

The Millennium

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Introduction

The word *millennium* does not occur anywhere in the Bible. However, it comes from two Latin words which mean a period of 1,000 years. Revelation 20 is the only place in all the Scriptures that a specific period of 1,000 years is mentioned. Thus, here in this chapter we have a picture of the millennium. Before we turn our attention to the millennium in Revelation 20, we will take a brief look at the three major interpretations and their variations.

Different Views of the Millennium

Amillennialism

Amillennialism is the view that the Christian Age constitutes the millennium through which Jesus reigns with His people on earth. Almost everything in Revelation 20 is therefore treated as symbolic rather than literal. This includes the period of 1,000 years itself, which is viewed as an indefinite era extending through the entire Christian Age. The binding of Satan is interpreted as his defeat at the cross and his subsequent weakened state whereby he can still wreck havoc on the earth but cannot prevent the gospel from being proclaimed.

Three major factors led to the dominance of this view. First, there was Montanism, a latter second-century movement founded by a self-proclaimed prophet named Montanus in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), which promoted morally austere living in anticipation of the soon return of Jesus to establish His millennial kingdom on the earth. The movement's fanaticism attracted followers and also the wrath of the Church. Second, Origen (d. ca. 254) of Alexandria, emphasized Christ's kingdom coming into the soul of the believer rather than its literally coming to the earth. His allegorical method of interpreting Scripture had many consequences for Christian theology, the millennium being only one. Finally, the legalization of Christianity (313) and its adoption as the official religion of the Roman Empire (380) caused the Church to settle more fully into its institutional status. Augustine (d. 430), bishop of Hippo (in North Africa), was the most influential pre-medieval Church scholar, who adopted part of Origen's allegorical method and whose amillennial view became the official teaching of the Medieval Church. It is still the official view of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches.

Postmillennialism

Postmillennialism is the view that places Jesus' Second Coming after the close of the millennium, which is usually understood as an indefinite long period of time rather than specifically as 1,000 years. With its optimistic outlook on human nature, postmillennialists believe that social reforms and the gospel will gradually convert the entire world and improve the human condition until a golden age of peace and prosperity, called the millennium, arrives on the earth.

Postmillennialism arose in the seventeenth century among English Puritans and others. Ironically, however, it was the more liberal scholars influenced by the Enlightenment of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who became the champions of postmillennialism. Enlightenment thinkers vehemently disagreed with the traditional concept of the sinfulness of human nature and saw it as perfectible through education, individual reform, and social reform. It flourished from about the late seventeenth to the middle of the nineteenth century. Today it is more popular among liberal Protestant scholars but not as popular as it was in the nineteenth century.

Premillennialism

Premillennialism is the view that places Jesus' Second Coming just before the millennium so that it ushers in the period of 1,000 literal years. There are three important variations of this school of thought. First, *historic* premillennialism holds that Jesus' coming will inaugurate His one 1,000-year reign on the earth and that His millennial kingdom will include all of God's people, both Jews and Gentiles. However, before Jesus returns to initiate His millennial kingdom, Christians will experience the final tribulation brought on by the Antichrist. This particular view is called posttribulationism (that Jesus will come *after* the final tribulation).

Second, *dispensational* premillennialism holds that Christians will be raptured out of the earth to heaven before the final tribulation of the Antichrist, thereby escaping that tribulation (called pre-tribulationism). During the next brief period, usually understood as seven years, the Antichrist makes his appearance, and the Jews are converted to Christianity and evangelize the world until Jesus returns and deals a death blow to the Antichrist and establishes His millennial kingdom in which Jews rule the world. Most dispensationalists believe the pre-tribulation believers remain in heaven during the millennium, but others place them on the earth instead. This is the most popular view of the millennium among modern Protestant Christians.

Finally, what may be called *new* premillennialism holds that all faithful Christians will reign in heaven, where they judge the wicked, all of whom were left dead by the Second Coming of Jesus. Only Satan and his wicked angels are living on the earth at this time, to contemplate all the misery that they have caused by the introduction of sin to the universe. At the end of the millennium, all

of heaven comes down to the earth, where all the lost are resurrected to face the final judgment, after which they, including Satan and his angels, are destroyed in the lake of fire.

Historic premillennialism was the prevailing view during the second and third centuries of Christianity. But the forces mentioned under “Amillennialism” above weakened this position and led to the adoption of amillennialism under Augustine. Premillennialism never disappeared and made its way back during the late Medieval Period and was generally accepted by the sixteenth Protestant Reformers.

