

## What About Revelation 20? (Part II)

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### ***The Millennium is Now***

We have observed that a key issue in the interpretation of this passage is that of the relation between Revelation 19:11-21 and Revelation 20:1-11. If Revelation 19 is a vision of the second coming of Christ at the end of the present age, and if Revelation 20 describes events which occur after this event, then the primary claim of Premillennialism would seem to be established. For on this understanding, the millennium would commence after the return of Christ.

However, must these visions be read in chronological succession, as premillennialists typically maintain? Or are there reasons to believe that the events depicted in these visions may parallel each other?

Though the premillennial claim on this point has an initial plausibility, there are several reasons, some more significant than others, why they should be read as parallel descriptions of the same time period. A careful study of these visions within the setting of the book of Revelation as a whole suggests that they describe the same period of history, but from differing vantage points.

### **I. THE RECAPITULATORY STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION**

Students of the book of Revelation have observed that it is structured according to a series of visions, several of which repeat or recapitulate events and periods of history covered in preceding or following visions. Each of these cover events that occur within the period between Christ's first and second coming. This being so, the book can hardly be read as a prophecy of future events in their exact chronological order. The visions recorded overlap a great deal, and often jump from one set of events to another. In spite of the wide range of interpretations of the book, most interpreters agree that it should

not be read as a historical novel, a preview of upcoming events listed in their order of occurrence.<sup>1</sup>

William Hendriksen, for example, in his overview of the book of Revelation concludes that its structure is one of 'progressive parallelism'. He notes that the book can be divided into seven distinct sections, the first three sections describing events between Christ's first and second comings as they transpire upon the earth, the second four sections describing events between Christ's first and second comings as they transpire in heaven. The first three sections are: the description of Christ dwelling among the seven churches in the world, represented by means of the seven lampstands (chapters 1-3); the vision of the church suffering trial and persecution, represented by the seven seals (chapters 4-7); and the description of the church protected and ultimately vindicated, represented by the seven trumpets (chapters 8-11). In these first three sections of the book, the progress and unfolding of events under Christ's dominion are portrayed from the vantage point of the earth. These sections describe the foreground of history.

However, in the last four sections of the book, events are described from the vantage point of their background, that is, the conflict between Christ and the Antichrist. These four sections are: the description of Christ opposed by the dragon and his helpers (chapters 12-14); the description of the pouring out of God's wrath upon the unbelieving and impenitent, represented by means of the seven bowls of judgement (chapters 15-16); the description of the fall of Babylon and of the beasts (chapters 17-19); and the description of the final defeat of the dragon, including the commencement of the final state (chapters 20-22). According to Hendriksen, the seven sections of the book of Revelation should be read as parallel descriptions of the period between the first and the second comings of Christ. They parallel and often recapitulate events earlier described in preceding visions. Furthermore, as the book of Revelation proceeds, it

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<sup>1</sup> As noted previously, a preterist reading of the book says that the events described in its language of vision and prophecy were events occurring or about to occur at the time the book was first written. These events are, from our vantage point, past events, things that have already occurred — hence the term. A futurist reading of the book says that the events described in its prophecy are events yet to occur in the future, primarily in the period just prior to Christ's coming at the end of the age. An historicist reading of the book identifies the events in the visions of Revelation with historical developments throughout the history of the church. An idealist reading of the book says that the visions and prophecy of Revelation refer to events that typify the principles and forces at work in the entire period of history between Christ's first and second comings. See G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 44-49. Following Beale, who argues for an eclecticism or 'redemptive-historical form of modified idealism', it is best to read the book of Revelation, not exclusively in terms of one of these approaches, but inclusively in terms of the insights of each. The book, though addressed originally to the circumstance of the church in the first century of the Christian era, certainly speaks of events that will occur prior to the return of Christ and as well of events that are typical of the entire period of history in which we now live.

progressively emphasizes events that lie upon the furthest horizon of history, just prior to the end of the present age. For this reason, the book concludes with a grand vision of the state of consummation, the new heavens and the new earth.<sup>2</sup>

Whether Hendriksen's analysis of the structure of the book of Revelation is entirely correct in all of its particulars is not so important at this juncture. What is important is that it illustrates a commonly acknowledged feature of the book: that it should not be read as a linear description of end-time events. The simple fact that one vision follows another vision in the book does not mean that it does so chronologically. As is often true throughout the book, the events depicted may well parallel and recapitulate events represented in a preceding vision.

