

“Reigning or Restrained?” (Rev. 20:1-8)

“Struck Down But Not Destroyed” (2 Cor. 4:9) Approaching and Interpreting Rev. 20

One of the most blessed chapters in Scripture is one of the most misunderstood. It is the most symbolic chapter in the most symbolic book of Scripture. What saddens my heart is to see that the topic of millennium has become the distinguishing determiner for one’s paradigm of eschatology. One’s eschatological view is judged by one’s view of the millennium. One would think that the millennium would be mentioned all throughout the Bible since it has become the determiner of end times views and even denominational views. Would it surprise you to learn that it is only mentioned in this small chapter of *Revelation*? In other words, a topic which has served to divide many and label virtually all (if not all) Christians and denominations, is only declared here in a very symbolic chapter of the most cryptic letter in Scripture. It seems a bit presumptuous to put that much weight of theology and application on so little information. Some have erroneously even purported that one’s millennial view is a test of orthodoxy. You’re gonna tell me that even those who believe Jesus is the only way to salvation and that His person and atonement have secured their salvation, but because they are not pre-millennial or believe in a pre-tribulation rapture, that they are not Christians? Wow!

Let’s see if we can agree on some premises. One cannot hope to achieve great accuracy of interpretation without first understanding fundamental principles of interpretation (hermeneutics). In fact, hermeneutical principles are universal in interpreting any form of literature!

There are many ways to approach interpreting John’s Apocalypse (unveiling). I’d like to suggest a few. Firstly, consider Revelation as a microcosm of the canon. It is a metanarrative or compilation of God’s revelation, borrowing from the entire Old Testament and employing many motifs, symbols, types, and communicative tools, employing metaphors, idioms, word plays, parallelisms (including chiasmic structures), etc.

I don’t like to be pigeonholed into a millennial category. The so-called view of which I’m considered is mislabeled in the first place. I know of no Christian who doesn’t take the concept described as the millennium in Revelation chapter 20 literally. If the Bible describes it, it is a reality. When the ch. 20 says there is a dragon, I take what the dragon represents as a literal entity. However, I don’t believe that John is speaking of a literal fire-breathing, scaled, horned, tailed animal. Nor do I think the period of time marked as a thousand years is a literal thousand years. Only the pre-mil view adheres to such but it has to ignore that every occurrence of “one thousand” in Scripture is metaphorical. Why then would the most obviously symbolic chapter in the most symbolic book of Scripture uncharacteristically intend one thousand to be literal?

Following are some examples:

- Ex. 20:6 God shows love to a thousand generations – Incidentally, those who maintain that Rev. 20 must be literal also say end of time is w/in a generation or two = Ex. 20 not literal.?
- Deut. 1:11 God increased # of Israelites a thousand times
- Deut. 7:9 God keeps covenants for a thousand generations
- Ps. 50:10 cattle on a thousand hills
- Josh. 23:10 one Israelite shall chase a thousands troops
- Isa. 60:22 the least of Zion will become a thousand and the smallest a mighty nation

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- Ps. 84:10 one day in God’s sight is better than a thousand elsewhere
- Ps. 91:7 A thousand may fall at your side, And ten thousand at your right hand;
- Furthermore, the expression “a thousand years” never represents a literal number of years rather to denote an extended or long period of time.
- E.g. Ps. 90:4 For a thousand years in Your sight *Are* like yesterday when it is past,
- Eccl. 6:6 even if he lives a thousand years twice—but has not seen goodness. Do not all go to one place?
- 2 Pet. 3:8 A day as thousand yrs. Thousand yrs. as a day.
- Especially noteworthy is 1 Chron. 16:15–17 (= Ps. 105:8–10), where God’s “covenant forever” and his “everlasting covenant” are equated with “the word which he commanded to a thousand generations.”

Secondly, the genre of literature of a book, letter, or passage must be discovered e.g. prose, poetry, epistle, prophetic. Expound.

Thirdly, another hermeneutical approach I’d like for you to employ is that we must approach interpretation in the context of its author and original recipients. None of Scripture was written to you, but all of it is written for you. It was written to and pertinent for the original contemporaries in particular circumstances yet has application for the Church (Ro. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:1-6).

Fourthly, I’d like for you to consider that Jesus, Paul, and John offer heavenly (supernatural) views juxtaposed to conventional (natural) views in order to point out the paradoxical realities of victory. Revelation employs heavenly vs earthly views and Jesus and Paul did the same. Where it seems (from a worldly view) that Christians and God are being defeated, the truth (heavenly view) is that they are conquering and reigning.

