

**LIVING AND REIGNING  
WITH CHRIST:  
AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF REV. 20:1-6**

**Rev. Thomas C. Messer  
Peace Lutheran Church  
Alma, Michigan**

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### TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| INTRODUCTION.....                             | 1  |
| THE MILLENNIUM: FOUR VIEWS.....               | 3  |
| 1. Historic Premillennialism.....             | 3  |
| 2. Dispensational Premillennialism.....       | 6  |
| 3. Postmillennialism.....                     | 11 |
| 4. Amillennialism.....                        | 12 |
| AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF REVELATION 20:1-6..... | 14 |
| 1. Translation.....                           | 14 |
| 2. Textual Notes.....                         | 15 |
| THE CHRONOLOGICAL QUESTION.....               | 18 |
| VERSE BY VERSE COMMENTARY.....                | 21 |
| Verse 1.....                                  | 21 |
| Verses 2-3b.....                              | 23 |
| When Does This Event Take Place? .....        | 23 |
| To What Extent is Satan Bound? .....          | 25 |
| To What Do the Thousand Years Refer? .....    | 29 |
| Verse 3c.....                                 | 35 |
| Verses 4 and 5b.....                          | 42 |
| Verse 5a.....                                 | 51 |
| Verse 6.....                                  | 53 |
| CONCLUSION.....                               | 57 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY.....                             | 60 |

*Scripture quotations outside of the book of Revelation are from the English Standard Version (ESV)*

## INTRODUCTION

First one, then another cried out when they realized their seatmates were missing but that their clothes were still there. They cried, they screamed, they leaped from their seats. Hattie grabbed Rayford from behind and wrapped her hands so tight around his chest that he could hardly breathe. “Rayford, what is this?”<sup>1</sup>

The above is an excerpt from *Left Behind*, the best-selling book that spawned a series of books, movies, and other materials, which have captured the attention of millions of Christians. This particular scene takes place on an airplane. Rayford is the pilot of the plane and Hattie is a flight attendant. They are forced to deal with the mass confusion and mayhem that occurs when hundreds of passengers just vanish into thin air. Those who remain are horrified. Where did the people go? What could possibly explain the sudden and simultaneous disappearance of hundreds of people? These people do not realize that what has just occurred is the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. The people who vanished were Christians. Christ has just raptured His Church and the End Times have begun!

It may seem odd to begin an exegetical study of Revelation 20:1-6 with an excerpt from a fictional book. But, the inclusion of this scene from *Left Behind* is justified because, while the authors admit their books are fictional, they claim that they represent the actual fulfillment of biblical prophecy. These are fictional accounts of what will actually take place in the future. Furthermore, this inclusion is justified because millions of Christians are reading this ongoing series and a great many have come to believe that these books represent what Scripture teaches regarding the End Times. These people do not realize that these books follow a completely false system of theology called dispensational premillennialism (see below). A major reason for the development of this false theology is a faulty interpretation of Rev. 20:1-6.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1995), 18.

It is the purpose of this exegetical study to uncover the truth of this passage. The motivation behind this study is the belief that there is only one correct interpretation. Furthermore, this study will be capable of making absolute claims regarding this passage, because this study will show that these claims are made by God's Word. This study follows the essential hermeneutical principle that Scripture must interpret Scripture. It is impossible to interpret Rev. 20:1-6 without adhering to this principle. The abandonment of this principle has led many to misinterpret this passage throughout the years. Theologians have continuously made the mistake of trying to interpret this passage on its own, which has made it impossible for them to see the truth that is so evident.

With all of that said, I do not want to leave the reader with the impression that this is a simple passage to interpret. To be sure, this is a difficult passage to interpret, which is evident from the numerous interpretations theologians have arrived at throughout history. However, when one realizes that this passage must be interpreted both within the broader context of the book of Revelation and within the broader context of Scripture as a whole, the interpretive task is made much easier, and the truth of this passage becomes very clear.

With all of that said, this exegetical study will prove that the "thousand years" of Revelation 20 is not literal, but figurative, referring to the entire New Testament era, in which believers in Jesus Christ live and reign with Him. With Scripture as my guide, I will show how this passage reveals the present, blessed reality that all believers in Jesus Christ share. This study will also remove any confusion regarding the seemingly odd things found in this passage, such as the "binding of Satan," the "first resurrection," and the "second death." In the end, this study will show how all of the features of this passage are easily explained when Scripture is made the

interpretive source. Before commencing with the study, a brief survey of the four major teachings regarding the “thousand years” of Rev. 20 will be helpful in setting the stage.

## **THE MILLENNIUM: FOUR VIEWS**

Revelation 20:1-6 is one of the most controversial passages in the bible. The reason for this is the occurrence of the phrase χίλια ἔτη (“thousand years”), which appears six times in Rev. 20:2-7, and only twice outside of Revelation, both in 2 Pet. 3:8. This little phrase has been, and still is, hotly debated among Christian theologians. Do the “thousand years” refer to a literal period of time or a figurative period of time? When does this period of time take place? What happens during the “thousand years”? How does it relate to Christ’s Second Coming? Throughout history, theologians have struggled with how to answer these questions. Their struggles have led to four major, diverse interpretations of the millennium<sup>2</sup>: 1) Historic Premillennialism; 2) Dispensational Premillennialism; 3) Postmillennialism; 4) Amillennialism.<sup>3</sup>

### **1. Historic Premillennialism**

Historic premillennialism receives its title from the undisputed fact that there have been theologians throughout history who interpreted the “thousand years” in Rev. 20 as a literal, one-thousand year, reign of Christ on earth, which will begin at His Second Coming. Christ’s Second Coming will occur before (pre-) the “thousand years” (millennium). According to this view, the chronology of End-Time events is as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> Louis A. Brighton in *Revelation*, (Concordia Commentary; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 533, says, “The word ‘millennium’ is from the Latin *mille* (“one thousand”) and *annus* (“year”). The compound of the two words is ‘millennium,’ ‘a thousand-year period.’ The belief in a literal thousand-year reign of Christ on earth is sometimes referred to as chiliasm, which is from the Greek word for ‘thousand’ (χίλια).”

<sup>3</sup> What follows here is a very brief summary of these four major teachings. For a thorough representation of these four teachings, see Robert G. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1977).

1. The “binding of Satan” and the “first resurrection” of believers occurs at Christ’s Second Coming, which is His visible, glorious descent from heaven to earth.
2. Christ and His Church (consisting of all believers, both Jews and Gentiles) reign gloriously over the unbelieving nations still on earth for one thousand years. This will be a time of peace and prosperity, in which sin and evil is restrained, though not eliminated.
3. Satan is released for his “little season” to deceive people and to lead the unbelieving nations in a final assault against Christ and His Church.
4. Christ and His Church are victorious over Satan’s assault and Satan is cast into the “lake of fire.”
5. The “second resurrection” occurs, consisting of all dead unbelievers.<sup>4</sup>
6. The Great White Throne Judgment takes place, in which all people of all time receive their final judgment. Unbelievers are cast into the “lake of fire” to suffer eternal punishment; believers are granted access into the eternal kingdom to enjoy eternal peace, comfort, and glory.
7. The “new heavens and earth” are created, which is the glorious eternal kingdom where believers dwell with the Lord in paradise.

Historic premillennialism has drawn much attention over the years because it was the view held by numerous early church fathers. Indeed, one cannot escape the fact that early church fathers such as Papias (ca. 60-ca. 130), Melito of Sardis (died ca. 180), Irenaeus (ca. 130-ca. 200), Hippolytus (ca. 170-ca. 235), Justin Martyr (ca. 100-ca. 165), Tertullian (ca. 160-ca. 225), and others, were premillennialists (or, chiliasts). However, that there were many Fathers who were premillennialists does not mean that this was the uniform, or even prevailing, view of the early church. As Steve Gregg aptly points out:

In his *Dialogue With Trypho*, Justin wrote: I am not so miserable a fellow, Trypho, as to say one thing and think another. I admitted to you formerly, that I and many others are of this opinion (premillennialism), and (believe) that such will take place, as you assuredly

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<sup>4</sup> Historic Premillennialists differ as to the nature of the “second resurrection.” Some hold that only the dead unbelievers will be raised at this time to face the final judgment. Others claim that this refers to the bodily raising of dead unbelievers as well as believers who came to faith and died during the millennium.

are aware; but on the other hand, I signified to you that many who belong to the pure and pious faith, and are true Christians, think otherwise.<sup>5</sup>

Gregg rightly concludes from this quote, “It is clear that there were ‘many’ whom Justin regarded as ‘true Christians’ and ‘who belong to the pure and pious faith’ who did not hold to his premillennialism.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, to conclude, as many premillennialists today do, that the early church was uniformly premillennial in thinking is simply untrue.

Furthermore, the fact that some of the prominent early church fathers were premillennialists does not make this view correct. We should not be enticed to follow the early church fathers merely because they lived in the first couple centuries A.D. Instead, we need to analyze their views and determine whether or not they are true to Scripture. Besides, there is good evidence that an “apocalyptic fever” had erupted in the late first century A.D. due largely to the influence of Jewish and Jewish-Christian pseudepigraphal literature that was circulating at the time. Many of these writings were apocalyptic in nature and some of them reveal that a Jewish millennial tradition had arisen.<sup>7</sup> The early church fathers were no doubt influenced by these writings and traditions, which probably accounts for their premillennial views. Brighton provides support for this argument by quoting the church historian Eusebius (ca. 260-ca. 340), who provides an explanation for how Papias arrived at his premillennial understanding:

Eusebius says that this belief came to Papias “through unwritten tradition” about “mystical things” and “through a misunderstanding of the apostolic accounts, not perceiving that the things said by them were spoken mystically in figures. For he appears to have been of very limited understanding . . . But it was due to him that so many of the Church Fathers after him adopted a like opinion.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Steve Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views – A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 29.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> For a good summary of Jewish millennial views, see Brighton, *Revelation*, 534-536.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 536.

Accepting the above argument, it is easy to see why theologians began to reject premillennialism once the “apocalyptic fever” began to die down at the close of the second century. Brighton notes, “In the third century the church began to turn away from a premillennial interpretation and increasingly espoused what today would be called amillennialism.”<sup>9</sup> Church fathers that rejected millennialism and interpreted the thousand years of Rev. 20 either symbolically, metaphorically, or allegorically, include Origen (185-254), Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-ca. 213), Tyconius (died ca. 400), Augustine (354-430), Jerome (ca. 342-420), Primasius (sixth century), Alcuin (ca. 735-804), Cassiodorus (ca. 490-ca. 585), and others.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Dispensational Premillennialism

Dispensational premillennialists are in agreement with Historical Premillennialists in interpreting the thousand years of Rev. 20 literally, believing that Christ will return prior to this literal, thousand-year earthly kingdom. That is where the agreement ends. In fact, dispensational premillennialism (a.k.a., Dispensationalism) is really based on an entirely different system of theology than that of historic premillennialism. Millard J. Erickson explains it this way:

Dispensationalism is more than a view of the relationship of Christ’s coming to the tribulation. It is a whole system of theology, of which eschatology is but one part. Further, it is a method of interpreting the Bible, therefore affecting one’s understanding of even non-doctrinal portions of Scripture.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 537.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed discussion on the various interpretations of the thousand years in Rev. 20 employed by the early church fathers, see Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views*, 28-31, and Brighton, *Revelation*, 534-541.