This means that the visions of Revelation 19 and 20 need not be read as though they depicted events in sequence. If other clues in the text suggest that these visions are parallel or recapitulatory, then there is no reason to insist, certainly no reason so far as the structure of the book of Revelation is concerned, to insist that they are in chronological order.

It is important to recognise this general structure of the book of Revelation because it raises the question whether Revelation 20 might be introducing a new vision sequence, a vision whose events parallel and repeat the course of events earlier depicted in other visions. An analysis of the general structure of Revelation alone, however, is insufficient proof that this is in fact the case. The question is, Does the text specifically indicate that Revelation 20 begins a new vision sequence in parallel with the vision of Revelation 19? Indeed, it does. Several features of the visions of Revelation 19 and 20 corroborate the thesis that they should be read not in sequence, but in parallel to each other.

At least six such features are of particular significance.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (1967; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), pp. 11-64. Hendriksen's analysis treats Revelation 20 as an introduction of a new vision sequence spanning the period from Christ's first coming to his second coming and the consummation.

<sup>3</sup> In what follows, I am especially indebted to R. Fowler White who has thoroughly examined the relation of the visions in Revelation 19 and 20 and summarized his findings in two studies: 'Reexamining the Evidence for Recapitulation in Rev 20:1-10', *Westminster Theological Journal* 51/2 (Fall 1989), pp. 319-44; and 'Making Sense of Rev 20:1-10? Harold Hoehner Versus Recapitulation', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37/4 (December 1994), pp. 539-51. For an earlier treatment of this relation that anticipates some of White's arguments, see Raymond Zorn, *Christ Triumphant: Biblical Perspectives on his Church and Kingdom* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), pp. 106-7 (previously published as *Church and Kingdom*, 1962).

### ***i. The theme of angelic ascent and descent***

The vision of Revelation 20 begins with the descent of an angel from heaven in order to bind Satan for a period of one thousand years. In other instances in the book of Revelation where an angel's ascent or descent begins a new vision sequence, the vision portrays the course of events from the present time to the time of Christ's return at the end of the age. For example, similar visions of an angel ascending or descending are found in Revelation 7:2, 10:1 and 18:1. In these instances, the angel's ascent or descent occurs at a time clearly prior to the return of Christ and marks the beginning of a vision whose sequence of events concludes with the coming of Christ in final victory over his enemies. It would not be surprising, accordingly, were the angel's descent in Revelation 20 to be another instance of this pattern. Not only would this be consistent with the structuring of the book of Revelation throughout, but it would also be following a pattern evident elsewhere, in which vision sequences that parallel each other are introduced by the announcement of an ascending or descending angel.

### ***ii. The discrepancy between Revelation 19:11-21 and Revelation 20:1-3***

Secondly, the visions of Revelation 19 and Revelation 20 show an obvious discrepancy if they are read in chronological sequence. In Revelation 19:11-21, especially verses 19-21, we see a vision of Christ's triumph over and destruction of the nations that are opposed to his kingdom. The language used to describe this triumph is vigorous: all the nations are described as taking up arms against Christ and are said to fall without exception by the sword that he wields against them. Christ's victory over the nations is complete and final. They are wholly destroyed at his coming. However, if the vision of Revelation 20 follows in time and sequence the vision of Revelation 19, it seems senseless to speak of the binding of Satan in order to prevent his deception of the nations. Presumably, nations that have been utterly destroyed constitute no viable or continuing threat to the reign of Christ or the deceptive wiles of Satan. What sense does it make to speak of nations being protected from Satanic deception, when those nations which were formerly deceived by Satan have now been completely vanquished?

Premillennialists who recognize this discrepancy might suggest, in order to mute its obvious implications for their view, that the nations of Revelation 20 are survivors of the battle described in Revelation 19. This suggestion, however, presents two difficulties. On the one hand, the language of the nations' defeat in Revelation 19 is too absolute to allow for the notion that some nations survive unscathed. And on the other hand, the terminology of 'the nations' in Revelation typically denotes nations in their opposition to Christ and his church. The nations are the nations in rebellion against the Lord's anointed. However, on this premillennialist construction, the nations of Revelation 20 would actually be the peoples of the earth during the millennial reign of Christ. The nations of Revelation 20 would have a different reference from the nations mentioned just before in Revelation 19.

