

Commentary on the Revelation

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Before us is one of the most disputed and discussed paragraphs in the Revelation. Among the pertinent questions are these: Is the millennium an age or is it an era with an age? Is the millennium descriptive of the period from Christ’s triumph at the cross and in the resurrection? Was the millennium inaugurated in the first century but will be fully consummated in the eternal state with a progressive manifestation of its fullness, though not in its fullness, until the eternal state? Is what we call the millennium a picture of the eternal state and nothing more, that it is entirely future and exclusively after the conclusion of time? Is the millennium a discernible period before the eternal state, whether it be a thousand years or not, before the final judgment and the beginning of the eternal state? These, with a variety of nuances by their advocates, has been designated as Amillennialism (typically viewed as not occurring in time but exclusively in eternity), Postmillennialism (typically viewed as a progressive unfolding of the triumph of the victory Christ procured at the cross over sin and Satan in time), and Premillennialism (typically viewed as a distinct period before Christ’s second advent and the eternal state

gospel triumphant [for most an era of the fulfilled of promises to the ancient people of God though not for all who hold the position]).

I think the comment by Ray Summers is pertinent as we begin: "This chapter needs to be approached with great humility of spirit, a recognition of its difficulties, an avoidance of dogmatic statements, and respect for the honest interpretation of others. This chapter has been a bitter debating ground for Christians for many centuries (*Worthy Is the Lamb*, 202)."

The phrase "And I saw (19:11,17, 19; 21:1)" would appear to connect this chapter with the previous describing the return of Christ, making what follows here to be after the Second Coming, not prior to it. However, John uses these words to indicate the sequence of visions rather than chronological sequence. Buist Fanning states, "John's narration here is impressionistic, not always in logical order (501)."

1. The latter career of Satan, 20:1-3

a. The appearance of an angel, v. 1

John sees ("And I saw an angel," the fourth in a series [19:11, 17, 19]) descending from heaven with authority derived from the throne of God. The unnamed angel has the "key," the symbol of authority, to cause the judgment by another angel. In 1:18 Jesus has the "keys" to death and hades; in 3:7 the angel addressing the Philadelphia church has the "key of David" (meaning access to the kingdom. This angel has been given the authority over the abyss, the bottomless pit (hades and the abyss being the same, the place of judgment). It is not a physical but as a spiritual place.

b. The action of the angel, vv. 2-3a

John is specific as to the object of the angel's mission by defining the culprit with four designations (the dragon [21:1], the serpent of old (Gen 3:1), the devil, and Satan). The reference to "the serpent of old" links the destruction of the garden with the harbinger of its restoration (the agent of corruption is being put always so that the new garden may come!).

Scholars debate two things in this passage: the literalness of the number of years and when this did or will occur. The number may or may not be literal, but it surely indicates a time element. Give the symbolism of numbers throughout the book there is an uncertainty of interpreting them with stark literalism such as in 5:11, 14:20 and 21:16). However, John seems it interpret numbers at times quote literally (11:3 and 12:6, for example)

Is this symbolic of moments in the church throughout the centuries of the triumph of God's people, prefigurements of what is described

here as the climatic one prior to the end of time and the eternal presence of God among His people with the devil and His minions cast out forever? It would seem valid that there is within the progressive disclosure of the fullness of the revelation of God (greater clarity with the NT than what is revealed in the OT, greater clarity within the NT as events are fulfilled in time to eternity), a progression from shadows ever becoming clearer images within canonical scripture and upon the stage on which it is revealed (history) until its ultimate, final fulfillment in the new garden, the new city, and God dwelling with a completed, perfected people (the intent of Gen 1-2). There are thus many shadows of things to come, which is why the Bible is relevant on the experience of every generation of believers, and one final disclosure after the end of times. The millennium, in this way of looking, is a literal event, a shadow (imperfect it be but quite an advance over other shadows) of what is to immediately follow.

While Satan's activities are restricted and his wicked attempted coup prevented by God, the gates of hell, however foreboding in appearance at times, will not prevail as history attests, many antichrists having come and gone, there will be a day when his activities will be even more restricted. He will be "bound" and this earth will enjoy a season unlike other seasons, yet not to the extent that people will no longer be subject to deception and death, Adam's curse not being removed. God's kingdom will be more apparent than ever before but will prove to only be the most profound prefiguring of the eternal habitation of God with His people. The details of this unprecedented era should be described with caution and humility because if taken too literally; for example, only Christian who lived and died during this period will reign with Christ (vv. 4-5).