<sup>11</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1977), 109.



This is the first point that must be made when beginning a summary of dispensational premillennialism, that it is a *system of theology*. While a detailed analysis of this system of theology lies beyond the scope of this paper, the following key points are offered as a summary:

1. Dispensationalists believe that the Scriptures are divided into distinct periods of time called “dispensations,” in which God deals with mankind in different ways. During each dispensation, God provides a specific test for mankind. When mankind fails, God ushers in a new dispensation with a new test. We are currently living in the sixth dispensation, the “dispensation of grace,” in which God is testing mankind’s faith in Jesus. The seventh dispensation will be the millennium.<sup>12</sup>
2. Dispensationalism is based upon three key theological principles: a) The clear distinction between Israel and the church,<sup>13</sup> b) The literal interpretation of Scripture,<sup>14</sup> and c) The emphasis on God’s glory as His underlying purpose in the world.<sup>15</sup>
3. Their three key principles lead dispensationalists to develop a unique and radical eschatology, which will be summarized below.

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<sup>12</sup> C. I. Scofield was the man who popularized dispensationalism during the early twentieth century with his *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909). In his *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia School of the Bible, 1928), which came to be printed within his bible, he defined the dispensations as follows: “The Scriptures divide time, by which is meant the entire period from the creation of Adam to the ‘new heaven and new earth’ of Revelation 21:1, into seven unequal periods, called, usually, ‘Dispensations’ (Eph. 3:2), although these periods are also called ‘ages’ (Eph. 2:7) and ‘days’ – as, ‘day of the Lord’ . . . These periods are marked off in Scripture by some change in God’s method of dealing with mankind, or a portion of mankind, in respect of the two questions of sin and of man’s responsibility. Each of the Dispensations may be regarded as a new test of the natural man, and each ends in judgment – marking his utter failure. Five of these Dispensations, or periods of time, have been fulfilled; we are living in the sixth, probably towards its close, and have before us the seventh, and last – the Millennium.”

<sup>13</sup> This is the *key* to dispensationalism - Israel and the Church are totally distinct and God is working out separate plans for each. Charles C. Ryrie, in *Dispensationalism*, Revised and Edited (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 63, explains, “The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved which is Christianity.”

<sup>14</sup> While dispensationalists do recognize symbolic language in Scripture, they assert that every reference to Israel and every biblical prophecy must be interpreted literally. Every time Scripture mentions “Israel” (or any analogous term, such as “house of Jacob,” et. al.), it means literal, national Israel, and never the Church. Likewise, every prophecy in Scripture will be fulfilled in the literal way it is described. Erickson notes, “If the Bible says that Christ, having descended, will stand upon the Mount of Olives and that the mountain will split, then Christ will literally stand upon the literal mountain and the mountain will literally split” (*Contemporary Options*, 116).

<sup>15</sup> God’s plan of redemption through Jesus Christ is only one of many ways He reveals His glory throughout history. As Ryrie points out, “To the normative dispensationalist, the soteriological, or saving, program of God is not the only program but one of the means God is using in the total program of glorifying Himself. Scripture is not man-centered as though salvation were the main theme, but it is God-centered because His glory is the center” (*Dispensationalism*, 40).

In sum, dispensationalism is a unique system of theology that differs completely from historic Christian theology, for it teaches multiple plans of salvation and relegates the work of Christ to a minimal position. It teaches that justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, was not the original plan of God. Christ came to earth to establish His glorious earthly kingdom among the Jews. But, the Jews rejected Him, so God sent Christ to the cross in order to establish a new people for himself, i.e., the church. However, God will remain faithful to the promises He made to the Jews and will reestablish His relationship with them when Christ returns. Meanwhile, the current church age is a “parenthesis” in God’s plan. It is like a “time out.” God has temporarily stopped the “prophetic clock” from ticking and will not start the clock again until Christ returns. Thus, the return of Christ at the End is primarily for the Jews, not for Christians. The dispensational chronology of End-Time events is as follows:

1. The Rapture: This will be the first “phase” of Christ’s Second Coming, in which He will secretly remove all Christians from the earth in an instant.<sup>16</sup> The Rapture is the “first resurrection.” All dead believers will be resurrected and all believers who are raptured will receive their glorified bodies, as they are changed “in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor. 15:51-52). It is also the first “phase” of the “first judgment,” called the “Believer’s Judgment,” in which all believers are rewarded according to their faithful service during their earthly lives. Now that the church has been removed, the “prophetic clock” will start ticking again, as God resumes His plan for the Jews.
2. The Seven Year Tribulation: Soon after the Rapture, this literal, seven year period of tribulation will commence when the Antichrist appears on the scene and confirms a covenant with many for “one week” (seven years).<sup>17</sup> It is called the Tribulation

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<sup>16</sup> This theory of the rapture of the church was invented in the early nineteenth century under the direction of John Nelson Darby, a leader in the Plymouth Brethren movement. The key text for the doctrine of the rapture is 1 Thess. 4:13-18. In this passage, dispensationalists believe Paul is describing a secret “snatching away” (from the Greek word, ἀρπάζω, translated in Latin as *rapere*, which is where the English “rapture” comes from) of the Christian church from the earth so that God may resume His plan for the Jews. As we discussed above, the dispensationalist believes that God is working out two plans for two separate people, the Jews and the church. God will remove His heavenly people from the earth so that He can resume His plan for the Jews, which was put on hold at the first advent of Christ.

<sup>17</sup> Dispensationalists base their belief in the Tribulation on their interpretation of Dan. 9:24-27, which is the famous prophecy of the “seventy weeks.” Tim LaHaye, in *Understanding the Last Days: The Keys to Unlocking Bible Prophecy* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1998), 46, offers the standard Dispensational interpretation of this passage: “In this vision the prophet was told that ‘70 weeks’ (or 70 ‘heptads,’ meaning 70 times 7 weeks of years, for a total of 490 years) were ‘determined for your people [the Jews] and the Holy City.’ He then lists three

because during this period God will send many judgments upon the earth, resulting in great pain and suffering, and because the Antichrist will bring a reign of terror upon the earth, especially during the last 3 ½ years, which is called the “Great Tribulation.” To battle the Antichrist, God will raise up 144,000 literal Jews (Rev. 7), who will spread His Gospel of the Kingdom throughout the world. Those who heed the message of these Jews and refuse to worship the Antichrist will be saved.<sup>18</sup>

3. The Glorious Appearing: When the seven-years have transpired, Christ will return visibly to the earth (the second “phase” of His Second Coming), along with His saints and the angels. He will judge (the “second judgment”) those who inhabit the earth and divide the “sheep” from the “goats” (Matt. 25:31-36) and those who are found worthy will enter into the millennial kingdom and Christ will be their Ruler. Those who are found unworthy will be slain and their souls will be cast into the lake of fire. The second “phase” of the “first resurrection” takes place at this time as well, which consists of the resurrection or transformation of all those who accepted the Gospel of the Kingdom during the Tribulation and were put to death.
4. The Binding of Satan: Like historic premillennialists, dispensationalists believe that Satan will be bound immediately preceding the millennium.
5. The Millennium: The one thousand year reign of Christ on earth. Like historic premillennialists, dispensationalists see this period as one of peace and prosperity, where sin and evil are restrained. However, the manner of Christ’s rule during the millennial kingdom is much different in the dispensational scheme. The millennial kingdom is decidedly Jewish in nature. Historic premillennialists see this period as a time when Christ and His Church rule; dispensationalists claim that it is Christ and the Jews who rule. In their view, the Church hovers over Jerusalem, while the Jews occupy the earth with Christ and share in His reign.<sup>19</sup>

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periods of time, beginning with ‘seven weeks [or 49 years] from the going forth of the command to restore and rebuild Jerusalem’ (which is described in the book of Ezra and Nehemiah as the time when the walls and the temple were rebuilt). The second period was ‘62 weeks’ (or 434 years) until ‘Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself.’ (This is an obvious reference to the period from the rededication of the temple to the crucifixion of Jesus the Messiah). That leaves one heptad (seven-year period) of tribulation for the Jews that has never been fulfilled.”

<sup>18</sup> The judgments that God hurls upon the earth during this seven year Tribulation are the three sevenfold judgments in Revelation (seals, trumpets, bowls). These judgments are interpreted literally and will occur exactly as Revelation depicts them in chronological order. In fact, according to dispensationalists, Rev. 4-5 describes the Rapture, Rev. 6-19 describes the chronological and literal depiction of the Tribulation, and Rev. 20-22 describes the Millennium and Eternal Kingdom. Thus, the book of Revelation is a chronological and literal record of the End Time events.

<sup>19</sup> Clarence B. Bass, in *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 43, describes the dispensational view of the millennium: “The millennium is to be a literal fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy; therefore its government will be theocratic. Christ will have a physical throne upon which He sits to rule over the nations, with David as His regent. National distinctions will continue, with the seat of government in Jerusalem. All nations of the earth will be subservient to Israel, since the regathered tribes of Israel will be the center of all things.”

6. The Loosing of Satan: Satan is released for his “little season” to deceive people and to lead the unbelieving nations in a final assault against Christ and His Church.
7. The “Second Resurrection” and the “Third and Final Judgment (Great White Throne): Christ defeats Satan and throws him into the “lake of fire.” The dead unbelievers are raised (“second resurrection”), judged, and thrown into the “lake of fire.” Those who came to faith during the millennium will have their bodies transformed (part of the “second resurrection”) and will be permitted to enter into the glorious, eternal kingdom with the rest of the saints.
8. The “new heavens and earth” are created, which is the glorious eternal kingdom where believers dwell with the Lord in paradise. At this time, God’s two plans will both finally come to ultimate fulfillment and the distinction between Israel and the Church will be erased, as both dwell with the Lord forever in paradise.

I realize that this summary of dispensational eschatology barely scratches the surface.<sup>20</sup>

Hopefully it provides the reader with enough of an overview to gain a preliminary understanding of the system. Once one understands the material principle<sup>21</sup> of dispensationalism, i.e., God is working out two distinct plans (one for the Jews, the other for the Church), one will have little trouble grasping their eschatology, for it is driven solely by this principle. It is also this material principle that makes dispensationalism absolutely unacceptable from a Lutheran perspective, “because it does not see all of Scripture and all of salvation history as a unity centered in the person and redemptive work of Jesus Christ, and it extends false hopes of other means of salvation.”<sup>22</sup> The cross of Jesus Christ is but one means of salvation in dispensationalism, which makes it a heresy.

