

What About Revelation 20?

(Part I)

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No biblical treatment of the subject of the millennium can avoid directly addressing the teaching of Revelation 20:1-11, and especially of verses 1-6. This is the one passage in the Bible that explicitly speaks of the millennium, using an expression which literally means a 'thousand years', and it does so no less than six times.¹ George Eldon Ladd has correctly noted that though the Scriptures may not clearly teach a millennium in other passages, one passage that clearly teaches the millennial reign of Christ after his second coming is sufficient to establish the doctrine. Since he and other premillennialists are convinced that Revelation 20 is just such a clear passage, our evaluation of Premillennialism, whether of the historic or dispensational variety, would be incomplete and unconvincing without giving special attention to this passage.

Thus far, our evaluation of the two premillennial views, historic and dispensational Premillennialism, has been rather general. We have argued that the central tenet of all premillennialist views, that the return of Christ will precede the millennium, does not enjoy the support of the general teaching of Scripture. We have also evaluated more directly some of the tenets of Dispensational Premillennialism that are unscriptural. However, the key question that must be put to any millennial view remains: Does it do justice to the teaching of Revelation 20? To borrow language from the arena of warfare, the primary battleground in the debates regarding the millennium is the vision of the Apostle John recorded in Revelation 20.

Because of the importance of this passage, our consideration of it will be divided into several parts. We will begin with a summary of how it has been traditionally understood

¹ As noted earlier, our English term 'millennium' is actually the Latin equivalent for the Greek expression used in Revelation 20, a compound word formed from the words for 'one thousand' (*mille*) and 'year' (*annus*) in Latin.

by premillennialists. After this we will take up the question of the relation between Revelation 19 and 20, as this is one aspect of the premillennialist case. We will present several reasons why the vision of Revelation 20 should not be read as though it described events that are chronologically subsequent to the vision in Revelation 19:11-21.

Only after dealing with these preliminary and introductory matters will we turn to consider the most important aspects of Revelation 20. The first of these is the opening section of the vision in Revelation 20:1-3, which describes the binding of Satan so as to prevent him from deceiving the nations during the millennium. The second is the vision in Revelation 20:4-6, which speaks of the saints who 'came to life' and who reign with Christ during the millennium. In this section reference is made to a first resurrection of the believing saints in distinction from an apparent second resurrection of the unbelieving at the end of the millennium. Because of the decisive role this distinction plays in premillennial thinking, this part of the vision will be given special attention.

The Premillennialist Case

Most premillennialists maintain that Revelation 20 presents a clear and compelling picture of the millennium. According to historic and dispensational premillennialists, Revelation 20 constitutes an insurmountable obstacle to any non-premillennialist understanding of the millennium. Before examining this claim in the light of this passage, the main lines of the premillennial case need to be set forth.

I. REVELATION 20 DESCRIBES EVENTS AFTER THE RETURN OF CHRIST

The starting point for the premillennialist understanding of Revelation 20 is the claim that the events depicted in the vision of Revelation 20 follow in time the events depicted in the vision of Revelation 19, especially verses 11-21. The sequence of visions in Revelation 19 and 20 should be, in this view, read chronologically. When read in this manner — the simplest and most straightforward reading, according to the premillennialist — the visions in these chapters of Revelation describe a number of events in series. What the Apostle John is revealing in these chapters is a chronological tale of what will happen in the future. It is as though he were saying, 'first this will occur . . . then this. . . then this.'

The importance of this way of reading the relation between Revelation 19:11-21 and Revelation 20:1-11 for the premillennialist case becomes evident when it is noted that most who hold this view regard Revelation 19:11-21 as a description of the second coming of Christ. When read in this way, the insistence that the return of Christ precedes the millennium seems indisputable because the return of Christ, depicted at the close of Revelation 19, comes immediately before the events of Christ's binding of Satan and reigning with his saints for a thousand years.

Though we will return to the issue of the relation between Revelation 19 and 20 in the following section, it does seem correct to regard Revelation 19:11-21 as describing the second coming of Christ and his victory over all his enemies. There are several reasons for holding this view.