To make the point of the unnamed angel's action John uses five verbs: "laid hold of," "bound," "cast," "shut," and "sealed." He seems to be emphatic about the limitations imposed on the devil, though for a time only.

c. The reason for the action, v. 3b

The purpose of the action is to prevent the deception of the nations by the grand deceiver. The difficult word to interpret is "nations." On the one hand, the nations are mentioned as having been destroyed in 17:2, 18:3 and 19:18-21 lending credence to the fact that the judgments cycle (seals, trumpets, bowls) in completeness leading to the triumph of Christ and are repeat for effect. Hence the "nations" could be interpreted with the cycling once again, a

repetition or recapitulation. “Nations” are usually seen in Revelation as wicked and godless. Could John be saying that Satan’s deceptive grip over wickedness is lessened? Could each lessening grip as time marches forward be a pre-figuring of it’s final and forever denouement?

At the termination of this time of restraint, Satan will be released for one last stroke of wickedness, but his time will be short. He will be allowed to deceive the nations into one last attempt to prevent the new garden, the new dwelling of God with His people.

2. The reign of Christ, vv. 4-6

The point of these verses is to show struggling saints in the seven churches, and those of subsequent centuries, that God will reign victoriously over His people someday, a day when all His enemies will be judged. God will be vindicated in His judgments and saints shall derive encouragement and strength to persevere.

a. The victory of the saints in Christ, vv. 4, 5b

Once more “And I saw” introduces another of the seven visions.

The major issue of discussion in this verse is the occupants of the thrones. If it speaks of one group, it likely refers to the persecuted, martyred saints (“beheaded” refers to the double-edged axe used by the Romans to exact capital punishment). However, there seems to be a second group (“those who had not worshipped the beast...”). These, it seems, are believers in Christ who have not fallen to compromise and idolatry. “Mark of the beast” and “worship of the beast” seem to be parallel statements. Says Mounce, “The millennium is not, for John, the messianic age foretold by the prophets of the OT, but a special reward for those who have paid with their lives the price of faithful opposition to the idolatrous claims of the Antichrist.... The essential truth of the passage is that the martyr’s steadfastness will win for him the highest life in union with God and Christ (359).”

b) A parenthetical comment, v. 5a

“The rest of the dead” unbelievers (deceased saints possess life by virtue of the first resurrection); these await resurrection at the end of the millennium at the Great White Throne judgment and is a consignment to eternal separation from God.

Note: In the Revelation the phrases “first resurrection” and “second death” are only found here. The basic idea with “resurrection” is that of coming to life, spiritual life existence, and the context

defines the nature of that life, reward. The “second death” is that of spiritual separation of unbelievers, the unrighteous, from God’s presence.

c) The blessing of the saints, v. 6

The blessing of those who share in the first resurrection will be that of service, particularly the service of worship.

3. The demise of Satan, vv. 7-10

Having mentioned the delimitation of Satan’s hold over God’s people in vv. 1-3, John turns to his final judgment.

a) His release, v. 7

At the end of this time between Satan’s limitation, some scholars argue that the period of restriction began in his judgment at the cross and the triumph of His resurrection, while others assign the period as between the beginning and end of the millennium, Satan will be allowed to have one last chance to rally his forces, the nations (Gog and Magog).

b) His last deception, vv. 8-9

It is amazing that the nations can be deceived after the Lord’s special protective mercies for a “thousand years,” a witness to the devil’s abilities and powers. “Four corners” is a figure of speech meaning a gathering from all over the world, an innumerable host as indicated by the metaphoric “sands of the seashore (it is interesting that Abraham is promised descendants in number as the sand on the seashore [Gen 15:5].” Is this another example of an evil parody in mockery of God?).

“Gog and Magog” is intriguing and difficult. Some help may be derived from Ezek. 38:1-3, the apparent background from which John is writing. He adapts the imagery of the defeat of Israel’s ancient invaders from the East and translates them into equivalents in his day (i.e., Rome from the West).

The location of the final conflagration is said to be a “broad plain,” generally identified as the Jezreel Valley in the Lower Galilee (see also 6:15-16; 11:18; 16:12, 14, 16; 19:19). This large army, composed of armies, will camp in opposition to the saints and “the beloved city.” It would seem that the reference to “the beloved city” is not to be taken literally since the “broad plain” is quite distant from the mountains of Jerusalem. Perhaps a clue to help us understand is found in 3:12, words to the church at Philadelphia. The “beloved city” is there described as the “New Jerusalem,” the habitation of God with His people.