In sum, while both of the premillennial positions presented above have some similarities, in the end they are completely different. Historic premillennialism is based on historic Christian

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<sup>20</sup> What has been presented here is the “pre-tribulation rapture” schema, which the majority of Dispensationalists adhere to. The other two, less common schemas are the “mid-tribulation rapture” theory (Christ raptures His church after the first 3 ½ years of the seven year Tribulation) and the “post-tribulation rapture” theory (Christ raptures His church after the seven year Tribulation). The timing of the rapture is the only essential difference between these three views.

<sup>21</sup> The material principle is the central theme/purpose that underlies a theological system.

<sup>22</sup> Brighton, *Revelation*, 540 (footnote 36).

theology, but with a faulty interpretation of the thousand years, while dispensationalism is based on an entirely new and different system of theology that is not in line with historic Christian theology at all.

### 3. Postmillennialism

The following summary of postmillennialism is provided by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (CTCR-LCMS):

In contrast to the above [premillennial views], the less common postmillennial view places Christ's second advent *after* (post) the millennium. Only then will the rapture, the general resurrection, the general judgment, and the eternal states occur. The millennium is not understood to involve a visible reign of Christ in the form of an earthly monarchy, nor is the millennial period to be taken literally as necessarily 1000 years long. In these respects, postmillennialism corresponds closely to the amillennialist position.

But the postmillennial view does posit a recognizable millennial period, a golden age of prosperity and peace among all at the end of which Christ will return. The millennium will arrive gradually under the increasing influence of Christianity, leading to the pervasive reduction of evil and to greatly improved conditions in the social, economic, political, and cultural spheres. In fact, the entire world will eventually be Christianized to the point that the Christian belief and value system will become the accepted norm for all nations. Matthew 28:18-20 will become a reality.<sup>23</sup>

From the above summary, we can posit the following postmillennial chronology of End-

Time events:

1. The Binding of Satan: Satan was bound by Christ at His first advent in His earthly ministry, death, and resurrection. Since Satan has been bound, he can no longer “deceive the nations,” which means that he cannot accuse sinners before God, nor can he prevent the Gospel from going out to all nations. It is because the Gospel can be freely preached to all nations that the gradual Christianization of the world will occur, ushering in the Millennium.
2. The Millennium: The golden age of worldwide Christianity; the “thousand years” is symbolic for this golden age, which will occur gradually as the Christian Church becomes more influential in the world.
3. Satan's “little season”: At the close of the Millennium, Satan will be released for a short time to deceive the nations into making a final assault on the Christian Church.

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<sup>23</sup> A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS), *The End Times: A Study on Eschatology and Millennialism* (September 1989), 6.

4. Christ's Second Coming: The visible and glorious return of Christ on the Last Day. Christ will defeat Satan and cast him into the "lake of fire."
5. The Bodily Resurrection and Final Judgment: When Christ returns, all the dead will be resurrected, those who are living on the earth will be transformed, and the Final Judgment will take place. Unbelievers will be cast into the "lake of fire," and believers will enter into the eternal kingdom.
6. The "new heavens and earth": The eternal kingdom, in which all believers dwell with the Lord in paradise.

The postmillennial view is by far the least prominent view among theologians. It enjoyed a place of prominence in the theological arena during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (due to the Enlightenment), but began to die out early in the twentieth century due, in large part, to World War I (1914-17). From that point on, theologians began to be much less optimistic about the future and postmillennialism has all but disappeared as a major eschatological view, though there are still some who hold to it.<sup>24</sup>

#### **4. Amillennialism**

Amillennialism is the view espoused in this exegetical study. Simply put, this eschatological view sees the "thousand years" as symbolic, referring to the entire New Testament era (from Christ's first advent to His second advent). Christ ushered in the "last days" at His incarnation and, during His earthly ministry, He established His kingdom, i.e., the church. He came to redeem the world from sin and accomplished complete and total victory over sin, death, and the devil by means of His entire redemptive work, culminating in His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. He is now seated at the right hand of God and all authority over heaven and earth is His. He reigns now, and His reign is shared by all believers throughout the millennium, which will continue until He returns in glory on the Last Day.

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<sup>24</sup> For a detailed Postmillennial argument, see Loraine Boettner's chapter, "Postmillennialism," in Gregg, *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 117-141.

The title given to this eschatological view is a little misleading, for it seems to imply that amillennialists reject, or do not believe in, the millennium – no (a-) “thousand years” (millennium). As Brighton notes:

The term “amillennialism” is somewhat of a misnomer, for those who hold this view *do believe in the millennium as it is defined by the Scriptures*, but it is not one that consists of a literal thousand years, nor one in which Christ establishes a visible kingdom here on this fallen earth.<sup>25</sup> (emphasis his)

Amillennialism is the clear teaching of Scripture, as this exegetical study of Rev. 20:1-6 will prove. It is the only eschatological view that maintains a thorough Christological perspective and allows Scripture to interpret Scripture. The amillennial chronology<sup>26</sup> of End-Time events is as follows:

1. The Binding of Satan: Accomplished by the redemptive work of Christ during His first advent, culminating in His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.
2. The Millennium: The entire New Testament era, in which believers in Jesus Christ live and reign with Him.
3. Satan’s “little season”: Just prior to Christ’s Second Coming, Satan will be loosed and permitted to deceive the nations and make one final, futile attack against the Church.
4. Christ’s Second Coming: The visible and glorious return of Christ on the Last Day. Christ will defeat Satan and cast him into the “lake of fire.”
5. The Bodily Resurrection and Final Judgment: When Christ returns, all the dead will be resurrected, those who are living on the earth will be transformed, and the Final Judgment will take place. Unbelievers will be cast into the “lake of fire,” and believers will enter into the eternal kingdom.

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<sup>25</sup> Brighton, *Revelation*, 534 (footnote 6).

<sup>26</sup> Notice the similarities between this chronology and the chronology of Postmillennialism. The only difference between the two views comes in their interpretation of the Millennium. However, this makes all the difference in the world. Postmillennialists view the millennium as a “golden age” of worldwide Christianity; Amillennialists realize that the millennium refers to the entire New Testament era. The Postmillennial view is unacceptable, for it goes against the clear teaching of Scripture that this world will remain a sinful place and that, just prior to Christ’s second advent, things will be exceedingly bad in the world as Satan is loosed for his “little season.” The Christian Church does not look forward to a “golden age” on earth prior to Christ’s second coming, but rather lives under the cross, realizing that worldly suffering will be removed only when Christ appears again.

6. The “new heavens and earth”: The eternal kingdom, in which all believers dwell with the Lord in paradise.

As stated above, this exegetical study will prove that the amillennial view is the only eschatological view that agrees with Scripture. We now turn to the study at hand, beginning with a translation of the text under consideration.

## AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF REVELATION 20:1-6

### 1. Translation

<sup>1</sup>Καὶ εἶδον ἄγγελον καταβαίνοντα ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἔχοντα τὴν κλεῖν τῆς ἀβύσσου καὶ ἄλυσιν μεγάλην ἐπὶ τὴν χεῖρα αὐτοῦ. <sup>2</sup>καὶ ἐκράτησεν τὸν δράκοντα, ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἀρχαῖος, ὃς ἐστὶν Διάβολος καὶ ὁ Σατανᾶς, καὶ ἔδησεν αὐτὸν χίλια ἔτη <sup>3</sup>καὶ ἔβαλεν αὐτὸν εἰς τὴν ἄβυσσον καὶ ἔκλεισεν καὶ ἐσφράγισεν ἐπάνω αὐτοῦ, ἵνα μὴ πλανήσῃ ἔτι τὰ ἔθνη ἄχρι τελεσθῆ τὰ χίλια ἔτη. μετὰ ταῦτα δεῖ λυθῆναι αὐτὸν μικρὸν χρόνον.

<sup>4</sup>Καὶ εἶδον θρόνους καὶ ἐκάθισαν ἐπ’ αὐτοὺς καὶ κρίμα ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς, καὶ τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν πεπελεκισμένων διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ καὶ διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ οἵτινες οὐ προσεκύνησαν τὸ θηρίον οὐδὲ τὴν εἰκόνα αὐτοῦ καὶ οὐκ ἔλαβον τὸ χάραγμα ἐπὶ τὸ μέτωπον καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν χεῖρα αὐτῶν. καὶ ἔζησαν καὶ ἐβασίλευσαν μετὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ χίλια ἔτη. <sup>5</sup>οἱ λοιποὶ τῶν νεκρῶν οὐκ ἔζησαν ἄχρι τελεσθῆ τὰ χίλια ἔτη. Αὕτη ἡ ἀνάστασις ἡ πρώτη. <sup>6</sup>μακάριος καὶ ἅγιος ὁ ἔχων μέρος ἐν τῇ ἀναστάσει τῇ πρώτῃ· ἐπὶ τούτων ὁ δεύτερος θάνατος οὐκ ἔχει ἐξουσίαν, ἀλλ’ ἔσονται ἱερεῖς τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ βασιλεύσουσιν μετ’ αὐτοῦ [τὰ] χίλια ἔτη.

(1) And I saw an Angel coming down out of heaven, having the key of the Abyss and a great chain in His hand. (2) And He took hold of the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and He bound him a thousand years (3) and He threw him into the abyss and closed and sealed (it) upon him, so that he should no longer deceive the nations until the thousand years were brought to completion. After these things, it is necessary for him to be released a short time.

(4) And I saw thrones and they sat upon them and judgment was given to them, and (I saw) the souls of those having been beheaded on account of the witness of Jesus, that is, on account of the word of God, and who did not worship the beast nor his image, and did not receive the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand. And they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (5) The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years were brought to completion. This is the first resurrection. (6) Blessed and holy is the one having part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and they will reign with Him for (the) thousand years.



## 2. Textual Notes

The text is pretty straight forward and free from any major text critical questions. The vocabulary is familiar (with the exception of the participle τῶν πεπελεκισμένων (v. 4), which is the only occurrence of this verb in the New Testament) and the grammar is easily discerned. Thus, what follows is a brief explanation for some of the key words and phrases.

1. τῆς ἀβύσσου (“the abyss”) - “A description of the underworld as a. the ‘place of imprisonment for disobedient spirits’ (Luke 8:31; Rev. 9:1, 2, 11; 11:7; 17:8; 20:1, 3) and b. the ‘realm of the dead’ (Rom. 10:7)” (J. Jeremias, “ἄβυσσος,” *TDNT* 1:9). The abyss is synonymous with “death and Hades” (cf. 1:18, where Christ holds the key). It is the residence proper of fallen angels and unbelievers; it is Hell.
2. ἐκράτησεν . . . ἔδησεν (“He took hold . . . He bound”) – According to BDAG, κρατέω carries the primary meaning of “taking into one’s custody, arresting,” and, correspondingly, δέω can mean “to bind in imprisonment.” These meanings provide us with a better understanding of what is taking place here. The Angel takes Satan into custody and puts him in prison, locking the door, so that he cannot escape. This fits well with 1 Pet. 3:19, where Christ proclaims His victory to the spirits in φυλακή (“prison”), which is another term for “the abyss” (cf. 20:7).