In the vision of Revelation 19:11-16, Christ is described as a conqueror, as the divine warrior who comes to vanquish all his enemies. He is portrayed in these verses as riding upon a white horse and coming to judge and wage war in righteousness (verse 11). His name is called 'The Word of God' (verse 13) and 'on his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, "King of Kings, and Lord of Lords"' (verse 16). Furthermore, the weapon this glorious and conquering Christ uses to destroy and defeat the nations whom he rules with a rod of iron is a sharp sword protruding from his mouth (verse 15). The language used in these verses seems best suited as a description of the return of Christ at the end of the age, when he will destroy both his and his people's enemies (see *2 Thess.* 1:6-10). The weapon with which Christ will win this victory is not the armies of this world, but the Word of God which is 'living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword' (*Heb.* 4:12).

That this vision depicts the return of Christ is suggested further by the references in Revelation 19 to the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:7-10) and the defeat of the beast and the false prophet (19:17-21). The marriage supper of the Lamb symbolizes the full and intimate communion between Christ, the Lamb, and his blood-bought bride, the church, who will be united at his coming. The destruction of the beast and the false prophet represents the destruction of the Antichrist, whose person and work were earlier described in Revelation 13 and 17. These events coincide with the return of Christ as the divine warrior and symbolize his complete defeat of his enemies at his coming. Within the context of the visions of Revelation, it seems apparent that Revelation 19:11-21 constitutes a symbolic depiction of the second coming of Christ.²

If Revelation 19 is a description of the return of Christ, then it is obvious why so much depends upon the relation between its vision and that of Revelation 20. On the premillennialist view that the vision of Revelation 20 follows the vision of Revelation 19, it seems quite natural to regard the sequence of events in the future as one in which the return of Christ will be followed by the millennium of Revelation 20. For this reason, we

² George Eldon Ladd, 'Historic Premillennialism', in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse, 34, adds the consideration that, were this vision not a reference to the second coming of Christ, the book of Revelation would contain no clear reference to this great event at the end of the age. Many postmillennialists regard the vision of Revelation 19 as a description of that point in history (realized suddenly or gradually over time) when Christ's kingdom will come to ascendancy in the earth, but not a description of Christ's physical return at the end of the age. These postmillennialist interpreters agree that Revelation 19 and 20 should be read as chronologically successive, though they regard the coming of Christ in Revelation 19 as something other than his second coming. See, for example, John Jefferson Davis, *Christ's Victorious Kingdom*, pp. 92-93.

will return to this question in the next section.

II. THE BINDING OF SATAN IS COMPLETE

Within the context of this understanding of the relation between Revelation 19 and 20, premillennialists believe the description of the millennium in Revelation 20:1-6 clearly supports their position. In these verses, repeated reference is made to a period of one thousand years that commences with the binding of Satan. This period is a literal period during which Christ will reign with his saints upon the earth after his return at the end of the present age. Throughout this period, with the exception of Satan's 'little season' of rebellion at its close, the nations will be subject to Christ's blessed reign and the fruits of his reign will be abundantly evident in the earth. The nations and peoples of the earth will be largely subject to Christ, and the rebellion and disobedience of the nations will be extinguished from the earth.³

In the opening verses of Revelation 20, the binding of Satan is described in this way:

And I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he should not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time.

Premillennialists insist that this description means that, by contrast to his previous freedom to exercise influence and deceive the nations, the binding of Satan will not only curtail but completely exclude any active working of Satan among the peoples and nations of the earth. Christ and his people will enjoy, during the period Satan is bound, an unprecedented period of relief from Satan's wiles. Only at the close of the millennium will Satan be permitted a limited period of rebellion, during which he will once again gather the nations against Christ and the church.