Fifthly, I’d like you to consider the dating of authorship.

1. Many of the finest NT scholars (and even begrudging liberal scholars) attest that the entire NT was written before AD 70.
2. “near,” “soon,” within a “generation,” “at the door,” “at hand”
3. The synoptic accounts offer the Olivet Discourse and John offers us Revelation.
4. Dating the book of revelation has much bearing on its interpretation.
5. A brief logical deduction that Revelation was written prior to AD 70.
  - a. Terrorist book on NY w/o 911.
  - b. Jewish persecution in Germany book w/o mention of Hitler’s Holocaust.
  - c. Why then would John write the final, ultimate, inspired assurance of Jesus’ promise, life, work, death, resurrection, and return – without mentioning the most profound and scandalous prophesy being fulfilled – especially with its eternal pertinence?

Sixthly, the NT authors’ prerogative of re-interpreting passages through a Christological lens e.g. Hos. 11:1 cf. Mat. 2:15, Exod. 19:5-6 cf. 1 Pet. 2:4-5, picking up on the temple motif, the NT authors clearly state the eschatological Temple is that of the body of Christ e.g. 1 Cor. 3:16-17, Eph. 2:19-22. In fact, Ezekiel’s prophesied eschatological Temple is seen as being fulfilled in Jesus person/work (Ezek. 47:1-12 cf. Jn. 7:37-38). See also Zech. 6:12-13 cf. again 1 Pet. 2:3ff.

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Seventhly, apocalyptic language and metaphor reigns supreme in John’s vision. In fact, we see Jesus using the precise hyperbolic metaphors which the OT Prophets employed. In Matt. 24:29, 34-35 (cf. Mark 13:24-27) we see the pinnacle of progressive apocalyptic metaphors from Babylon to the entire world (Sun, moon, stars): Isa. 13:6-10 (lights out Babylon). Isa. 34:4-5 (Lights out Edom). Ezek. 32:4-8 (lights out Egypt). Amos 5:18; 8:9 (lights out Israel). Joel 2:31 (lights out world). Jesus was clearly speaking of the looming judgment over Jerusalem due to her refusal to acknowledge her visitation from the LORD. Jesus Messiah fulfilled the advent of YHWH! And for those who stumbled over the Stone yet refused to be broken on it, Jesus had a stern warning (Lu. 19:41-44). In that context, Jesus was acknowledged as the Messiah king coming to Jerusalem (28-40).

It is precisely erroneous employment of hermeneutics to take the obviously established judgment metaphors and make them walk on all fours. The darkening of the stars and the coming on the clouds are prophetic metaphors of judgment. And as Jesus predicted such over Jerusalem (e.g. Mk. 13:1-2; Mat. 24:1-2) within the generation (Mat. 24:34), He is either a false prophet or those like Bart Ehrman (who call Jesus such) are mistaken.

Paradox is often used in all genres of the Bible and much of it is found in *Revelation*.

What is found in the visions i.e. paradoxical nature of spiritual victory and reigning is even spelled out in the first chapters viz. Smyrna and Laodicea (see below).

6. There is a parody of the Trinity with the dragon, beast, false prophet or the dragon, land beast, and sea beast.
7. The One who died lives forever (1:18).
8. Victory comes via death
9. The beasts seem to have the power but they will be judged and punished.
10. Smyrna appears poor yet she is spiritually rich.
11. She is opposed by the religious authorities (Jews) who are actually Satan’s synagogue (2:9).
12. Laodicea boasts of wealth yet she is miserable, pitiful, poor, blind and naked (3:17).
13. Sardis has a reputation for life but is dead (3:1).
14. Things are not as they appear to the world’s point of view. The imposing authoritative Rome which seemed an invincible force is defeated by the invisible force who uses the weak, helpless, hunted, poor, defeated believers to overcome. They are victorious through obedient submission while the Dragon and his entities are defeated via their own assertion and seeds of ruthless self-destruction.
  - a. Rome – the contemporary beast of John’s day, was used by John in more than a few paradoxical parodies:
  - b. Rome was known as the eternal city
  - c. Caesar had the moniker (coins and such) “lord and savior.”
  - d. Pax Romana – peace that Rome brings
  - e. Lex Talionis – eye for eye
  - f. Nero Redivivus – Nero’s supposed resurrection
  - g. City of seven hills known for its ultimate ‘complete’ rule was roughly the same square area (miles) as New Jerusalem (see Wright 194).
  - h. Whereas the earth perceives the Roman empire to have total authority and power (cf. the universal worship of the beast 13:4, 8, 12), heaven reveals it is God who receives universal worship for His real authority, power, righteousness, and grace (15:4; 19:5-6).