ὁ Σατανᾶς (“Satan”) – Some mss. insert ο πλανῶν την οικουμενην ολην (“the one deceiving the whole world”) after ὁ Σατανᾶς. This was an obvious attempt to harmonize this verse with 12:9 and was almost certainly not part of the original.

ὁ ὄφης ὁ ἀρχαῖος (“the ancient serpent”) - One would expect “the ancient serpent” to be in the accusative case, in apposition to τὸν δράκοντα (“the dragon”). However, it is in the nominative. Brighton suggest two possible explanations for this: 1) It is a Semiticism; 2) “John’s frequent use of the nominative in apposition to an indirect case may be due as much, if not more, to his desire to achieve emphasis.”<sup>27</sup> Both explanations are possible, but I would venture a third, and more probable, explanation, namely, that this is a nominative of appellation. John is using this as a proper name/title to identify the dragon (the devil, Satan).<sup>28</sup> When a proper name or title is used it is often placed in the nominative instead of the case expected. This is John’s style throughout Revelation and is the harder reading,

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<sup>27</sup> Brighton, *Revelation*, 542-543.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. 12:9, where the same title is used. These are the only two occurrences of “the ancient serpent” as a title for Satan in the New Testament, making them the only explicit identifications of Satan as the Serpent in the Garden, though this is made known implicitly throughout the Bible.

which is why NA<sup>27</sup> followed those witnesses who have the nominative (A 1678 1778 2080), instead of those who have the accusative (Ⲡ 046 P most minuscules).<sup>29</sup>

**χίλια ἔτη** (“thousand years”) – This phrase occurs six times in 20:1-7. The only other occurrence of this phrase is in 2 Pet. 3:8, where it occurs twice. This is where the term “millennium” comes from (see “The Millennium: Four Views” above).

3. **ἔβαλεν** (“He threw”) – This is the same verb used in Rev. 12:9, where Satan “was thrown” (ἐβλήθη) out of heaven by Michael and his angels. As the commentary below will show, these two events are parallel.

**ἵνα μὴ πλανήσῃ** (“so that he should not deceive”) – This is a purpose clause, indicating why Satan was bound and thrown into the abyss, namely so that he would be unable to deceive the nations until the thousand years were finished.

**μετὰ ταῦτα** (“after these things”) – This phrase occurs often in Revelation (e.g., 1:19; 4:1; 7:9; 9:12; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1) and in every case the pronoun refers to the preceding events. The same is true here. However, the question is: Which preceding events does ταῦτα refer to here? Some argue that it refers to the binding and imprisonment of Satan, which would mean that his “little season” falls within the “thousand years.” This study follows the majority in taking ταῦτα as referring to the “thousand years,” which places Satan’s “little season” *after* the “thousand years” are finished. This is the natural reading of the text.

**τελεσθῆ** (“were brought to completion”) – This is a divine passive and could very well be translated, “the thousand years were brought to completion *by God*.” God is in total control over history, as Revelation makes very clear throughout. Thus, the “thousand years” will be over when God has carried His plan to completion and not before.

4. **εἶδον** (“I saw”) – A few mss. repeat εἶδον before τὰς ψυχὰς (“the souls”). The context does not require such repetition, for it is understood that τὰς ψυχὰς is the direct object of εἶδον here. It is perfectly legitimate for a verb to have two or more direct objects. For the sake of clarity, I have included a second “I saw” in the above translation, but it is not necessary.

**κρίμα ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς** (“judgment was given to them”) – This is another example of a divine passive (“judgment was given to them *by God*”). See the commentary below for an explanation of who is referred to here and the nature of the judgment given them.

**τῶν πεπελεκισμένων** (“those having been beheaded”) – This is the only occurrence of the verb πελεκίζω in the NT. In this context, it is symbolic for all Christians. As Brighton states, “The varied NT vocabulary for martyrdom indicates that this verb in Rev. 20:4 should not be restricted to a literalistic sense. *All Christians are in view here*. ‘The ones who had been beheaded on account of the witness of Jesus’ epitomize all martyrs of faith . . . regardless of

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<sup>29</sup> See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second Ed., (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1994), 687.

the circumstances of their death . . . and also those who have not yet died physically but who would die for the faith if called upon to do so” (Brighton, *Revelation*, 544).

καὶ διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ (“that is, on account of the Word of God”) – This is an exegetical καί, which equates the “testimony of Jesus” with the “Word of God” – they are one and the same thing.

ἔζησαν (“they lived”) – Commentators are divided as to how to take this verb, which is the aorist indicative active of ζάω. The confusion comes from the fact that ζάω appears 140 times in the NT and can mean different things, depending upon the context. Brighton notes that BAGD gives three primary meanings, “‘to be alive,’ ‘to become alive,’ or even ‘to come back to life’” (Brighton, *Revelation*, 544). The only way to determine its meaning here is by looking at the broader context of Revelation and the NT. The immediate context must be consulted as well, but it is not enough to nail down the meaning here. What the immediate context tells us is that those who “lived and reigned” with Christ a “thousand years” are those who “sat on thrones” and “were beheaded on account of the witness of Jesus” and “did not worship the beast, etc.” We are forced to take these clues and search the Scriptures in order to arrive at a meaning. What we find is that the meaning here is the spiritual “coming to life” of those who are brought to faith in Christ. Brighton is correct when he concludes, “The verb describes all Christians as those who ‘came to life,’ that is, who were given new, spiritual life through baptismal incorporation into Christ and faith in Christ” (Ibid.). The Scriptural support and further explanation for this argument is provided in the commentary below.

5. οἱ λοιποὶ τῶν νεκρῶν οὐκ ἔζησαν ἄχρι τελεσθῆ τὰ χίλια ἔτη (“the rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years were brought to completion”) – There is great reason to question whether or not this sentence is original. Numerous important mss. (e.g., **Ξ** 2030 2053 2062 2377 Majority text, et. al.) omit this entire sentence. Those mss. that have the text are A 1611 *pc* lat. However, Brighton notes, “codex Alexandrinus (A) is the best witness for the text of Revelation” (Brighton, *Revelation*, 545). This makes it impossible to simply throw this sentence aside. What makes the case against the originality of this sentence even stronger is its awkward position. It falls between “they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years” and “This is the first resurrection,” which are obviously parallel to one another. Thus, this sentence is parenthetical, interrupting the rising of the saints with the title of that rising. In the final analysis, it is impossible to say with certainty whether or not this sentence is original.

Αὕτη ἡ ἀνάστασις ἡ πρώτη (“This is the first resurrection”) – The antecedent to this descriptive sentence is “they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.” Thus, the “first resurrection” refers to the spiritual raising of believers throughout the NT era.

6. ἔσονται . . . βασιλεύσουσιν (“they will be . . . they will reign”) – Since the same saints who “lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years” are in view here, it is impossible to take the future tense as expressing an event that will happen sometime in the future. Rather, the context shows that the future tense here has a durative meaning, “they will *continue to be*

priests of God and of Christ and will *continue to reign* with Him the thousand years.” Their priesthood and reign begins at conversion and lasts throughout eternity.<sup>30</sup>

[τὰ] – The reason the Committee of NA<sup>27</sup> bracketed the article here is because the external evidence for its inclusion and for its absence is almost evenly divided (see Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 687). It has no bearing on the text either way.

## THE CHRONOLOGICAL QUESTION

The first thing that must be determined before proceeding with an interpretation of this text is whether or not Revelation 20 follows Revelation 19 chronologically. Many commentators believe it does. They argue that 19:19-21 depicts the defeat and destruction of the two beasts (the second beast being portrayed as the “false prophet”) and that 20:1 follows in time, showing what will happen to the dragon, i.e., Satan. In other words, 20:1 picks up where 19:21 leaves off. The main thrust behind this argument is noted well by G. K. Beale:

The primary evidence adduced for this view is the series of καί (“and”) conjunctions punctuating 19:11-20:15. These conjunctions are understood as indicating historical sequence in 19:11-21, and the continued use of the same conjunctions in 20:1-15 is said to function most probably in the same historical manner, so that ch. 20 must record events after those of ch. 19.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, commentators taking the chronological position believe the opening καί of 20:1 reveals that the events in ch. 20 are sequential to those in ch. 19. The two beasts attacked the saints, were defeated, and thrown into the lake of fire *and then* the angel comes down from heaven and binds Satan, etc.

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<sup>30</sup> See Brighton’s discussion on these verbs, where he suggests that the future tense here could reflect the Hebrew Qal imperfect, having a durative force. Of special interest is his discussion on the question of the tense of βασιλεύσουσιν, where he points out that Codex Alexandrinus has the present tense, etc.

<sup>31</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 974-975.

This argument that καί denotes historical sequence in 20:1 is easily refuted. Beale makes the point that “‘and’ (καί) throughout the whole Apocalypse can indicate either historical sequence or visionary sequence.”<sup>32</sup> The only way to determine how it is used in 20:1 is by the context that follows it. As we will see, the context assures us that here it indicates visionary, not historical, sequence.

The other impetus that compels commentators to conclude that ch. 20 follows ch. 19 chronologically is a literal interpretation of the “thousand years” in 20:1-7. It is no coincidence that the majority of them are premillennialists, who see the events throughout Revelation following one another sequentially in future history. Thus, it is not surprising that they would see ch. 20 following ch. 19 in time. However, a close examination of these two chapters, and of the entire book of Revelation, reveals that this is impossible.

The best way to understand the book of Revelation is as a single vision given to John, in which he is shown a variety of scenes throughout. These scenes often reveal different images of the same events. Revelation presents the entire history of the world in a cyclic fashion. Seven times we are given a picture of the history of the New Testament era, each time seeing different images depicting the same realities, each scene culminating with the end of the world at Christ’s Second Coming (6:12-17; 7:9-17; 11:18; 14:1-20; 16:17-21; 19:11-21; 20:7-15).

When one understands the cyclic nature of Revelation, it is easy to discern the relationship between chs. 19 and 20. Rev. 19:11-21 shows us a picture of the final assault of Satan on the Church, which is synonymous with the activities of Satan’s “little season” portrayed in 20:7-10. The same picture was given to us in Rev. 16, where the “beast” and the “false prophet” assemble their evil army “at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon” (16:16).

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. See 975-983, where Beale makes a thorough and excellent argument in favor of a nonsequential relationship between Rev. 19 and 20.

This is the same End Time battle, which is portrayed in different ways throughout Revelation, each time ending with the victory of Christ and His church at His Second Coming on the Last Day (see the list above).

