⁷Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 995; Beale, "The Millennium in Revelation 20.", 30–31; Merkle and Krug, "Hermeneutical Challenges for a Premillennial Interpretation of Revelation 20.", 223.

²⁸Beale, *The Book of Revelation*

²⁹Boring, *Revelation*, 206; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 367–368. For helpful interactions with other millennial literature of the era, see Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1018–1019; Osborne, *Revelation*, 701; Ford, *Revelation*, 352–354.

³⁰Merkle and Krug, "Hermeneutical Challenges for a Premillennial Interpretation of Revelation 20.", 223–224.

³¹Contra Patterson, *Revelation*, 353, who thinks *all* the numbers in the book are literal.

³²Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 362 n. 11. So likewise, Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 995; Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, 533, 535; Koester, *Revelation*, 774. A more reasonable but still flawed approach appears in Joseph L. Mangina, *Revelation*, ed. R. R. Reno, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, Michigan: BrazosPress, 2010), 231.

where Satan is restrained change the hearts of rebellious men and women.³³ Both Satan and rebellious humanity vindicate God's judgment against them.

20:7–10: A Climactic Battle with Satan

Not itself a distinct section,³⁴ the final war with Satan recapitulates material already covered in Revelation 16–19, and also links back to both of the immediately preceding “and I saw” sections.³⁵ Here is one of the major clues that John is not building a theology of the millennium: the climactic defeat of Satan here directly echoes the previous defeat at Armageddon (16:14) and the defeat of the beast and false prophet (see above).³⁶ Indeed “the war” (ὁ πόλεμος) appears only here, at 16:14, and 19:19 in the book, further tying them together.³⁷ As noted above, the nations were utterly destroyed in the battle in 19:17–21, yet appear again here as Satan's pawns only to be destroyed completely again. Even commentators who suppose a basically premillennial outlook therefore grant that the sequence of events with the nations here is difficult to make chronological sense of in premillennial terms.³⁸ This is the same battle, with the same enemies, and the same outcome. John is indeed following Ezekiel's outline; like the prophet, he retells the same battle from two angles. Just as the beast and false prophet deceived the nations and led them to destruction, Satan deceives the nations only to lead them to destruction. Indeed, this serves as the conclusion to a large-scale chiasm running from the beginning of ch. 12. John introduces Satan, the beast and the false prophet, and Babylon, and in turn God judges Babylon, the beast and the false prophet, and finally Satan.³⁹

³³Rightly, Osborne, *Revelation*, 697–698; Koester, *Revelation*, 776, 788; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 363.

³⁴There is no demarcating καὶ εἶδον.

³⁵Contra e.g. Boring, *Revelation*, 194; Boring also includes the New Jerusalem in this sequence as well to get to a seven-part series—a rather doubtful structure. Rightly, Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, 531–532; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 980.

³⁶Thus, Osborne, *Revelation*, 688 grants that 20:8b is *the* problem for premillennial interpretations of the passage.

³⁷See Beale, “The Millennium in Revelation 20.”, 33–35; and Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, 532.

³⁸Koester, *Revelation*, 788 and Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, 1095; cf. Osborne, *Revelation*, 688, who suggests that only the *armies* are destroyed in ch. 19 because “...there must be some present to follow the dragon when he is released in 20:7.” But nothing in the text suggests this.

³⁹Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, 544.

This outcome is as expected, in light of the rest of the book and especially the preceding section it so clearly echoes. There, Christ defeated the Beast and the false prophet utterly; here God defeats Satan utterly. No actual battle appears in either case: God's and Christ's victory is immediate and without contest.⁴⁰ Satan's deception comes to an end once and for all, every one of his tools (whether the harlot, the false prophet and the beast, or the rebellious nations of the earth) unable to stand before God.⁴¹ As in Ezekiel, the rebellious nations are destroyed in the first telling with a sword, in the second telling with fire.⁴² Likewise, the end of Satan's deceptions of the nations culminates in his being thrown into the lake of fire, just as were the other deceivers in ch. 19.⁴³ The millennium is not a sequence *following* the war against the saints, but a second image of the time that *leads up to* that final confrontation.