Different Views Evaluated

With respect to amillennialism, it is difficult to believe that Satan and his demonic forces have yet been bound to any degree. Also, we will see that Revelation 20 is filled with a mixture of symbolic and literal language, so without any good reason to believe that the period of 1,000 years is symbolic, it is best to take it literally. Finally, the idea that Jesus is reigning through His church on earth right now seems to stretch credibility because the world seems to be getting progressively more wicked, not more righteous.

The most common passage used to defend amillennialism is Daniel 2. In that prophecy, four world kingdoms are followed by a period of political division and then by the so-called Stone Kingdom (Daniel 2:36-45). The Stone Kingdom, which becomes a mountain and fills the whole earth, is identified as God’s everlasting kingdom (2:44). The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches interpret this Stone Kingdom as God’s kingdom of *grace* in which He rules through the influence of the Church, which gradually takes over (“fills”, v. 35).

The Stone Kingdom cannot be the kingdom of grace for three reasons. First, Daniel 2:34 says that the stone was “cut out without hands.” According to II Corinthians 5:1 and Hebrews 9:24, the phrase “without hands” refers to something done by God without human involvement. Since the kingdom of grace reigns through the Church, the Stone Kingdom cannot be that kingdom. Second, the Stone struck the image of the man in the prophetic vision in his feet (Daniel 2:34), which represents the period of political division (2:41-43). Yet the kingdom of grace began in the first century A.D. when Jesus came and declared that the kingdom is here and in you (Matthew 4:17; Luke 17:21). Since this was during the fourth kingdom (Rome), represented by the legs, the Stone kingdom cannot be God’s kingdom in Daniel 2. Finally, the Stone kingdom will destroy and replace all human kingdoms (Daniel 2:35, 44). But the kingdom of grace coexists with human kingdoms. The Stone Kingdom must therefore represent Jesus’ kingdom of *glory* rather than of grace, which makes its coming the Second Coming of Jesus. We would also add that it is impossible to see how Satan could be bound today, for Revelation 20:2-3 says his being bound was to prevent him from deceiving the nations. Yet he is certainly deceiving people today. Therefore, for all these reasons, we must reject amillennialism.

Regarding postmillennialism, its view of human nature is also far too optimistic to be consistent with Scripture, which teaches that the *heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked* (Jeremiah 17:9). Every aspect of Biblical eschatology screams that the world's only salvation is sudden divine intervention in which man will have no direct part.

From a purely theological perspective, premillennialism appears to be the most attractive interpretation. However, we must allow the Bible to speak for itself to see if this is what it teaches, and if so, which type of premillennialism. Therefore, we turn now to the book of Revelation.

Second Coming of Jesus

Before turning to Revelation 20, the millennium chapter itself, let us notice its context in Revelation 19:11-21. Like nearly all scholars, we agree that the event described there is the Second Coming of Jesus. First, a leader on a white horse said to be making war (v. 11) is Jesus because He is called (1) *The Word of God* (v. 13; cf. John 1:1, 14) and (2) the *KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS* (v. 16). Second, verse 15 says that He *will rule them [nations] with a rod of iron*, which is a reference to the iron end of a shepherd's rod that he uses to attack wild animals that attack his flock (Psalms 2:9). So this is not ruling the nations as a king reigns over a nation but as defeating His enemies. Third, verse 15's reference to treading a winepress of God's wrath points back to Revelation 14:14-20, which refers to Jesus reaping the harvest of the saved and the lost at His Second Coming. Therefore, the event in Revelation 19:11-21 is the Second Coming of Jesus.

The Millennium Itself

Where Everyone is During the Millennium

The description of the millennium here in chapter 20 immediately follows the account of the destruction of the wicked at the Second Coming of Jesus given in 19:11-21. But what is the relationship of the millennium to the Second Coming? Near the end of chapter 19, verse 20 describes the capture and punishment of the beast and the false prophet. But Revelation 16:13 tells us that there will be an unholy trinity consisting of the beast, the false prophet, *and the dragon*. By telling us what happens *only* to the beast and the false prophet in chapter 19, the story is incomplete. However, the opening verses of chapter 20 describe the fate of the *dragon*, who is explicitly called Satan. Therefore, the millennium described in chapter 20 continues the story begun in chapter 19, so that we know the millennium begins at the Second Coming of Jesus. In this way, premillennialism is established as the correct interpretation because Jesus' return will occur *before* the millennium.