Furthermore, those who argue that ch. 20 follows ch. 19 chronologically are forced to separate the two beasts from the dragon, as if each one acts independently and will receive individual punishment. This is the backbone of their argument. The two beasts are dealt with in ch. 19 and ch. 20 shows us how the dragon will be dealt with. This is a ridiculous argument to make, for the two beasts and the dragon are not three individual entities, but one.

The dragon is clearly identified as Satan in 12:9 and 20:2.<sup>33</sup> Ch. 12 ends with an angry dragon, who is determined to make war with the church, depicted as a woman (v. 17). Ch. 13 shows us how the dragon makes war with the woman, namely through the agency of two beasts, one that comes up from the sea (13:1) and one that comes up from the land (13:11). Through the dragon and the two beasts, we are given a picture of Satan's evil activity in the world, and especially of the war he makes with the church. These are not three individual entities, but three manifestations of Satan himself.

This is Satan's way of mocking the Holy Trinity; the dragon and the two beasts can be seen as the Unholy Trinity of Satan. The dragon is a parody of the Father, for he gives his "power and authority" to the first beast (13:2); the first beast is a parody of the Son, for he has a "fatal wound that is healed" (13:3), speaks "great things" as one having authority (13:5), and is "worshipped" (13:8); the second beast (a.k.a. the false prophet) is a parody of the Holy Spirit, for he "causes those on earth to worship the first beast" (13:12), "gives breath to the image of the first beast" and "causes all who will not worship the image to be killed" (13:15). Anyone who

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<sup>33</sup> Rev. 12:9 and 20:2 use almost identical language in their identifications of the dragon as Satan: ὁ δράκων ὁ μέγας, ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἀρχαῖος, ὁ καλούμενος Διάβολος καὶ ὁ Σατανᾶς (12:9); τὸν δράκοντα, ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἀρχαῖος, ὅς ἐστιν Διάβολος καὶ ὁ Σατανᾶς (20:2).

reads how the dragon and the two beasts are described cannot mistake the similarities with how Scripture depicts the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity.

When we understand that the dragon and the two beasts are not separate entities, but different ways in which the one entity, Satan, masquerades in the world, it is impossible to see ch. 20 as following ch. 19 chronologically, for both chapters portray the final activities and destruction of Satan.

In sum, the only possible conclusion to make regarding the chronological relationship between chs. 19 and 20 is that both chapters depict the same events via different images, just as Revelation does throughout. This will be made clear by the commentary that follows.

### **VERSE BY VERSE COMMENTARY**

#### ***1. And I saw an Angel coming down out of heaven, having the key of the Abyss and a great chain in His hand.***

Who is this angel John sees? Most commentators believe that this is an unidentified, created, angel. The argument employed is that this angel has been authorized by God to descend from heaven, bind Satan, and throw him into the Abyss. However, the text says nothing about this angel being “authorized” to do these things. Rather, this angel simply does them, as if he has the authority within himself. Furthermore, this angel is said to possess “the key of the Abyss.” This “key” is not given to him, as it was given to the angel in 9:1. Taking these things into consideration, we are forced to look for an angel who has authority within himself and possesses the key of the Abyss. When scanning Revelation, no such created angel can be found. However, we do see someone who fits the bill, namely Christ.

In Rev. 1:5, Christ is described as “the Ruler of the kings of the earth.” He is later depicted as the Lamb who is “worthy to receive to receive power and wealth and wisdom and

might and honor and glory and blessing” (5:12). Christ is the “Lord of Lord and King of Kings” (17:14). He has been seated at God’s right hand (cf. Mark 16:19; Luke 22:69; Eph. 1:20; Phil. 2:9; et. al.) and “all authority over heaven and earth” has been given to Him (Matt. 28:18). The Scriptures are very clear throughout in describing Christ as the all-powerful Ruler of heaven and earth. He has this authority within Himself, for He is God.

As far as possessing the “key of the Abyss,” Christ Himself tells John in 1:18, “I have the keys of Death and Hades.” Abyss is synonymous with “Death and Hades” (see textual note above), which means that Christ possesses this key. Charles A. Gieschen states:

Christ declares to John that he has “the keys of Death and Hades” (1:18) and then towards the end of the apocalypse comes this scene which uses this same image . . . The implication of reading these texts in light of one another is that ‘the angel’ of Rev. 20:1 is Christ.<sup>34</sup>

Siegbert W. Becker concurs:

Everything that is said about this angel fits the Lord Jesus better than it fits any created angel. We are told that this angel has “the key of the Abyss.” “Abyss” is most certainly a name for hell and in chapter 1 Jesus is quoted as saying, “I have the keys of death and of Hades [hell].”<sup>35</sup>

This Angel is no created angel. This Angel has authority within Himself and is the sole owner of the key to the Abyss. This Angel is none other than Christ Himself. This will become abundantly clear as we move through the rest of the text.

It is interesting to read the commentaries of those who object to identifying this angel with Christ.<sup>36</sup> Many of them readily comment on the similarities between the actions of this

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<sup>34</sup> Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents & Early Evidence*, (Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill, 1998), 250.

<sup>35</sup> Siegbert W. Becker, *Revelation: The Distant Triumph Song*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1985), 296-297.

<sup>36</sup> For example, see the following Lutheran commentators: Brighton, *Revelation*, 542-546; Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation* (Augsburg Publishing House, 1963), 567; Martin H. Franzmann, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 130.



angel and of Christ. Most of them will even admit that the pre-incarnate Christ appeared often in the Old Testament as the “Angel of the Lord.” However, when it comes to identifying this angel as Christ, they refuse, even though they acknowledge that this angel does only what Christ can do. They claim that if this was a picture of Christ, surely He would not be identified as an angel.

These same commentators employ the same “reasoning” in their refusal to acknowledge the “Mighty Angel” of 10:1ff. as Christ. Even though the angel there is described with the same powerful language and imagery as Christ elsewhere, they refuse to acknowledge him as Christ. It is as if they are saying, “He looks like Christ and acts like Christ, but cannot be Christ.” Why not? It makes no sense to acknowledge the fact that Christ had appeared often throughout the OT as the “Angel of the Lord,” but cannot appear in Revelation, a book filled with a variety of language and imagery depicting the same persons and events in different ways, as Christ.

***2-3b. And He took hold of the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and He bound him a thousand years (3) and He threw him into the abyss and closed and sealed (it) upon him, so that he should no longer deceive the nations until the thousand years were brought to completion***

Here John is shown what the Angel with the key does: He binds Satan and throws him into the Abyss for a thousand years. Three questions immediately arise: 1) When does this event take place? 2) What is the extent of this binding of Satan? 3) What do the thousand years refer to? It is impossible to answer these questions without consulting clearer Scriptures that depict the same things. The question is, “Can we find such Scriptures?” The answer is, “Yes!”

### **When Does This Event Take Place?**

In Rev. 12:1-12, we are given a picture of the same event depicted here. There, we see a woman with Child, whom the dragon seeks to devour (v. 4). This Child is the “one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron” (v. 5). The Child is born and “caught up to God and to His throne” (v. 5). When this happens, a “war broke out in heaven” between “Michael and his

angels” and “the dragon and his angels” (v. 7). Michael and his angels are victorious and the dragon and his angels are cast out of heaven to earth (vv. 8-9). Immediately, the heavens break out in rejoicing, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God” (v. 10).

What this scene in ch. 12 describes is the exaltation of Christ and expulsion of Satan. The promised Messiah (Child), whom the faithful of God (Woman) had longed for, was born. Satan (dragon) could not stop Christ from accomplishing His redemptive work (could not “devour Him”) and, after Christ had completed His work, He was exalted to His throne in heaven, where He rules forever and ever. Christ’s exaltation began at His resurrection and culminated at His ascension. As a result of Christ’s first advent, culminating in His death, resurrection, and ascension, “he [Satan] was defeated and there was no longer a place for them [Satan and his angels] in heaven” (12:8). Thus, the “binding of Satan” in 20:2-3b is parallel to his being “cast out of heaven” in 12:8-9. This occurred at Christ’s first advent, culminating in His death, resurrection, and ascension.

The very reason Christ came to earth “was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). The devil, “the ancient serpent,” was successful in tempting Adam and Eve to sin in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3). The result of Adam’s sin was death to the world and the human race (Rom. 5:12; 6:23). But, God promised to send a Seed of the woman, who would crush the serpent’s head (Gen. 3:15). This promise was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Through His perfect active and passive obedience, Christ fulfilled the requirements of the law and paid the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of the world. It is that glorious work that has bound Satan.

We find further evidence for when the binding of Satan took place as we look at Christ's earthly ministry. In Matt. 12:29, Christ uses the same verb (δέω) for binding the "strong man."

Becker provides a good summary:

This angel also lays hold of Satan and binds him with a great chain and locks him up in the abyss. Jesus had spoken of his dealings with the devil in just such terms. Once, when the Pharisees and the teachers of the law accused Jesus of being in league with the devil because he cast out demons, Jesus overcame that accusation by pointing out that then Satan would be fighting against his own interests. To illustrate what was really happening, Jesus told them, "No one can 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" (Mk 3:27; Mt 12:29). Jesus is thus saying that by delivering the man from the devil possession he proved that he had tied up the devil and was therefore free to carry off the devil's possession.<sup>37</sup>

Commenting on the same text, Brighton draws the same conclusion:

In his ministry of exorcising demons he was setting people free from the demonization and slavery of Satan. And by such exorcising of demons, he was displaying the power and authority by which he was binding Satan.<sup>38</sup>

Christ's binding of Satan during His earthly ministry is depicted throughout the NT (e.g., Luke 10:17-18; 11:20-22; John 12: 31-32; 16:8, 11; Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14). Thus, we can conclude that Christ was already binding Satan during His earthly ministry, and that binding took full effect at the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. But, to what extent is Satan bound?

### **To What Extent is Satan Bound?**

Many commentators argue that the events in ch. 20 are still future because the evil we see in the world shows that Satan has not been bound and confined to the Abyss. They cite passages like 1 Pet. 5:8, "Be sober-minded; be watchful - Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour," to show that the Scriptures teach us that the devil will remain very active in the world until he is finally bound at Christ's parousia. To be

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<sup>37</sup> Becker, *Revelation*, 297.

<sup>38</sup> Brighton, *Revelation*, 549.

sure, there are many passages in Scripture which tell us that Satan will remain active in this world until the Last Day (cf. Luke 22:3; Acts 5:3; 2 Cor. 4:3-4; Eph. 2:2; 1 Thess. 2:18; 2 Tim. 2:26). However, these passages do not negate the fact that he is already bound and confined to the Abyss.