After: Judgment, Then Consummation

After Satan's defeat, the living and the dead are judged, and those whose names are not found in the book of life are subjected to the second death—this one spiritual, joining the beast, the false prophet, and Satan in the lake of fire. Notably, the dead who are judged have not gone previously to the lake of fire here—unlike the rest of the New Testament's expectation that the dead will be judged immediately at Christ's return.⁴⁴ At the last, Death and Hades join them (just as in 1 Cor. 15:26).⁴⁵ Again: these are symbolic images; the visionary content cannot be translated into future-historical referents directly and without interpretation. These conclusive events *do* help resolve the point of the millennium itself, though: they align all the final judgments together, synchronize John's telling with the Ezekiel narration he is interpreting. Thus, John turns immediately after the judgment to the final vision of the book: the New Jerusalem, and the new Heavens and new Earth, and the descent

⁴⁰Boring, *Revelation*, 210.

⁴¹Osborne, *Revelation*. See also the parallels noted by Beale, "The Millennium in Revelation 20.", 33–37.

⁴²Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 976–977.

⁴³Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, 544; cf. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 373–374.

⁴⁴*ibid.*, 360–361 notes the parallels to Jude and 2 Peter but rejects the implication; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1030–1031, rightly notes that the nations in 19:20 go to final, not "preconsummation judgment" (1031).

⁴⁵Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 378; Osborne, *Revelation*, 709.

of God to dwell with humanity forever. As in Ezekiel, the focus is on the shape of the future temple, as a symbol of the perfect restoration of God's place of fellowship with humanity—only magnified manifold even beyond Ezekiel's vision. Further, John's integration of Isaianic imagery here into the new Jerusalem/heaven and earth strongly militates against interpreting Isaiah 65 as pointing to a millennial age.⁴⁶ The turn to this massively perfect garden-city-temple emphasizes the finality of God's eschatological work. It also further demonstrates that John's concern, unlike so many commentators, was not the establishment of a doctrine of a millennium. Rather, John sought to make clear that God's victory would be final and complete, that justice would be done in the world, and that the saints would have the reward he promised them.

Concern

The church may err—indeed, *has* erred—in several ways in its interpretation of the Apocalypse. On the one hand, she may swerve into the kind of sensuousness attributed to Papias and others early in the history of the church, prompting Origen and Augustine to take a purely spiritual reading of the millennium, with the Reformers following them. On the other hand, the church has sometimes carried this idealized reading into spiritualizing away Christ's return. Neither of these are good. John's millennium is not a literal thousand years, nor even an unspecified-but-lengthy period of time when the former saints reign in resurrected bodies on a still-fallen earth, with sin yet-unjudged, over others who are still mortal and can reject salvation.⁴⁷ But it is not a throwaway idea, and it should not lead the church to mischaracterize *other* elements of John's eschatology.

John uses this language not to outline a new eschatological doctrine, but to shine light on an old one: God's work overthrowing the powers of the present age in his Messiah's incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. He reiterates what he and others have already said: Satan's power to deceive the nations has been broken, because the strong man came and bound him.⁴⁸ Christ is reigning *now* (Hebrews 1:3–4), though there is a greater reign yet to come. Moreover, the broader context of the

⁴⁶Koester, *Revelation*, 777; contra Patterson, *Revelation*, 355, who asserts (without supporting argument) that Isaiah's imagery *must* precede the consummation.

⁴⁷Merkle and Krug, "Hermeneutical Challenges for a Premillennial Interpretation of Revelation 20," 213.

⁴⁸Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 985.

book makes clear that John's point here is not to suggest some future half-way stop between fall and glory. Rather, he assures saints that even now, Satan's hatred and lies are restrained—however fierce they may seem at times. As such, the saints can stand fast in the face of whatever trials they face.

There are two major implications of this reading for the life of the church. First, and foundational for the second, Revelation as a book and this passage specifically have something to say to the church *today*. These are not merely vague notions about an unknown future, which confuse rather than comfort. Instead, they are a symbolic (but for that no less *true*) proclamation of the reign of Jesus Christ, the Ancient of Days, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who will one day let Satan loose only to destroy him and his evil utterly. Secondly, therefore, the church should *preach* this book, and regularly. John's promises about the future will lead the church now to stand fast when the surrounding world calls for compromise and the temptation to idolatry rears its head, as it does in every generation. Satan is bound; Christ reigns *now*, and the saints with him; and someday Christ will come again, judge the living and the dead once for all, and consummate his kingdom. "Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus" (Rev. 14:12). The indicative—Christ reigns, Satan is bound—prompts an imperative: life as if this is so!⁴⁹ Come temptations to materialism, or the worship of ancestors, or nationalism, or any other idolatry, Christians proclaim Christ alone is Lord.

⁴⁹Boring, *Revelation*, 202.

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