Note that Revelation 20:4 portrays the righteous as reigning with Jesus on thrones during the millennium: *And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them.*

Specifically, two groups of the righteous are mentioned later in the same verse, martyrs and those who refused the mark of the beast. We know that these are two separate groups because the Greek text (although not all English translations) contains the word for *and* between their descriptions. But this does not mean that they are the only two groups of righteous who are reigning with Jesus during this time. First, verses 5-6 refer to a first resurrection and a resurrection after the millennium, which is followed by the second death for those who were raised in what is implicitly the second resurrection (the one after the millennium). Because the second resurrection and subsequent second death include only the wicked, then all those raised in the first resurrection at the Second Coming of Jesus must include *all* the righteous. Thus, all the righteous must be with Him during the millennium. This, of course, is in perfect harmony with the testimony of other Scriptures, notably Matthew 24:31 and I Thessalonians 4:16-17, that all the righteous are gathered to be with Jesus at the Second Coming. Second, when Revelation 20:1-3 refers to the binding of Satan, this must include all of his wicked angels even though they are not specifically mentioned. Thus, Satan represents all of the wicked angels. In the same way, the martyrs and those who refused the mark of the beast represent all of the righteous. Undoubtedly, they are the ones specifically named because their experiences of persecution make their reigning in *judgment* on the wicked an excellent example of poetic justice.

If all the righteous are with Christ, where are they located? In other words, do the events of the millennium occur on the earth, as amillennialists, postmillennialists, and most premillennialists teach, or in heaven? Passages like I Thessalonians 4:16-17 teach that all the righteous will be taken to heaven with the Lord at the Second Coming. This teaching strongly suggests that they must be located in heaven during the millennium. But is there any evidence for this position in Revelation, which speaks explicitly about that period of one thousand years? First, the Greek word for *throne* or *thrones* occurs more than 40 times in the book of Revelation. Excluding Revelation 20:4 for the moment, all but three of them are associated with God and are clearly located by the context in heaven. The only mention of thrones not associated with God are to Satan's throne (2:13) and the beast's throne (13:2; 16:10), which obviously are the thrones of God's enemies. Therefore, because the millennial thrones in 20:4 are associated with God, these thrones must be in heaven.

Second, the *beloved city* associated with the camp of the saints (v. 9) is the New Jerusalem (cf. 21:2), which comes down from heaven at the end of the millennium. This indicates that the saints are actually in heaven during the millennium and do not appear on the earth until the close of that period. Often, although not always, expositors interpret the *beloved city* as Old Jerusalem and cite this as evidence that either Christian saints or the Jews are reigning on the earth. But note that while the expression *beloved city* does not appear in Revelation outside 20:9, the related term *holy city* occurs four times in the book—see 11:2; 21:2; 21:10 (in the Greek text); and 22:19. The last three occurrences of *holy city* obviously refer to the New Jerusalem. The reference in 11:2 is not a literal city at all because it is used as an equivalent to the court of the temple, thus symbolically representing God's people who are persecuted. In addition, Revelation 3:12 calls the New

Jerusalem *the city of My God*. Because this *city* is singular, it means that it *alone* is God's city in the book of Revelation. Therefore, the *beloved city* of 20:9 is the New Jerusalem, which literally does not come down to earth from heaven until the end of the millennium (21:1-4). In this way, it is clear that the righteous must be with Jesus in heaven during the millennium.

Only the new earth will be fit for the New Jerusalem, and the earth cannot be made into the new earth until after the Great White Throne Judgment and the subsequent execution of its sentences have rid the planet of sin forever (20:11-15). The fact that the destruction of the wicked is presented in 20:9-10 before the Great White Throne Judgment (20:11-15) and before the New Jerusalem is seen in vision coming down from heaven to earth (21:1-2) indicates that the events recorded in Revelation 20:1-21:8 are not all presented in chronological order. However, as with the timing of the coming down of the New Jerusalem from heaven to earth, the chronological order of the entire passage can be easily determined by the necessity of that which must occur before another thing can happen.

Conditions and Events During the Millennium

Now we are ready to more fully examine the conditions and events during the millennium as described in Revelation 20. We will examine the conditions on earth and then in heaven, respectively.

