

## The Thousand Years of Revelation 20 – Part I

by

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It is my contention that present Christian teaching concerning the last things relies too much on the belief of a future earthly millennial kingdom. Therefore, it may be profitable to see whether the idea that the thousand years mentioned by John refers to a future kingdom is consistent with what the NT, and Revelation in particular, teaches on Satan's binding, the resurrection and the reign of the saints. Additionally, we should explore the clues provided by Revelation's literary framework, style and structure, as those arising from the biblical use of the expression "one thousand years".

### 1. *On whether there is chronological continuity between Revelation 19 and 20.*

Fundamental to a belief on a wholly future earthly millennial kingdom is the assumption of a chronological continuity between the visions of Chapter 19 and those of Chapter 20; that is, the defeat of the beast, the kings of the earth and their armies is temporally followed by Satan's binding and the coming to life and reign of beheaded saints. However, that this is the case is by no means obvious. Most students of Revelation have long ago noticed that while in each vision there is some kind of orderly intensification (the seals, the trumpets, the vials), there are also discontinuities among them, as if each series of visions showed at least partially overlapped events.

From written records, we learn that the first to point out this characteristic feature of Revelation was the millenarian Church Father, Victorinus bishop of Pettau (who died ca. 304). At the end of his remarks on Ch. 7 he wrote, concerning the similarities between the seals, the trumpets and the bowls: "We must not regard the order of what is said, because frequently the Holy Spirit, when He has traversed even to the end of the last times, returns again to the same times, and fills up what He had [before] failed to see. Nor must we look for order in the Apocalypse; but we must follow the meaning of those things which are prophesied." (*Commentary on the Apocalypse*; in A. Roberts & J. Donaldson, Ed., *The Antenicene Fathers*; Repr. 1989, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 7:352). In other words, the Seer from Patmos leads us time and again from the beginning to the end of salvation history, in several partially parallel sections that follow a pattern of repetition with elaboration.

This approach, later called recapitulation, is one of the keys for understanding Revelation.

Most interpreters from different schools agree that there is an evident discontinuity between Chapters 11 and 12: From the apparent end ushered by the seventh trumpet we are unexpectedly carried back to the time before Jesus Christ's birth.

Now, we can find clues that allows us to delineate seven sections in the book:

- 1.** The glorious Savior ruling His churches: Ch. 1-3 (Introduction, messages to the Churches; turning point: John is called up to heaven).
- 2.** The Lamb as the revealer and executor of God's plan: Ch. 4-7 (heavenly vision, God & the Lamb, the book, the seals; turning point: "God will wipe away every tear ...").
- 3.** The proclaiming of God's rule and warnings of the coming judgments: Ch. 8-11 (The censer, the trumpets, the temple, the two witnesses; turning point: the opening of God's heavenly temple).
- 4.** The Battle of Satan and his followers against Christ and His church: Ch. 12-14 (The Woman, the male Child and the Dragon; the beasts; the Lamb & the 144,000, the great multitude in heaven; turning point: the harvest of the earth).
- 5.** The wrath of God poured on earth: Ch. 15-16 (The plagues, the bowls; turning point: judgment, "the plague was so terrible").
- 6.** The victory of the Lamb over the unrighteous of the earth: Ch. 17-19 (Babylon, her downfall, heavenly celebration, judgment; turning point: "The rest of them were killed ...").
- 7.** The final triumph over Satan and the eternal blessing of the saints: Ch. 20-22 (Satan's binding, the saints raised and reigning, Satan's final attack, general resurrection and judgment, new heavens and earth, heavenly Jerusalem, epilogue).

Colin Brown, Editor of the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975-1978), says that "there is a very strong case for seeing the whole book as structured in seven series of visions corresponding to the seven days of the creation story in Gen. 1, each of which looks at the Church in the gospel age. The visions are thus seven sets of

parallel visions of the church and its tribulations between the two advents of Christ. In this view the period of a thousand years refers to the present era culminating in a final outburst of Satanic activity prior to the final destruction of all the evils that afflict man.” (*sub voce* “*chilias*”, 2:702). I agree, and let me show you why I believe that Chapter 20 does not follow chronologically Chapter 19, but starts another section, the last one, culminating with the eternal state. At the start of Chapter 20 we learn that Satan has been bound. with a goal that’s carefully specified by John: “to keep him from deceiving the nations any more...”. So we must accept that there are still nations that can be deceived, and 20:7f dramatically confirms this. However, in 19: 11-21 we have learned that all earthly foes of God have been utterly destroyed, so nobody is left that may be deceived!

## 2. *The binding of Satan* (Revelation 20:1-3)

To understand what John wants to convey with this vision, we first must look to other NT texts related to the binding of Satan. He was initially defeated by Jesus in the desert (Matt. 4:1-11). Afterwards, he suffered defeat after defeat during Christ’s ministry. To those who accused Jesus of driving out demons by Beelzebub’s (= Satan’s) power; He answered that it was actually by God’s power that he drove them out, and asked: “how can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house” (Matt 12:29). It should be pointed out that the Greek verb *deō*, to bind, here translated “ties up” is the very same verb used of Satan’s binding in Rev 20. Those who object that Satan is still struggling to carry out his deceptive work (e.g., 1 Cor 7:5; 2 Cor 3:15; 11:3f, 13-15) overlook that the binding implies a restriction, not total neutralization. For example, the very same verb (*deō*) is employed of John the Baptist’s binding by Herod (Matt. 14:3), which nevertheless didn’t prevent John from sending his disciples to Jesus (Matt. 11:1-7). Another example of this verb used to depict a relative restriction is found in Romans 7: 2 , “For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to [her] husband as long as he lives.”