The mistake these commentators make is taking the binding and confinement of Satan to the Abyss as referring “to a complete cessation of the devil’s influence on earth.”<sup>39</sup> But, that is not what this binding and confinement entail. As Beale rightly explains:

That Satan is “cast out” by Christ’s death does not restrict Satan in every way. Rather, it keeps him from preventing “all people” throughout the earth being drawn to Jesus (John 12:31-32). “Sealing” may connote an absolute incarceration, but could just as well connote the general idea of “authority over,” which is its primary meaning also in Dan. 6:17 and Matt. 27:66 (though the context of the latter pertains to absolute confinement). God’s “seal” on Christians does not protect them in every sense but only in a spiritual, salvific manner, since they suffer from persecution in various physical ways (see on 7:3; 9:4). Conversely, God’s seal on Satan prevents him from harming the salvific security of the true church, though he can harm it physically.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, the binding of Satan does not prevent him from still being active in the world. Rather, it prevents him from harming the church spiritually. Christ made it explicitly clear what this binding of Satan indicates when He said, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). Satan is bound from prevailing against Christ’s church.

We need also to take note of the purpose for which Satan is bound, i.e., “so that he should no longer deceive the nations until the thousand years were brought to completion.” As we have seen, this means that he will not be able to harm the church spiritually throughout the thousand years. This inability to spiritually harm the church can be summarized by noting that the effects of Satan’s binding is such that a) he can no longer bring accusations against sinners before God

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<sup>39</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 985.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 985-986.

in the heavenly throne room, and b) that he cannot prohibit the Gospel from being preached to all nations.

Prior to the “casting out of Satan,” which was ultimately fulfilled at Christ’s crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, Satan was permitted access into the heavenly throne room, where he would make accusations against sinners before God (cf. Job 1-2). However, now that Christ has come and defeated the works of the devil, Satan no longer has access to the heavenly throne room. This is the very thing that causes the heavenly hosts to celebrate in Rev. 12:10, for “the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.” The objective reconciliation that Christ accomplished on the cross negates any further accusation from Satan.<sup>41</sup> Brighton has a nice summary:

Before Christ’s incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension, Satan could even accuse and bad-mouth God’s saints before God’s heavenly throne (Job 1:6-11; 2:1-5; Zech. 3:1-5). But at Christ’s victory he was thrown out of heaven (Rev. 12:7-12). Never again would Satan be able to accuse God’s saints in his holy presence. Satan’s exile from heaven was a direct result of Christ’s saving ministry and death (cf. Lk 10:17-19; Jn 12:31-32), which exile was authorized and carried out at his ascension (Rev 12:5, 7-9).<sup>42</sup>

The inability of Satan “to deceive the nations” is also seen in his inability to prohibit the Gospel from being preached to all nations (Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:15; et. al.). Becker explains:

The context tells us that it is a chain which prevents the devil from deceiving the nations any longer, that is, it prevents, or hinders, the devil in his attempts to lead men astray into eternal damnation. From the Bible we know of only one thing that can do this. It is the preaching of the gospel, the “Good News” that the Son of God was manifested to destroy the works of the devil (1 Jn 3:8).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The Scriptures distinguish between objective reconciliation, the forgiveness won by Christ for the whole world, and subjective reconciliation, the forgiveness applied to those who have been brought to faith by the Holy Spirit via the means of grace. Thus, all people of all time have been saved, but only those who are brought to faith have this salvation applied to them. Those who remain outside of the faith are those who remain in the devil’s sphere of influence and believe his lies.

<sup>42</sup> Brighton, *Revelation*, 553.

<sup>43</sup> Becker, *Revelation*, 298.

Try as he might, Satan cannot stop the Gospel from being preached, nor can he prevent the Holy Spirit from converting people through the Gospel.

Prior to his being cast out of heaven, Satan was able to stop the Gospel from being preached to all nations, just as he was able to accuse sinners before God in the heavenly throne room. This can be seen by noting that, during the Old Testament era, we do not see the Gospel going out with great power, converting mass groups of people from other nations. The Gospel was pretty much confined to the Israelites. That is not to say that the Gospel was not for all people even at that time, for the Israelites were called to be a “light unto the Gentiles.” However, “in spite of the many Old Testament passages that urged the Israelites to share their faith with the Gentiles, the fact remains that any large-scale conversion of the Gentile world had to wait for the great commission the Lord gave to his disciples after his resurrection.”<sup>44</sup> The reason for this is twofold: 1) Israel’s consistent stubbornness and unfaithfulness; 2) Satan’s ability to deceive the nations. It is only after Christ comes and establishes His church, the New Israel, and binds Satan through His redemptive work, that the Gospel is given free reign throughout the world. We see this playing itself out in the book of Acts. That the Apostles were able to go into all parts of the world to preach the Gospel was because Satan could no longer prevent them from doing so.

Lastly, this mention of Satan being bound by a chain and thrown into the Abyss has further Scriptural precedent. As we have already mentioned, the Abyss is another term for “Death and Hades,” or for “Hell.” In several passages, we are told that the Abyss is where disobedient angels and spirits (unbelieving souls) are imprisoned and kept there by chains. “And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 299.

dwelling,<sup>45</sup> he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day” (Jude 6; cf. also Isa. 24:21-22; 2 Pet. 2:4). The Abyss (Hell) is the residence proper of all disobedient angels and souls. However, that these disobedient angels are “kept in eternal chains” does not prevent them from being active in the world (cf. Luke 8:30-32). In fact, Rev. 9:1 tells us that the “angel of the Abyss,” i.e., Satan, is “*given* (note that he does not possess it) the key to the shaft of the Abyss” in order to let the demons out to afflict the world. This is a good example of what the binding of Satan entails. Just as Scripture tells us that the evil angels are confined to the Abyss by chains, but at the same time are active in the world, so Satan is now bound to the Abyss by “a great chain,” but remains active in the world. He is limited to his own sphere of influence. He is like a chained-up dog that is incapable of biting people unless they enter into the area within the chain’s reach. The work of Christ has placed the heavenly throne room and the preaching of the Gospel out of Satan’s reach for good.

### **To What Do the Thousand Years Refer?**

The binding of Satan, having been accomplished at Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension, initiated the “thousand years,” which is symbolic for the entire NT era, i.e., from Christ’s first advent to His second advent. As Becker states, “Once we have clearly understood what is meant by the chain with which the devil is bound, the interpretation of the thousand years also becomes relatively simple.”<sup>46</sup> That the “thousand years” is not a literal period of time is

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<sup>45</sup> The fall of Satan and those angels who followed him is described in Rev. 12:3, “His [the dragon’s] tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth.” This is the only place in Scripture that provides us with a picture of the number of angels who joined Satan’s rebellion. While we should not claim that exactly one-third of the total number of created angels rebelled, we can conclude that, while the majority did not rebel, a great many did.

<sup>46</sup> Becker, *Revelation*, 302.

made obvious by several points.<sup>47</sup> First, nearly two-thousand years have passed since Christ's first advent, which, as has been clearly shown, was when the binding of Satan occurred. Second, throughout Revelation, numbers are used symbolically to denote many things. As Lenski notes, "Revelation is full, not only of symbolical numbers, but of symbols of all kinds. It would be strange, indeed, if '1,000 years' were here where it occurs in so marked a way, all of six times, to be understood in a literal sense."<sup>48</sup> Third, there is biblical and extrabiblical evidence that a "thousand years" refers to a symbolic period of time. Fourth, Scripture makes it abundantly clear that Christ established His kingdom during His first advent. To posit a literal thousand-year period of time in which Christ reigns on earth negates this truth. Fifth, the Scriptures clearly show us that the events which this text describes as occurring during these "thousand years" have been happening since the beginning of the NT era, and will continue to happen until its close. Given all of these points, it seems ludicrous that anyone would interpret these "thousand years" literally. But, the fact that many have, and still do, requires a more thorough explanation of these points.

The first reason why these "thousand years" cannot possibly be interpreted literally is because nearly two-thousand years have passed since Christ's first advent. Since all commentators agree that the "thousand years" begins with the binding of Satan, and since we have shown that this took place as a result of Christ's first advent, these "thousand years" cannot be literal. The only way to maintain a literal interpretation is to conclude that the binding of

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<sup>47</sup> Beale states, "That this is not a literal chronological number is apparent from: (1) the consistently figurative use of numbers elsewhere in the book, (2) the figurative nature of much of the immediate context ("chain," "abyss," "dragon," "serpent," "locked," "sealed," "beast"), (3) the predominantly figurative tone of the entire book (so 1:1), (4) the figurative use of '1,000' in the OT, and (5) the use in Jewish and early Christian writings of '1,000' years as a figure for the eternal blessing of the redeemed" (*The Book of Revelation*, 995).

<sup>48</sup> Lenski, *St. John's Revelation*, 573.



Satan has not yet taken place. This is the very thing premillennialists claim, but, as has been adequately shown, this is an impossibility.

The second reason is even more obvious than the first. Revelation is replete with symbolic language. The entire book is one that employs fantastic imagery to figuratively depict reality. For example, we see a Lamb who was slain, colored horses with strange riders, a great dragon, locusts with human faces, a beast with multiple heads and horns, horrific judgments and plagues coming upon the earth, and so on. All of these images are symbolic, not literal. They are pictures that depict reality. Only the context tells us what these images represent. The same is true for the numbers in Revelation. To interpret these images and numbers literally is to entirely miss their meanings. For example, in Rev. 7, John sees the sealing of 144,000. The context tells us that what he is seeing is the whole number of the Church Militant.<sup>49</sup> To interpret this 144,000 literally would mean that at any given time throughout history, there can only be exactly 144,000 members of Christ's church. But, this is absurd, for there are millions of Christians on earth right now! The point is that Revelation, as apocalyptic literature, employs figurative language to depict reality. The only way to understand its message is to understand its symbolism. In other words, we are forced to employ a hermeneutical method that allows both the immediate context of Revelation and the broader context of Scripture as a whole to arrive at the meaning behind the figures.

There is biblical and extrabiblical evidence of a "thousand years" referring to a figurative, not literal, period of time. Brighton notes:

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<sup>49</sup> The interpretation that sees the 144,000 as the Church Militant is accepted by many commentators. For OT background, see Numbers 31:1-6. Also, see Brighton's discussion, where he concludes, "The 144,000 thus present a picture of the church militant throughout the entire period of the prophecy of Revelation and at any given moment in this time period" (*Revelation*, 190-191). Of course, such argumentation does not phase dispensationalists, who employ a completely literal interpretation to this passage, claiming that John sees a literal 144,000 Jews, who will be God's "special forces" unit during the Tribulation period (cf. LaHaye, *Understanding the Last Days*, 53; 91).

Only two other passages in the Bible mention a time period of a thousand years. In Ps 90:4 “a thousand years” are to God “like a day just gone past and like the watch of the night” (cf. Job 10:5). In 2 Pet 3:8 the apostle states “that a day with the Lord is like a thousand years and a thousand years like a day.” Those two references do not refer to the same thousand-year period of time mentioned in Rev 20:2-3. However, they do suggest the hermeneutical method for interpreting the length of time represented by the “thousand years” that the dragon is confined. In both cases it is not a specific period of earthly history, exactly one thousand years long, that is in view. Rather, the “thousand years” is a general reference to a lengthy period of earthly time which is, however, brief in God’s estimation. God will bring his plans and purposes to completion according to his own time schedule<sup>50</sup>

These biblical references assure us that the only other times a “thousand years” is used in Scripture it refers to a figurative, not literal, period of time.