Satan is Bound

At the beginning of the millennium, Revelation 20:1 describes an angel *coming down from heaven with the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain*. He binds Satan (and implicitly his angels with him) with the chain and casts him into *the bottomless pit* for the entire period of the millennium (vv. 2-3). The purpose for this action is so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. Then he must be released for a little while (v. 3).

In what way will Satan be bound during the millennium? Notice that the purpose for his binding is **so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished**. But after these things *he must be released for a little while* (verse 3). We have already discovered that the living wicked at the time of Jesus' return will be destroyed; the wicked who had died before the Second Coming will remain in their graves; and all of the righteous have ascended to heaven. Thus, there is no one alive on the earth for Satan and his demons to tempt and deceive until the end of the millennium, when the wicked dead are raised in the second resurrection (vv.5-8). Therefore, Satan will be bound by a figurative *chain* of circumstances in which he will have no one to deceive during the millennium.

The *bottomless pit* (vv. and 3) to which he will be assigned is the earth, has been made desolate and void of life and beauty by the destructive forces unleashed by the Second Coming of Jesus (19:17-21). The Greek word which is translated as *bottomless pit* is the same Greek word used by

the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, to translate the word *deep* in Genesis 1:2. That same text further describes the earth's condition before the first day of Creation week as *without form and void*—which makes the term *bottomless pit* a perfect description of the earth during the millennium.

It also echoes the Hebrew annual holy day of Yom Kippur, or Day of Atonement, which came near the end of the religious year. See Leviticus 16. After the people of Israel, and the sanctuary, had been cleansed of sin, the sins were symbolically transferred to a scapegoat, which was then led into the wilderness (vv. 8-10, 20-22). At the beginning of the millennium, Satan is seen as the culprit who had caused God's faithful people to sin in the past, and he is confined to a desolate earth, the proverbial wilderness. But unlike the scapegoat, who could not think, Satan will be given one thousand years in which to contemplate all the sin and ruin he has caused on earth.

The Righteous Sit in Judgment

Verse 4 states in part that *I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them....And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years*. First, it is obvious that they are not ruling the wicked because the wicked are all dead. The reigning with Christ (in heaven), then, is a reign involving some type of judgment. Although Daniel 7 is not describing the same judgment as Revelation 20, note that its judgment scene also contains thrones. In that scene books are examined, thus making it a courtroom event (Daniel 7:9-10). The judgment in heaven during the millennium undoubtedly is also a courtroom event involving records because the actual final punishment of the wicked does not occur until after the millennium (Revelation 20:7-15).

Second, the reference to a judgment cannot mean the judgment which determines who will be saved and who will be lost eternally because Jesus will have made those decisions before He returns to earth at His Second Coming. See Revelation 22:12. The only other time that Scripture explicitly speaks of God's people judging the wicked is in I Corinthians 6:2-3, where it is asked, *Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?...Do you not know that we shall judge angels?* So what will the righteous be doing in judgment on the wicked? Although Scripture does not *explicitly* give us the answer to that question, two reasonable answers are apparent: (1) The righteous will be examining the records to satisfy themselves in particular cases that God has been completely fair and just in His decisions. It would be natural that the saved would have questions about certain loved ones and friends who are not with them in heaven. And even though God does not have to answer to us, His love has already proven to move Him to do much more than He ever would *have* to do. (2) The righteous may be helping to determine the degree of punishment in individual cases. Does the person whose primary guilt was a refusal to accept God's plan of salvation deserve the same degree of punishment as the one who took great satisfaction in inflicting suffering on others? In His parable of the faithful servant and the evil servant (Luke 12:35-48), in the very context of discussing punishment at the end-time, Jesus declared the following principle:

And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more (Luke 12:47-48).

Events After the Millennium

Revelation 20:5 declares *that the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. The rest of the dead* must refer to those who were not resurrected in the first resurrection at the Second Coming of Jesus, which means all the wicked. It is evident from verses 7-9 that the wicked are raised to life at the end of the millennium. Since the *first resurrection* involved the righteous, and verses 6 and 14 speak of the *second death* (applied to the wicked), then the resurrection of the wicked must be the *second resurrection*. These two resurrections, separated by the millennium, will be the fulfillment of Christ's statement that there will be *the resurrection of life* and *the resurrection of condemnation* (John 5:28-29). This resurrection of the wicked will release Satan from his binding because once again he has people to tempt and deceive.

Jesus and the righteous saved will descend with the New Jerusalem from heaven to the earth. After the wicked dead are raised in the second resurrection, Satan will lead them to surround the city in order to attack the righteous and take the city (Revelation 20:7-9). By this attempt, it will be proven to the universe that the wicked have not changed and would never change their character.