### **iii. The use of Ezekiel 38-39 in these visions**

In the visions of Revelation 19 and 20, the language used is extensively borrowed from Ezekiel 38-39. This prophecy describes a great end-time battle between the Lord and the nations of the north who are opposed to him and his people. In the description of this great battle upon the mountains of Israel, reference is made to Gog, prince of Rosh, Meshech and Tubal, and to Magog.

There are several striking parallels between Ezekiel 38-39 and Revelation 19 and 20. In Revelation 19:17-18, an angel issues an invitation to the great supper of God. This is almost an exact quotation of the invitation extended for the Gog-Magog conflict in the prophecy of Ezekiel (39:17-20). However, in Revelation 20:7-10, when the Apostle John describes the great warfare that will conclude Satan's little season at the close of the millennium, the prophecy of Ezekiel regarding Gog-Magog is again drawn upon extensively. The nations in rebellion are termed Gog and Magog (verse 8; cf. *Ezek.* 38:2; 39:1, 6). The weapon used by God to destroy Gog-Magog is a fire coming down from heaven (verse 9; cf. *Ezek.* 38:22; 39:6). This means that the Apostle John, in his respective descriptions of the rebellion and defeat of the nations in Revelation 19 and 20, is drawing upon identical language and imagery from Ezekiel's prophecy. It seems hard to believe, accordingly, that the episodes described in these visions are different episodes in history, separated by a period of one thousand years duration. A much more plausible reading would conclude that these visions describe the same event and are to be read as parallel descriptions of the same historical period.<sup>4</sup>

### **iv. The battle of Revelation 19:19 and 20:8**

The visions of Revelation 19 and 20 show a similar parallelism in their description of the battle that will terminate the period of history portrayed in them. In three instances in the book of Revelation, an end-time conflict between Christ and his enemies, a conflict in which Christ is triumphant and the rebellious nations defeated, is described as 'the battle'. Not only is the definite article used, suggesting that this battle represents a final and conclusive defeat of Christ's enemies, but also the language used to describe the nations' revolt and campaign against Christ is virtually identical (see *Rev.* 16:14; 19:19, 20:8).

Interpreters of the book of Revelation readily acknowledge the parallels between the description in Revelation 16:14-21 of the battle on the great day of Christ's second coming and the description in Revelation 19:19-21. The latter battle is regarded

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<sup>4</sup> Thus, premillennialists, recognizing John's use of the same prophecy in Ezekiel 38-39 to describe these allegedly distinct episodes, disagree among themselves whether Ezekiel 38-39 is fulfilled before and/or after the millennium. See, for example, R. H. Alexander, 'A Fresh Look at Ezekiel 38 and 39', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 17 (1994), pp. 157-169.

commonly as a resumption and conclusion of the battle first described in Revelation 16. Fewer interpreters have noticed the similarities of language in Revelation 20:7-10 in its description of the Gog-Magog revolt. This is likely due to the assumption that the battle of Revelation 20:8 refers to a different battle after the millennium from the battle that occurred before the millennium at the time of Christ's second coming.

If we reckon with the possibility of a parallel description of the same period of history in Revelation 19 and 20, then it is likely that the battle described in these passages is one and the same battle. Rather than positing the reoccurrence of a similar conflict and victory for Christ at the end of the millennium, a conflict that replays the earlier war that concluded history at Christ's second coming, it is more likely that these battles are the same battle, variously described in visions that parallel each other and depict the same historical period.<sup>5</sup>

#### ***v. The end of God's wrath***

When Revelation 19 and 20 are read as two visions in sequence, a further discrepancy is introduced. Just as we noted a discrepancy between the complete destruction of all the rebellious nations in Revelation 19 and their continued presence in Revelation 20 (were these two visions describing events in sequence), so there is a discrepancy between the end of God's wrath in Revelation 19 and the further outpouring of his wrath and judgement yet again in Revelation 20.

Revelation 15:1 contains an important declaration regarding the end of God's wrath: 'And I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels who had seven plagues, which are the last, because in them the wrath of God is finished.' This verse indicates that the dispensing of the seven bowls of wrath by the seven angels will bring to a close the outpouring of God's wrath upon the wicked in the course of history. The last of these bowls of wrath is described in Revelation 16:17-21, a passage that concludes with the final defeat of Christ's enemies, the nations in the vision of Revelation 19:19-21. The vision of Revelation 19, therefore, represents the completion of the course of history and the finishing of God's wrath upon the nations. The time frame for the fulfilment of the outpouring of God's wrath in Revelation 15:1 is concluded by the vision of Revelation 19.