Furthermore, elsewhere in Scripture, a “thousand” is used figuratively as a number of completeness: “Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a *thousand* generations” (Deut. 7:9); “For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a *thousand* hills” (Ps. 50:10); “In that day every place where there used to be a *thousand* vines, worth a *thousand* shekels of silver, will become briars and thorns” (Isa. 7:23). In each of these verses, it is clear that a *thousand* is used figuratively, not literally, providing further precedence for a figurative interpretation in our text.

There is also extrabiblical evidence that shows that a Jewish tradition had developed in the first century that saw the entire history of the world to be modeled after the seven days of creation. In short, this tradition believed world history to be divided into seven, one-thousand year periods of time. The seventh thousand-year period was to be the age of the Messiah, at the end of which would come the eighth period, i.e., eternity. These thousand-year periods were not

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<sup>50</sup> Brighton, *Revelation*, 551. Brighton goes on to provide an excellent discussion of how other biblical and extrabiblical literature support the view that the “thousand years” is a figurative number referring to the entire NT era.

believed by most to be literal periods of time. Rather, each thousand-year period represented a time of completion. Beale, after providing an excellent summary of this tradition, concludes:

The millennium of Revelation 20 could be associated broadly with the early rabbinic tradition of a thousand-year reign, and especially the tradition reflected in *Jubilees*, *2 Enoch*, and *Barnabas*. If so, it would not be a literal one thousand years but would represent a long epoch, the last epoch of world history.<sup>51</sup>

If this tradition was well known, and all the evidence suggests that it was, then it should not surprise us that John would use a “thousand years” to signify the entire NT era. The entire book of Revelation reveals John’s familiarity of OT and Jewish apocalyptic literature. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he sees and records some of the same things OT prophets like Isaiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel saw and recorded, using similar, and sometimes identical, language and imagery.<sup>52</sup> The language and imagery in Revelation, which seems peculiar to us today, would have been very familiar to John’s first-century audience. In any event, the biblical and extrabiblical evidence assures us that a “thousand years” is used elsewhere to denote a figurative period of time.

As we have seen, the number 1,000 is symbolically used for completion. But, why is 1,000 used as a number of completion? Franzmann provides a nice explanation:

As is usual with numbers in Revelation (cf., e. g., the Spirit designated as “seven spirits,” 1:4) the number “thousand” is symbolic: “Ten” is the number of the rounded whole: 10 times 10 times 10 is, then, the completely, definitively rounded whole (cf. the 12 tribes multiplied by 12 and then multiplied by the third power of 10 in the 144,000 of God’s people, 7:4-8; 14:1).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1020; the specific texts referred to are *Jubilees* 23:27-30, *2 Enoch* 32:2-33:2, and *Epistle of Barnabas* 15:4-9. See also Brighton’s discussion (*Revelation*, 534-536; 552).

<sup>52</sup> Compare, for example, Rev. 4-5 with Ezekiel 1; Isaiah 6; Daniel 7, 10.

<sup>53</sup> Franzmann, *The Revelation to John*, 130.

In sum, 10 is the number of completion<sup>54</sup> and, when cubed to make 1,000, it is the number of ultimate completion. Thus, the “thousand years” of our text is the period of time in which God will bring His plan to ultimate completion.

The fourth reason why these “thousand years” cannot be literal is because Christ established His kingdom during His first advent. Dispensationalists argue that the Scriptures prophecy about a glorious, earthly reign of Christ, and since no such earthly kingdom has been established as of yet, this “thousand years” refers to that kingdom and will be ushered in after Christ’s Second Coming.<sup>55</sup> This faulty understanding comes from the failure to understand biblical prophecy and from the failure to heed the very words of our Lord and Savior during His earthly ministry. The OT prophecies have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ and He accomplished everything He came to accomplish during His first advent. He established the kingdom foretold by the OT prophets by establishing His Church, which is the kingdom of priests who will reign with Him throughout the NT era (Rev. 20:6). This is a spiritual kingdom made up of all believers in Christ, not a literal, earthly kingdom. Our Lord made this very clear when He said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world” (John 18:36).

The fifth reason is that the Scriptures show us that the things which are said to happen during the “thousand years” have been happening since Christ’s first advent, and will continue to happen until He returns. For example, believers have been “living and reigning with Christ” since the beginning of the NT era. This will be made clear in the commentary below.

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<sup>54</sup> See K. Burton, “Numbers,” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, 974.

<sup>55</sup> See the section “Dispensational Premillennialism” above.

It has been adequately proven by now that the “thousand years” in our text cannot possibly be interpreted literally. Rather, it is figurative and refers to the entire NT era, in which believers live and reign with Christ. The commentary below on the remainder of our text will further prove that this is certain.

### **Summary**

Satan was bound by Jesus Christ during His earthly ministry, culminating in His death, resurrection, and ascension. He is no longer permitted access to the heavenly throne room to lodge accusations against sinners before God, nor has he any power to spiritually harm the church or prevent her from preaching the Gospel throughout the world. However, Satan remains a powerful force in this sinful world and is able to wreak havoc on those who enter his sphere of influence. But, Christ’s church remains outside of his sphere during the “thousand years,” i.e., entire NT era, in which he is bound.

#### ***3c. After these things, it is necessary for him to be released a short time.***

Commentators are divided in determining the antecedent of ταῦτα, but the natural reading of the text shows that it is “thousand years,” which means that this “releasing” of Satan occurs *after* the thousand years are “brought to completion.”<sup>56</sup> This fact is made even more clear when we analyze what this “short time,” often referred to as Satan’s “little season,” entails. But, before searching the Scriptures to determine the nature of this event, we must first answer the question, “Why must Satan be released after the thousand years?”

We are not told exactly why Satan must be released, so it is futile and dangerous for us to speculate on the matter. However, what we can say is that it is divine necessity (δεῖ) that Satan must be released for a short time. In other words, it is God’s will as part of His divine plan that

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<sup>56</sup> See textual note above.

Satan be loosed at the conclusion of the thousand years. Any attempt to delve further into this mystery is an attempt to search the will of the *deus absconditus* (the “hidden God”), which remains outside the limits of our investigation. As Brighton says:

No answer is given as to *why* he will be released, except that “it is necessary” (δεῖ, 20:3). To speculate why “it is necessary” may be a vain attempt, save to say that it will be according to the sovereign will of God and his eternal plan for the consummation of all things.<sup>57</sup>

Thus, we cannot know with certainty why Satan must be loosed. However, it has been revealed to us what Satan’s “little season” entails.

Rev. 20:7-10 provides a description of Satan’s “little season.” There, we learn that Satan will be released from the Abyss “to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle” (v. 8). Satan and his army of deceived nations will surround “the camp of the saints and the beloved city,” but they will be “consumed by fire” coming down “from heaven” (v. 9). Satan will be thrown into the “lake of fire” to suffer eternal torment (v. 10) and then the “Great White Throne” Judgment will occur (v. 11ff.), which will bring about the eternal separation of believers from unbelievers (cf. Matt. 25).

This short passage tells us two things: 1) Satan will be released in order to deceive the nations into making a final assault on Christ’s church; 2) Satan’s assault will be summarily defeated. But, what is the nature of this final assault? Are we to take this literally, concluding that Satan will literally lead the nations in a final, apocalyptic battle with God’s saints? Absolutely not! To do so would be to entirely miss the meaning of this text and of the book of Revelation as a whole. Satan’s “little season” will not be a literal, physical battle between the forces of evil and the church of Christ. Revelation makes it very clear throughout that Satan has already been completely defeated by the Lamb who was slain. Christ and His saints need not

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<sup>57</sup> Brighton, *Revelation*, 553.

engage in physical warfare with the devil, for Christ has already won total victory through His physical death on the cross. So, if Satan's "little season" does not refer to a literal, physical, End-Time battle, just what does it refer to? The Scriptures provide us with a conclusive answer.

Already in the OT, we are told that a climactic, End-Time opponent of the Messiah (Christ) will emerge shortly before the Last Day. Dan. 7:24-27 speaks of "another horn" who will arise, "speak words against the Most High," and "wear out the saints of the Most High," who "shall be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time." But, he will be judged, consumed, and destroyed. Immediately following, the eternal kingdom of the saints will be put into place.

What Daniel prophecies about here is the Antichrist, the End-Time opponent of Christ, who will appear for a "little season" ("time, times, and half a time") shortly before the Second Coming of Christ. That this is related to Satan's "little season" is made even more clear in Dan. 8:23-27, where this same End-Time opponent is depicted as a "king who shall arise" in the "latter time" to "destroy the mighty and the holy people." This "king" does not operate by his own power, but by the power of Satan, and "by his cunning he shall make *deceit* prosper under his hand." This End-Time opponent will use deception as his weapon against the nations and the saints during his "little season." It is for this very reason that we hear that Satan must be released, i.e., to *deceive* the nations.

We also have further OT evidence that helps us to understand Satan's "little season." Ezekiel 38-39, especially 38:18-23, describes "Gog" coming against "the land of Israel." The context of those chapters shows that this "Gog" refers to the End-Time opponent of Christ, who makes war on the church for a "little season" during the "last days." This is the very language that John uses in Rev. 20:8, showing the continuity between the accounts. We could also note

Isaiah 11 and Daniel 11 as providing further evidence in this regard. The conclusion is that the OT describes an End-Time opponent of Christ, who is given a “little season” to deceive the nations and make a final, but futile, assault on the church.

The NT evidence for this End-Time opponent is found specifically in 2 Thess. 2:1-12; 1 John 2:18-23; 4:1-6; 2 John 7-9; and Rev. 13:1-8; 11-18. 2 Thessalonians 2 provides the clearest picture of the nature of this End-Time opponent, who there is called the “man of lawlessness” and the “son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God” (vv. 3-4). Like Dan. 8 above, his power is not his own, but he comes “by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders” (v. 9). And, once again, deception is his weapon (“and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved” [v. 10]). This passage ends with perhaps the greatest indication as to why God must allow Satan’s “little season,” for it is to send them (unbelievers) “a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (vv. 11-12). This is all that God reveals to us as to why this is necessary and to speculate any further is futile, as stated above. That the activity of this “man of lawlessness” is synonymous with Satan’s “little season” is made clear by the text when it notes that when the “lawless one will be revealed, the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming” (v. 8). In sum, this “man of lawlessness” is the Antichrist, the End-Time opponent of Christ, through whom the activity of Satan is manifest in order to deceive the nations for a “little season.”