According to the premillennialist, nothing less than a literal millennium, during which Satan is completely bound and prevented from exercising any deceptive influence among the nations, could answer to the description of Revelation 20:1-3. Certainly the amillennialist view that the present age of the church coincides with this millennial period appears unlikely, if not impossible. Satan enjoys at the present time far too much freedom and influence among the nations to permit this period of history to be identified

³ There are, of course, differences between historic and dispensational premillennialist understandings of this millennium, particularly in terms of its importance for God's peculiar purposes for Israel. Though most premillennialists believe in a future conversion of many of the children of Israel prior to the millennium, only dispensationalists insist that this represents the resumption of God's distinctive programme for his earthly people, Israel.

with the millennial binding of Satan depicted in the vision of Revelation 20:1-3.⁴

III. THE FIRST AND SECOND RESURRECTIONS

Perhaps the most vital part of the premillennialist argument from Revelation 20, however, is the reference to a first resurrection in this passage. Here premillennialists believe that they have a strong argument for their position on the millennium. In verses 4-6, the first resurrection is described as follows:

And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgement was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.

For premillennialists, this description of the coming to life of believing saints who reign with Christ during the millennium is of decisive importance. Only believing saints are said to come to life in this way and participate in the first resurrection. By contrast, the rest of the dead remain in the grave and do not come to life until the thousand years are completed. Unlike the saints who are not subject to the second death, the unbelieving who do not enjoy this first resurrection will come to life only to be cast forever into the lake of fire with the beast and the false prophet (verses 13-15). Since a close parallel is suggested between those who come to life in the first resurrection, and those who come to life in the second resurrection, the most obvious and plain reading of the text would be one which takes both resurrections to be bodily resurrections, the one of believing saints before the millennium, the other of the unbelieving after the millennium. This is precisely the view of Premillennialism.

The classic statement of this point, and one that is almost invariably quoted in the literature, remains that of Henry Alford:

⁴ Ironically, many postmillennialists echo this criticism of Amillennialism. Many postmillennialists argue that the millennium of Revelation 20 is the golden age that will conclude the present period of history before Christ's return. Only an 'unprecedented period' of Christ's kingly rule, to use a phrase of John Jefferson Davis, can answer to the language of Revelation 20 when it describes the binding of Satan. The alleged pessimism and minimal expectation for Christ's rule in the present age so often characteristic of Amillennialism can-not, in the view of these postmillennialists, be found compatible with the millennium of Revelation 20. See John Jefferson Davis, *Christ's Victorious Kingdom*, pp. 93-95; Mathison, *Postmillennialism*, pp. 179-85.

If, in a passage where *two resurrections* are mentioned, where certain *psychai ezesan* [souls came to life] at the first, and the rest of the *nekroi ezesan* [dead came to life] only at the end of a specified period after the first, — if in such a passage the first resurrection may be understood to mean *spiritual* rising with Christ, while the second means literal rising from the grave; — then there is an end of all significance in language, and Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to anything.⁵

Alford does overstate the matter a bit when he says this passage mentions two resurrections. It should be noted that the passage explicitly speaks only of a first resurrection, not of a second resurrection. Though the idea of a second resurrection is certainly implied, a strict reading of the passage requires noting that what distinguishes the beneficiaries of the first resurrection or coming to life is that they are not subject to the second death. Those who come to life at the end of the millennium are subject to the second death. Whether their coming to life is a second resurrection is not explicitly affirmed in the text.

As this statement of Alford illustrates, the premillennialist takes the language of this passage to support the teaching of two resurrections, both bodily in nature, though distinguished as to their timing and benefit. The first precedes, the second follows, the millennium; the first grants millennial blessings and immunity from the second death, while the second is unto judgement and death.

When these various pieces of the premillennialist case are put together, a fairly clear picture emerges of its understanding of the vision of Revelation 20:1-6. After Christ returns and subdues the nations under his feet, Satan will be bound and the millennium will commence. The millennium will be a one-thousand-year period of unprecedented blessedness and well-being upon the earth. The nations and peoples of the earth will be united in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. Coinciding with the binding of Satan, believing saints will be raised bodily and granted the privilege of reigning with Christ upon the earth for one thousand years. At the conclusion of the millennium and the little season of Satan's rebellion, a second resurrection of the unbelieving will occur. The unbelieving will be raised to be judged by Christ and consigned to everlasting punishment in the lake of fire.

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⁵ *The Greek Testament* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1872), iv, p.732.

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