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- i. Caesar Augustus’ birthday was called “gospel” (good news).

So, Lets’ consider Rev. 20:1-8

Why would Satan be released after a millennium of peace? I think the appropriate question is, why wouldn’t Satan be finally cast out after a millennium of harassment?

Most questions have a millennial presupposition which itself needs to be questioned.

Regarding Rev. ch. 20 & Eph. 2

Satan (Dragon) now temporarily persecutes us but only on a limited basis because of Jesus’ work. However, He will be condemned forevermore at the end of the millennium. Conversely, →

The Church (Bride) currently reigns with Christ (Eph. 2:6) yet is subject to persecution and martyrdom in the millennium.

Revelation gives us the heavenly view juxtaposed to the earthly view. Not unlike Ecclesiastes, from “under the sun,” Satan is striking the Betrothed of God on a literal, physical, spatial, and earthly point. From “under heaven,” Satan may harass but is restrained from harming the Church (Rev. 11) metaphorically, spiritually, relationally, and heavenly.

From a worldly view, Satan is winning by persecuting and killing the saints. From a heavenly view, the Church is reigning via clinging to truth while being struck down (Rev. 12:11).

The Church may experience great opposition for a short time (e.g. 10 days) as she charges hell’s gates but she’ll be rewarded forevermore. Conversely, Satan may harass her for a short time (Rev. 12:12) but will be finally and ultimately cast out of the presence of the Bride and the New Creation.

Therefore, I do not accept the presupposition of Premillennialism which claims a semi-golden age of saints living and dying alongside angels and immortals who are glorified – only to be interrupted by a coop of feigned worshipers led by Satan. No, Revelation is not telling us such. Rather, John is articulating in vision form (metaphorically) that we (the Church), though being struck down, are reigning as priests (Rev. 20:4; Eph. 2:6) with Christ until He puts all things into subjection (cf. 1 Cor. 15:27). In other words at the end of the age (millennium), when Satan is unleashed to insight an *overt* assault on God’s people, Jesus will step in and simply destroy them (Rev. 19:19.5<sup>1</sup>; 20:9), thus ultimately vindicating His Church. As C. S. Lewis stated, once the author of the play steps on the stage, the play is over!

“Already but Not Yet” (Rev. 20:1-6)

1. It is true that Satan seeks (and sends demonic influence) to deceive lost and render saints useless (1 Pet. 5:8 lion). He is seen as the ‘god of this age’ (2 Cor. 4:4 and the ruler and

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<sup>1</sup> Note that victory is so swift and decisive that it is not described but assumed between verses 19 and 20. Victory presumed as having occurred, verse 20 thus simply states that the evil ones have been captured and casted into everlasting judgment. Thus I call it victory between verses hence verse 19 point 5 = between verses 19 and 20.

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prince of dark powers (Eph. 2:2; 6:11-12). Nevertheless, he is like a wounded animal which is the most dangerous kind (my old friend Gary O’Keefe and the bear).