At the moment when defeat of God and the saints seem in Satan’s

grasp, God will intervene supernaturally and what they thought would be a feast of victory will become a feast for the birds!

c) His final judgment, v. 10

The evil triumvirate, the unholy trinity will come to judgment. Satan will join the antichrist, the fake deliverer, and the false prophet, errant religion that controlled the evil system that have engulfed and blighted the initial garden, the dwelling place of God with His people. Their judgment befits their crime; they will exist in an everlasting hell of torment.

D. The great white throne, vv. 11-15

The scene is graphic, majestic, and stunning. The event is the final judgment of mankind, the dissolution of this blighted world in anticipation of the new creation, the new garden, the “New Jerusalem.” The evil triumvirate, the corrupt trinity, have been judged and cast into the Lake of Fire. Now the scene shifts to those who may or may not have followed them.

The phrase “And I saw” (v. 11) is the sixth occurrence making chapters 19:1-21:8 a unit of visions.

1. The presence of the great judge, v. 11

Upon the throne, the executor of the final judgments, is the God (this may be the Father since in Revelation He is depicted in this position [chs. 4-5; 19:4, 21:5] but it could be Christ [5:12-13]. The throne is white symbolizing holiness; the one who occupies the throne is holy and His judgments righteous. The background for the vision is Dan 7:9, the judgment of the Ancient of Days.

As to the meaning of “heaven” in the verse, it is best taken as the sphere that is above the earth, the heavens or the firmament (Gen 1:6-8). The heaven described subsequently comes down from above; it does not vanish.

The departure of the “earth and the heaven” from God’s presence can be taken in two ways: the phrase may be taken symbolically to represent evil which is separated from the presence of God or it may be taken literally as the destruction of the blighted earth and heaven (sky) in preparation for the new heavens and earth which follows immediately in 21:1. For a similar description concerning the final judgment see 16:14, 20.

2. The judgment by the great judge, vv. 12-13

a. Stated, v. 12

The most pressing issue in this verse is the identity of the dead, “the great and small.” It is most likely that the phrase refers to all

of humanity, the “sheep and the goats” of Matt 25:31-46. There appears to be two categories of evidence (books); plural books in contrasted to a single book, a book that vindicate the righteousness of the judgment of the lost and the book that vindicates the righteousness of reward. The background for “books” and “book” is Dan 7 and 12 respectively. In Dan 7 the books are about the justification of divine judgment, wrath, and in Dan 12 the emphasis is upon redemption. Thus, the “dead” in the final judgment comprise the lost and the saved. (*This is a disputed conclusion since it does not specifically indicate that the saved are judged at the same time; it only says that two kinds of books were in evidence. It may be that the lost were judged based on two criteria: the evidence in the “books.” This is further demonstrated by their absence from “the book.”*)

The judgment in the case of the “books,” which contain a record of compiled evidence, is relative to works or lifestyle. What an unbeliever does is not the cause of their judgment; it is the evidence for it since conduct reveals the motives of the heart.

- b. Repeated, v. 13
John tells us that three realms gave up the dead to appear at the Great White Throne. “Sea” is paralleled with “death” and “hades,” suggesting the three have commonality of some type. Since “death” and “hades” are linked to evil powers in 6:8 and since “sea” often symbolizes the unruly, dark realm (13:1, 15:2), and since the sea will not exist in the new creation (21:1), it would seem most probable that John has in mind mankind’s enemies. “Hades” refers to the temporal abode of the spirits of the unbelieving dead, their bodies in the earth. All the forces of evil, the power of death, nor powerful authorities. can prevent the unbeliever from the final judgment.
- c. The judgment of Satan’s minions, v. 14a
“Death and hades” being cast into the lake of fire, the symbol of eternal punishment seems awkward. In the fourth seal judgment the demonic agent in charge bore the names “Death” and “Hades” (6:8). It seems most probable that the forces behind these are consigned to eternal punishment. These would then be Satan’s minions.
- d. A parenthetical, explanatory statement, v. 14b
The “lake of fire” is symbolic of God’s eternal judgment. This is termed “the second death.”
- e. The summary of judgment, v. 15
It seems here that there is repetition for emphasis. There are two evidential archives being assembled: one is the books of death

(compiled evidence to support and verify the claim of the great, righteous judge to support the actions of God as just); the other book of life. This book is such because it belongs to the Lamb (21:27). In 13:8 it is called “the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.”