Jesus' massive attack against Satan’s kingdom is stressed in many NT passages. For example, Jesus’ remarked that “the gates of Hades” would not prevail against the Church (Matt. 16:18). The image is that of a city (Hades) besieged by an adversary (the Church) strong enough to throw down the city’s gate, thus indicating the offensive power of God’s people. The Lord

declared “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” in connection with the mission of the 72 (Luke 10:18, cf. Rev 12:9!). Similarly we read: “now the prince of this world will be driven out”; “the prince of this world now stands condemned”; he has no hold on Jesus (John 12:31; 16:11; 14:30).

Paul asserted that in his ascension, Christ “led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men” (Eph 4:8, quoting Ps 68:18); “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col 2:15). The decisive battle was, then, already won at the cross, as also Hebrews reminds us: “he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy (*katargesei*, “render powerless”) him who holds the power of death –that is, the devil” (Heb 2:14).

Thus, the uniform teaching of the NT is that the decisive victory over Satan was won at Christ’s FIRST COMING; it was *then* that Satan was bound.

It is on this ground that the victory of believers against the devil is boldly proclaimed. Paul was commissioned by the Lord himself to “open their (Jews’ and Gentiles’) eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18). Believers are more than conquerors (Rom 8:37-39). They are aware of Satan’s schemes (2 Cor 2:11). They have been rescued from the realm of darkness (Col 1:13). The Father and Jesus protect them from the Evil One (John 17:15; 2 Tess 3:3; 1 Pet 1:1; 1 John 5:18). Christians can stand against Satan’s plots with the armour of God, and they can successfully resist the devil (Jas 4:7; 1 Pet 5:8). In a real sense, believers already “have overcome the evil one” (1 John 2:13b, 14b).

The NT clearly teaches that the time during which Satan is prevented from deceiving the nations is the present Gospel era. So Simeon’s praise, the *Nunc Dimitis*, finishes thus: “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:32). In the ministry of John the Baptist, Luke saw the fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3-5, and said “and all mankind will see God’s salvation” (Luke 3:6). When Jesus saw the centurion’s faith, He said: “many will come from the east and west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 8:11). To the Samaritan woman He said: “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.” (John 4:21). After the resurrection, He commanded the eleven to “go and make disciples from all nations” (Matt 28:19), or, in Luke’s account, “to the ends of the earth”

(Acts 1:8), since “repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). Furthermore, after Jesus healed the man with a shrivelled hand on a Sabbath, Matthew lets us know that “This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ... in His name the nations will put their hope.” (Matt. 12:17,21).

Throughout the Book of Acts we witness the promise to the nations becoming a tangible reality. Thus, the gospel is first addressed to Jews “from every nation under heaven” and they convert to Christ by the thousands (Acts 2:5, 41, 47; 5:16, 42; 6:1, 7). After Stephen’s death, the Gospel reaches the Samaritans and the Ethiopian (Acts 8), and then other Gentiles (Acts 10). This calling of the Gentiles was seen by James as in agreement with the Scripture as signaling the time when “the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord” (Acts 15:13-18, quoting Amos 9:11f).

When people attempted to perform sacrifices to Barnabas and Paul in Lystra, Paul said: “We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God ... *In the past*, He (God) let all nations go their own way” (Acts 14:15f, emphasis mine). Returning to Antioch in Syria, Barnabas and Paul reported that God “had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles” (v. 27). Similarly, in his address in the Areopagus Paul said: “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:30f, emphasis mine). Furthermore, Luke reports that at Gentile Christians at Ephesus burned their sorcery scrolls (19:19). To unbelieving Jews at Rome, Paul remarked “I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!” (28:28). Paul explained to Timothy that Christ “was preached among the nations” (1 Tim 3:16). From the resurrection on, *Satan can only blind those who stubbornly refuse to accept the Gospel* (Rom 1:18-32; 2 Cor 4:4; 1 Tim 1:20; 5:15).

In the very book of Revelation, the devil cannot prevent, notwithstanding his furious efforts through his allies, the Gospel from being preached “to every nation, and tribe, and language, and people” (Rev 14:6; Cf. 10:11). Also, the gathering before God’s throne of people from all nations, that Satan could

obviously not deceive, is clearly described: “with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation”; “there before me there was a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb” (Rev 7:9; 14:6).

Finally, from 2 Thessalonians 2 we may infer still another sense in which Satan is restrained, and this is that he cannot set up the kingdom of the Man of Sin. Even when it is very debatable who and what is hindering him, there is no question an obstacle, most probably a God ordained one.

In conclusion, if Satan was bound at Christ’s first coming, it follows that the period styled by John as “one thousand years” is not some future earthly kingdom, but the present Gospel age. As we pursue this study, further evidence for this view will be presented.

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