2. Simultaneously, Satan is bound by a stronger Man (Mat. 12:29) because Jesus conquered him “having disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col. 2:15). Thus Jesus was able to see Satan fall like lightning (Lu. 10:18) and the gates of hell cannot prevail against Christ’s Church (Mat. 16:18). Do you believe that Jesus has restrained Satan? I’ve heard people say this is hell right now on earth. They’ve got another thing coming.
3. Satan is currently restrained, defeated, and his judgment has begun (Jn. 12:31; Heb. 2:14) and because of his restraint, the nations are coming to Christ (cf. Rev. 20:3).
4. “In their spiritual darkness the Gentiles, with rare exceptions, did not bless or receive blessing through Abraham’s seed during the ages of promise (Eph. 2:1-2, 11-12)” (Johnson 287). “Another indication, which the apostles make explicit after Jesus’ death and resurrection, is that the light of the kingdom now breaks forth on the nations that had been enslaved in satanic darkness (Mat. 4:14-16; Lu. 2:32; 4:18)” (Johnson 288).
5. Paul confirmed such dire spiritual status of Gentile nations until Christ bound Satan and released His Church. See Acts 17:30-31.
6. Oh, how evil and depraved are the souls of man? Even during the reign of God’s witnesses (end time priests) it will take nothing more than for Satan to be released to incite the hate in hearts of many as to gather the nations together against God and His own.
7. We must be diligent to not quench or grieve the Spirit’s work in us in and thus His Church.
8. As common, John offers us another paradox similar to these:
  - a. Church i.e. witnesses, 144000, priests, bride are preserved yet vulnerable. They are killed yet victorious.
  - b. Kingdom now but later: Mk. 13:7-8 “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. These things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, as well as famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.” This tells of a period so described in Revelation. Also, Mat. 28:19-20 tells of this age as the time of our commission where He will be with us in spirit till the end of the age. Similarly, Luke’s account reveals the paradox. In 19:11 we see the kingdom is immediate (now) yet in 12:35-40 we must endure patiently for its coming (in consummation).
  - c. The 3 Gardens in Bible – we live between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and final Garden: Easter message and reality started in the Garden with Christ’s resurrection and will have its consummation in the New Garden with our resurrection. Till then we are already raised with Christ in the heavenlies (Eph. 2:6) in a positional/spiritual fashion.
  - d. Satan seeks to deceive the world using demonic influence in this age (2 Cor. 4:4 god of this age) yet God is restraining him so that he cannot prevail in gathering the nations before it is time (16:13-16; 17:14; 19:19; 20:8; Cf. 14:17-20).
9. It is not till the end of the so called millennium when Satan is allowed to muster up his final rebellion; when God gathers His own and casts out the rest. This is simply described here and throughout Scripture.
  - a. At the end of this time, the wheat and chaff / good and bad fish / sheep and goats are separated, and the elect gathered. There is not a hint of a gap in the parables, Jesus’ discourse, Daniel’s seventy weeks, or Paul’s epistles.

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- b. In fact, rather than a gap, we can see an overlap. The time of Jesus’ atonement ushered in a new age yet it is not consummated yet .e.g. Joseph and Mary’s betrothal needed a divorce. The end times are the period of the so-called millennium. It began with His advent and will continue till His return and consummation. He inaugurated His Kingdom at His first appearing and will consummate it at His second appearing. Thus these last days, include both the decay and death due to sin and the renewal and reconciliation of which the OT Prophets spoke (Ezek. 36:24-28 cf. Jn. 3:5; Jer. 31:33 cf. 2 Cor. 5:17 & 1 Jn. 3:1!)
  - c. The age to come is not the millennium but the resurrection – the “age to come.” It is not some semi-golden age, semi-curse free age, or semi-suffering free age. It is not an age with tempered sin/evil, where death and a 2<sup>nd</sup> chance for salvation exists. Or where new resurrected bodies dwell both with Jesus and non-glorified bodies. Instead, the ‘age to come’ is the new heaven and earth!
  - d. Furthermore, if death is the last enemy to be conquered (1 Cor. 15:52), how can there be such after Christ returns? Such is only seen in the premillennial view. Contrary to this view, Scripture is clear that when Christ returns; Satan is cast out, no more sin, resurrection of bodies and new creation in perpetuity – not 1000 yrs. after His return.
  - e. Where in all of Revelation or Scripture can we plainly interpret Scripture to state there is a gap of 7 or 1000 yrs. or a secret rapture separated by such?
  - f. Read 1 Cor. 15:22-28.
10. Why release? N. T. Wright offers insight. Satan was initially a member of heavenly council and remains an accuser and he will be afforded time for such. At his defeat he will have accused till the last remnant of suspicion is exhausted. “Satan must be allowed a final moment to flail around with his lies and accusation, so that in his overthrow it will be clear beyond the slightest doubt that ‘there can be no condemnation for those who are in Messiah Jesus’” (Wright 179).
11. What is the relevance of 2 Cor. 4-6?
12. The Amillennial or Current Millennial interpretation is basically a view of the current spiritual realities and not meant to be read as a description of what things will look like on the earth during Christ’s reign – and He is reigning till all things are subject to Him (1 Cor. 15:26-27).
13. In fact, 1 Cor. 15 has three sections marked by resurrections which comport with ages.
- a. Vv. 1-11 speak of Jesus’ resurrection and its implications. The age of ceremonies and promise of future Messiah and Communion with God is fulfilled in Jesus’ resurrection.
  - b. Vv. 12-34 speak of the believer’s new life (spiritual resurrection cf. v. 22; 2 Cor. 5:17; Rev. 20:4-5). Such is indicative of the current dawning age of our individual spiritual resurrections. (Eph. 2:6; 2 Cor. 5:17) (Overlapping ages: this current age and the age to come which both includes our fallen nature which is fading and our new nature which is blossoming. cf. 2 Cor. 4:16-18)
  - c. Vv. 35-58 speak of the final blossoming of the New Creation consummated with a universal glorious physical resurrection of heaven, earth, and our bodies.
  - d. Therefore, we can outline the chapter as follows: the **Past Reality** of Jesus’ resurrection (1-11) and the **Present Relevance** of His and our resurrection (12-34). Now, we consider the **Promised Renewal** of our future physical resurrection on the day of His return (35-58)!