However, on a premillennialist reading of the visions of Revelation 19 and 20, the battle and pouring out of God's wrath in the vision of Revelation 20 comes one thousand

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<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this is the place to mention a phrase coined by Jay Adams in his criticism of Premillennialism. Adams uses the phrase 'premillennial diplopia' to describe the double-vision that often characterizes its reading of Scripture in general and the book of Revelation in particular. Because differing visions that describe the same history and events are read as though they described different events in sequence, a doubling occurs (two second comings of Christ or victories at the end of the age, two resurrections, etc.). See Jay Adams, *The Time Is At Hand*, pp. 17-40.

years later than the battle and pouring out of God's wrath in the vision of Revelation 19. Thus, this reading conflicts with the teaching of Revelation 15:1. It suggests that God's wrath in history is not finished with the events depicted in the vision of Revelation 19. Some one thousand years later would come another and truly last outpouring of God's wrath upon the nations. The deadline set for the completion of God's wrath in history in Revelation 15:1 would be exceeded. For this and the reasons already mentioned, it makes better sense to read the vision of Revelation 20 as a recapitulation of the period of history earlier described in Revelation 19. Both visions would then be describing the same battle at the close of history with the final outpouring of God's wrath upon the nations.

#### ***vi. The cosmic destruction of Revelation 19:11-21 and 20:9-11***

Finally, another parallel in the visions of Revelation 19 and 20 reflects the influence of Old Testament prophecy. The Old Testament scenes of the Lord's judgements and triumphs among the nations often refer to the involvement of the created universe in these events. Similarly, many of the visions in Revelation of the warfare between Christ and his enemies describe the shaking of the cosmos itself. It is remarkable to notice in a series of such descriptions in the book of Revelation, how this shaking accompanies the coming of Christ as King and the exercise of his judgement upon the nations (e.g., 6:12-17; 16:17-21; 19:11-21; 20:9-11). The last two instances of this association of Christ's coming in victory and the shaking of the earth itself occur in the visions of Revelation 19 and 20.

Again, this would confirm that these visions describe the same end-time event, but from a slightly different vantage point. Since the shaking of the earth at Christ's coming is elsewhere said to be the last instance of such shaking, after which nothing shakeable will remain to be shaken further (*Heb. 12:26-27*), it would not make sense to say that the shaking of the cosmos at Christ's second coming (*Rev. 19*) would still have to be followed by a further shaking of the cosmos at the end of the millennium (*Rev. 20*). A more likely reading would take these two visionary descriptions of this shaking to refer to the end of present history at the second coming of Christ.

These various clues and indicators of parallels between the visions of Revelation 19 and 20 having been considered, it may be helpful to summarize their significance for the understanding of the vision of the millennium in Revelation 20.

The premillennialist position depends significantly upon the claim that the visions of Revelation 19 and 20 are to be read in sequence. Since Revelation 19 is a vision of the return of Christ, and since the millennium of Revelation 20 follows this event, it seems that the premillennial position is the most likely one. However, if the considerations we have summarized in the preceding are correct, the premillennial position is seriously compromised, if not refuted. Not only does Premillennialism enjoy little support from other portions of Scripture, but it also fails to provide a plausible account of the relation between the visions of Revelation 19 and 20. For if these visions are not to be read in

sequence but as parallel accounts of the same period of history, then the millennium of Revelation 20 would precede rather than follow the event of Christ's return at the end of the age.

This seems to be the conclusion to which the above considerations lead. Just as the vision of Revelation 19 describes the return of Christ, the complete destruction of all of the nations, the last outpouring of God's wrath at the close of the present period of history, so the vision of Revelation 20 closes with a description of the return of Christ at the close of the millennium, the complete destruction of all the nations, and the last outpouring of God's wrath at the close of the present period of history. The parallels between these visions — in language, symbolism, use of Old Testament prophecy, and content — is so pervasive and compelling as to yield but one likely explanation: they are describing the same period of history, the same episodes and the same conclusion at the end of the age.

This means that in our study of the vision in Revelation 20 of the millennium, we have every reason to believe that the millennium it describes is now. The millennium of Revelation 20 coincides with the period of history prior to Christ's return at the end of the age, prior to the day of Christ's final victory over his and his people's enemies, and prior to the last judgement and all the other events that will accompany the close of this present age.

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