Applications

1. Our passage tells us of two types of resurrections. One is to spiritual life following physical death and the other is spiritual death following physical life. One is promised to those who remain faithful in their testimony to redemptive mercies even to the point and experience of martyrdom if such is required. Others chose what appeared to have been a softer, easier-to-manage life without the restrictions that come with being possessed of Christ and enjoying the temporal pleasures that many indulge. Both choices of life-path end in physical death. However, with spiritual life even in physical death there is spiritual life thereafter in the presence of the blessing of God. “Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection (v. 6).” The other meets death, but more than cessation of physical life; they meet spiritual separation from God, under His just wrath forever. This is the second death declared by the great judge of mankind at the end of time. Is your future lot the first resurrection or the second, life or death? The decision is yours to make; you may not do so today, but you will someday.
2. It is important to know that the devil is a defeated foe, defeated by Christ at the cross, yet today has been given quite a long leash. His sentence has been rendered at the bar of divine justice, but the guilty verdict has only partially led to justice through judgment. He has been excluded from the presence of God, but his domain now is upon the earth. Someday he will be banished from the earth and consigned justly and forever to hell. Do you see Satan as actively in your world today? Do you see him as a defeated foe that while quite dangerous is limited in the damage he can inflict? He is not dressed in a red suit with a long tail and pointed ears; he walks the great capitols of the world. Do you treat him as defeated or do you allow him sway over your life at times? What does it look like when Satan leads you astray?
3. The Bible portrays the devil, Satan, the serpent of old (John writes that was a liar from the beginning [I John 3:8]) as a clever master deceiver. He can make evil look like a profitable and good endeavor; he has led and leads many astray. He does it by his knowledge of us being a master of human psychology. He knows our fears, so he offers us false comfort. He knows our quest for material things, so he promises us shorter ways to obtain it. In what ways has Satan been particularly effective in using a weakness you have to take advantage of you? Have you learned to spot him when he nears? What techniques have you found to ward off his deceptions?

4. Our passage tells us something of our activities in heaven. It seems clear that we will set in places of authority since v. 4 speaks of thrones. Can you fathom that we will rule and reign (v. 6) with Christ? I can hardly understand the meaning of the concept. Further, we will be priests of God. The OT concept of the function of a priest was to lead the people of God in the worship of God; that tells me that we will not only rule, but we will worship. Are you preparing for that day as NT priests by taking the worship of God seriously? We have been gathered to God for the express purpose of offering worship to God. Do you see that as your primary duty even now? What does that look like for you?
5. Evil seems to prevail and righteousness wanting in our world today. However, the strength, or even success, of the enemies of God is no indication that it will always be the case. There is a time limit on wrong and the clock is ticking. None of us know when that time will come, but some day it will. Those who suffer will someday reign with Christ; those who are thought to be of little value will be the cherished in heaven. The sum of our experiences on earth is simply no indication of our position in heaven. Have you thought of heaven much? Do you find strength for your days in the hope of all your tomorrows in the presence of God? Does the thought of that great day shape your perspective on your days?
6. We should be very careful about identifying contemporary events with specific symbols in the Revelation. History is witness to many sincere but mistaken identifications. Some people relegate the significance of the book entirely to the "latter days," but that hardly explains how the book can have a timeless relevance for the people of God. The book is not about date setting; it is about hope and comfort in not-the-best-of times. The purpose of delineating the triumph of hope is to cause us not to lose heart in a culture that is contrary to everything that is truly sacred. That God will conquer His enemies and, having made us His friends and family, this should bring us great delight, strength, and resolve. Do you see the triumph of Christ as the hope of escaping what saints before us have endured for the glory of Christ and now have gained through it their eternal rest? Knowledge of the future should make us strong in our weakness today. Is that what hope does for you?
7. Though it is an uncomfortable teaching in many of our churches, perhaps due to our quest to be helpful and non-offensive, the Bible's witness to divine and eternal wrath of God is unmistakable. In this last chapter Satan's minions were cast there and in our section the week Satan and his deceived followers are also. Hell is not perhaps a physical place, a dimension of reality we mortals cannot grasp, it is, none-the-less, a place of judgment with no hope of reprieve for those who refuse the lordship of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. What is your response to this tragedy of human existence? The world is full of good things, but the vast majority are starving in the midst of plenty. The least we can do is warn people of the wrath to come, as did Noah. If there is no hell, there can be no heaven because there is no right or wrong and, therefore, no judgment, no justice and, no reward.