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Message: “Already but Not Yet” (Rev. 20:1-6)

PC:

Revelation chapter 20 is the most controversial chapter found in the most controversial and misunderstood book of Scripture. No matter what particular view one has regarding this chapter/book, he or she must be respectful and charitable when considering different views. Thankfully, the Southern Baptist Faith and Message (in all its versions) states the essentials of the Lord’s return with room for all millennial views. I believe, however, that this chapter reveals absolutely nothing new. Rather, it reaffirms (recapitulates) what has already been seen both earlier in this prophesy and in the old and new Testaments. It simply offers another vision affirming aspects of the Day of the Lord which can be found in many places. One of such places which offers the same aspects is neatly laid out in Ezek. 38-40. In some ways John merely mentions what has been given in greater detail earlier in Scripture e.g. 19:17-18 [Ezek. 39:17-20] and in other ways John’s vision combines multiple allusions and concepts such as seen here in chapter 20’s wrap up of the end times. “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophesy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near” (Rev. 1:3).

“Relevance of the Resurrection” \*Easter Sunday (Rev. 20:1-6; Eph. 2:5-6)

Though Easter may be the most significant holiday we celebrate, it doesn’t stand alone! Its celebration points to the centerpiece of history. History can be seen as having two categories i.e. before Christ and since His advent. But history can also be categorized in three parts (as seen in Scripture) i.e. the Old Testament times, the New Testament times, and the ‘age to come.’ These three periods are also marked by three gardens: 1. The Garden of Eden where the first man fell and sin entered the world. 2. The Garden of Gethsemane where the last Adam prevailed over sin and death. 3. The Garden to come which will be the total New Creation and which is the end result of Jesus’ triumph. Though this world is fading and the new one with all its splendor has yet to arrive; we are God’s most significant creation in the new birth afforded by Jesus’ sacrifice. Yes this old world, our old flesh, and that old Serpent just don’t seem to go away. However, we know that that kingdom is fading and our new one is coming. In fact, it already began to bud from the middle Garden where the Seed of Jesus body died – only to break through with Kingdom growth that has sprung to life, even in a sinner such as me!

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Revelation summarizes Scripture and so it is no surprise that it offers multiple contrasts and paradoxes. Such can also be seen in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Mat. 5-7) where He expounded on the Law and offered ultimate contrasts (ch. 7) and paradoxes (ch. 5). *Revelation* and Jesus’ sermon have much in common, especially regarding such. Jesus stated that the blessed ones were poor in spirit, mourners, and meek like *Revelation* reveals that these same kingdom citizens are preserved, yet exposed and vulnerable to being killed. One of Revelation’s revisited paradoxes concerns Satan’s fury and assault on God’s people, yet his inability to deceive and gather the nations to stifle the Church. Many Western Christians have been beguiled into apathy and complacency and Satan’s demons are happy to play a part. Such as seen in the Harlot and the Beast. However, Christ’s universal Church continues to prevail and even thrive

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under heavy persecution in the East generally speaking. This is because Satan is on a leash, the length of which is determined by God. Though he is likened unto a prowling lion now, he will only be unleashed at the end to bring about (in part) the judgment of God on a world that has filled the cup of wrath to the brim! Oh how wonderful God’s plan is for His people. A Christian’s only perspective needs to be indicative of such a passage (Rev. 20), because though we face discrimination in the West and persecution in the East, we have already been positionally raised with Christ in the heavenlies and those who have died in Christ currently reign with Him from heaven. No wonder Paul said “to live is Christ and to die is gain.”