Before the wicked can attack the city, God will interrupt them with the Great White Throne Judgment scene, during which the wicked will stand before God to stand accountable for what they have done. Then it will be made painfully clear by heaven's record books why each one has been lost (vv. 11-13). Thus will be fulfilled the prediction that everyone will eventually appear before the judgment seat and acknowledge that Jesus is Lord (Romans 14:10-11; Philippians 2:10-11). Compare Jude 15, where it is stated that *the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds*. The Greek word for *convict* means *to fully convict or reprove*. In the context of Jude, one hardly could understand the execution of judgment as being to *fully reprove* the wicked. Therefore, the thought seems to be that before their execution, the wicked will be fully *convicted* of their guilt.

Finally, the wicked are cast into the lake of fire, which is called the second death because there will be no resurrection from it (Revelation 20:14). See our paper entitled "Hell: The Final Punishment of the Wicked" for a description of hell. Death and Hades are also cast into hell (v. 14). Obviously, death and the grave cannot literally be cast into hell because they are not physical entities. However, by this figurative language we know that death and the grave will be no more part of anyone's existence, for the former things will have passed away (Revelation 21:4).

Then John says in Revelation 21:1 that he saw *a new heaven and a new earth*. The Greek word for *heaven* essentially means that which is *elevated* and can mean the sky, the starry heavens, or heaven as God's dwelling place, depending upon the context. Here it is probably limited in scope to the atmosphere around the earth, although anywhere sin has touched will have to be destroyed. This verse speaks of a *new* heaven and a *new* earth. The Greek word for *new* in each case is a word that normally refers to something that is new in *quality* rather than in *time*. The same Greek word occurs twice in II Peter 3:13, which discusses the same event. These passages seem to echo Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22. In the Old Testament Hebrew, the word for *heaven* always appears in its plural form of *heavens* (but not always translated in that way), even when it refers to the atmospheric heaven around the earth (singular). It is probably this Hebrew thinking that prompted the apostle Peter to use the Greek plural heavens in II Peter 3:10, 12-13. The point of the particular Greek word for *new* probably refers to a transformation of this earth rather than to a completely new, later earth being created *ex nihilo* (Latin for "out of nothing").

Jesus once promised that *the meek...shall inherit the earth* (Matthew 5:5). Immediately following the destruction of the wicked in Revelation 20:14-15, the very next verse says that *John saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away* (Revelation 21:1). Therefore, at the very end of the millennium, God will completely renew the earth and make it the new capital of the universe (because His city, the New Jerusalem, comes from heaven to earth also. Then God's faithful people will live on this earth with the Triune God throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity. What a glorious thought!

Revelation 21:1 also declares that *there was no more sea*. On the basis of Isaiah 57:20, Revelation 13:1 (cf. Revelation 17:15), we may view the sea here as the source of evil and strife. It is certainly true that there will be no more sources of evil or strife in the new earth. However, given that the immediate context is a new heaven and a new earth, which are literal entities, we should probably understand the reference to *sea* as also literal. Undoubtedly, water will still exist on top of the earth, but apparently not in such large quantities as they do now, covering at least 70 percent of the earth's surface.

Remaining Issues

Verse 8 says that Satan will gather *Gog and Magog* for the last battle against God and his city. Who are Gog and Magog? Gog and Magog represent the leader (Gog) and his land (Magog) whose defeat was predicted in Ezekiel 38-39. Their actual identities are not known, which makes them good symbols to represent all of the wicked at the last battle. All we know is that wicked will be a vast number, for verse 8 declares their *number is as the sand of the sea*.

Summary of the Relationship between the Second Coming and the Millennium

Beginning of the Millennium

- Second Coming of Jesus occurs
- Righteous Dead are Resurrected
- All the Living Wicked are Destroyed

During the Millennium

- No one Alive on Earth except Satan and his Angels
- Righteous are Reigning in Judgment with Jesus in Heaven

At the End of the Millennium

- Jesus Returns to Earth with His Angels, the Righteous, and the New Jerusalem
- Wicked are Resurrected
- Wicked Attempt to Attack the Saints and the New Jerusalem
- Great White Throne Judgment Interrupts the Attempted Attack
- Final Destruction of the Wicked
- Earth and Atmosphere Restored as New Earth and New Heaven