This End-Time opponent has become known as “Antichrist” on the basis of the references to him in John’s epistles. In 1 John 2:18, we read “Children, it is the last hour, and as



you have heard that Antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour.” John points out that “many antichrists have come,” but also that “*the Antichrist* is coming.” This is consistent with Paul’s account in 2 Thessalonians 2, for “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work” (v. 7) and yet the “man of lawlessness” is yet to be revealed. John also tells us that deception is the identifying factor of both the antichrists who have come and the Antichrist who is to come, adding that the antichrist is a) “he who denies Jesus is the Christ, he who denies the Father and the Son” (1 John 2:22), and b) “every spirit” that denies Jesus is from God and came in the flesh (1 John 4:2-3; 2 John 7).

Finally, in Rev. 13, we see this same consistency playing itself out. The activity of the two “beasts” described there is the activity of the “spirit of Antichrist” in the world throughout the NT era. The text also makes it clear that the activity of these two “beasts” will be to deceive the world into believing that the first beast is to be worshipped, not Christ. We can also see an intensification of their activities occurring shortly before Christ’s Second Coming throughout chs. 13-19, showing that they also represent *the Antichrist*.

When taken together, these texts from 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 John, and Revelation tell us that the spirit of the Antichrist will be manifest throughout the NT era, but also that *the Antichrist* will be revealed for a “little season” just prior to Christ’s Second Coming. During that “little season,” the Antichrist will be empowered by Satan, who has been released from the Abyss, to deceive many people into denying that Jesus is the Christ, the Word made flesh, who has redeemed the world from sin. We can also conclude that the Antichrist will make this final assault on the church from within the church. This will most definitely be a spiritual battle, in which the Antichrist will deceive non-believers into believing that his church is the true church. In other words, this will not be a final, climactic battle involving human weapons, etc., but a

spiritual battle, in which Satan is permitted to gather all who are already his into his fold, in order to make a last-ditch, desperate, completely futile assault on Christ and His church.<sup>58</sup>

The fact that Satan is only given a “short time” (“little season”) should also be duly noted. In comparison to the “thousand years,” Satan’s “little season” is minute. The grace of God is emphasized by noting this fact. God spends an ample amount of time (nearly 2000 years already!) giving the Gospel free reign to gather in His elect, but will only un-loose Satan for a “short time.” How long his “little season” lasts we cannot be sure, but it is safe to say that it is incomparable to the “thousand years” of his binding.

We might also note that the numbers which symbolize the church’s persecution, brought on by Satan and his agencies throughout the NT era, are small in comparison to the “thousand years.” The “1260 days” (11:3; 12:6; cf. also Dan. 12:11<sup>59</sup>), “forty-two months” (11:2; 13:5), and “time, times, and half a time”<sup>60</sup> (12:7, 14; cf. also Dan. 7:25) are synonymous, symbolic numbers referring to persecution against the church.<sup>61</sup> The relationship between these numbers and the “thousand years” coincides with a major theme of the book of Revelation, namely that Christ is in control of history and will protect His church amidst the persecutions she will inevitably face throughout the NT era. The reign of Christ and His saints is depicted as a “thousand years,” while the persecution the saints face is symbolized as “three and a half

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<sup>58</sup> We could also add to this discussion our Lord’s warnings about “false Christs” appearing before the End (Matt. 24:4-5; 24-25). His warning is to not let anyone “deceive” us, which is consistent with the deceptive activities of the Antichrist, through the power of Satan, as discussed above. We are told to be on constant lookout throughout the NT era for the revealing of this climactic, End-Time opponent.

<sup>59</sup> See Brighton, *Revelation*, 288, where he explains that the “1290 days” of Dan. 12:11 is equivalent to the “1260 days” in Rev. 11:3 and 12:6.

<sup>60</sup> This number is equivalent to three and a half years, making it synonymous to “1260 days” and “forty-two months.”

<sup>61</sup> See Beale’s discussion on the meaning of these numbers in *The Book of Revelation*, 565-568, where he concludes that these numbers symbolize the persecution the church will face throughout the NT era. Brighton reaches the same conclusion (*Revelation*, 287-291).

years.”<sup>62</sup> The spiritual reality of the church is thus emphasized over her physical reality; she is comforted with the ongoing spiritual and very real presence of Christ, her Lord and protector, amidst the futile attempts of Satan to put her down. More than anything else, Revelation assures Christ’s church that He knows the trouble she faces<sup>63</sup> and that, even though it may appear that Satan and his forces are having success in this world, the fact is that he cannot harm the church, for Christ has defeated him and is in total control of history.

One final question needs to be addressed before moving on: Are we in the midst of Satan’s “little season” right now? Some contend that the loosing of Satan could not possibly have occurred as of yet. The usual argument is that the Gospel is still being preached throughout the world. In fact, many will point to the fact that modern technology has given us the ability to spread the message of Jesus Christ to places never reached before. If Satan were loosed, surely we would see the effects of his deception and there would be no way the Gospel would have the free reign it so obviously does at the present time.

While this may seem to be a solid argument, an argument that it is possible that Satan has already been loosed could just as easily be made. The main points of this argument would point to the fact that we have seen a steady increase in the corruption of the Gospel over the past few centuries. The Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century has had a tremendous impact on Western thinking. The false, unbiblical, notion of human autonomy and the deification of nature has infiltrated the church and has had a devastating impact, so that many “Christians” do not believe the Bible to be the Word of God, deny the deity of Christ, and so on. Furthermore, the

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<sup>62</sup> See footnote 60 above.

<sup>63</sup> That Christ knows what is going on in each of His congregations is made clear at the onset of Revelation, for He is “in the midst of the lampstands” (Rev. 1:13). He is not an “absentee landlord,” but rather He is intimately involved in the happenings of His churches.

postmodern world we currently reside in<sup>64</sup> recognizes no absolutes. There is no such thing as absolute truth; rather, truth is relative to each, autonomous individual. False teachings run rampant in our day and the Name of Christ has become a marketing tool for many. We could go on and on citing examples of how apostate our present age has become. Given all that we see around us, is it not possible that Satan has been loosed already?

The bottom line is that we cannot answer this question at all. Anyone who claims to have absolute knowledge as to whether Satan is still bound or has been loosed is simply grasping at straws and offering a mere opinion, not a fact. What we can be sure of is this: The “mystery of lawlessness” (“spirit of the Antichrist”) has been a present reality in the world since Christ instituted His church. We can also be sure that theologians from the late first century to the present day have continuously claimed to have identified the Antichrist in their generations.<sup>65</sup> Each generation of Christians throughout the NT era will continue to make such identifications and the generation that finally correctly identifies the Antichrist will not know it until they see the Lord descending on the clouds. Every generation is warned by the Lord to keep alert, for no one knows the hour of His Second Coming (Matt. 24:36).

***4. And I saw thrones and they sat upon them and judgment was given to them, and (I saw) the souls of those having been beheaded on account of the witness of Jesus, that is, on account of the word of God, and who did not worship the beast nor his image, and did not receive the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand. And they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years . . . This is the first resurrection (5b).***

The second portion of the text begins here. The first half is focused on the fate of Satan during the “thousand years” and the second half will focus on the reality of the saints for the

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<sup>64</sup> Some believe that we have entered a post-postmodern era, but that point is moot, for the postmodern mindset is still alive and well today.

<sup>65</sup> This commentator maintains the historic, confessional Lutheran identification of the office of the papacy as the Antichrist. However, this does not mean that the office of the papacy is absolutely the full manifestation of the End-Time opponent of Christ. While the office of the papacy definitely fits Scripture’s description of the Antichrist, we must keep ever mindful that “the historical form of the Antichrist could change” (CTCR-LCMS, *The End Times*, 25). Lutherans must heed the warning of our Lord to be on the constant lookout for the Antichrist.

“thousand years.” In both halves, the same “thousand year” time frame is in view. We have heard what Satan does during the “thousand years” (remains in prison) and now we hear what the saints do during the “thousand years” (live and reign with Christ).

The first task at hand is to determine how many groups of saints John sees here. Are there one, two, or three groups? Commentators are divided on this point. We can immediately rule out three groups, for only those commentators who interpret Revelation with a crass literalism (mostly dispensationalists) take this view. It is absolutely absurd to suggest that John sees one group that sits on thrones, another group that was beheaded, and yet another group that did not worship the beast, etc. We need not refute this view any further.

The interpretation that suggests two groups in view here is possible, but not probable. This view claims that there is a distinction between martyred Christians (“those having been beheaded”) and Christians who were persecuted and died, but were not martyred (“those who did not worship the beast, etc.”). Lenski argues for this view:

The occupants of the thrones were “the souls of those having been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the Word of God; and they such as did not do obeisance to the beast,” etc. There are two groups; for if οἵτινες referred to the beheaded ones, καί could not precede.<sup>66</sup>

Lenski fails to validate his argument by explaining why καί is not permitted to precede οἵτινες here. Indeed, he cannot do so because there is no such rule for him to reference.<sup>67</sup> While this view only differentiates these groups concerning manner of death, which does not hinder the overall interpretation of the passage, the best view is that John uses three descriptive statements to account for one group.

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<sup>66</sup> Lenski, *St. John's Revelation*, 578.

<sup>67</sup> See Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1001, where, while he reaches a similar conclusion to Lenski, he shows that grammar does not demand Lenski's conclusion. See also Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Rev. ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 365, “Gk. οἵτινες often introduces a relative clause that emphasizes a characteristic quality of its antecedent; cf. Matt. 7:15 . . . Rom 1:25; Acts 10:47. In this case καί would serve as an explicative (“namely”); cf. Matt 8:33; 1 Cor. 15:38.”

What John sees here is a composite of all the souls of all Christians who have died in the faith. All Christians will be seated on heavenly thrones. All Christians share in the martyrdom of their brothers and sisters in Christ regardless of their manner of death, just as they share in the martyrdom of their Lord, for all Christians are, in one way or another, persecuted on account of their witness of Jesus and on account of the Word of God. Finally, all Christians refuse to worship the beast and could never receive his mark upon their foreheads or hands, because they are sealed with the Divine Name<sup>68</sup> at their baptisms (Rev. 7:3).

What is also made clear by the immediate context along with the broader context of Scripture as a whole is that these “souls” that John sees in heaven are continuing in a reality that had already begun on earth the moment they experienced the “first resurrection.” As will be shown, “living and reigning with Christ” is not something that will happen only after death, but is a reality that all Christians share throughout their earthly lives. Thus, John sees the culmination of the reality that he himself already participates in as a believer in Christ.

**1. *John sees Christians sitting on thrones:*** The Bible makes it clear that Christians will sit on thrones, sharing in Christ’s judgment over His creation. Brighton notes:

In [Rev.] 3:21 “the one who conquers” (that is, *all* the saints) will sit with Christ on his throne. In Dan. 7:9 the prophet in a vision sees that “thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days was seated [enthroned].” Then “judgment was given to the saints of the Most High” (Dan. 7:22), and later in the vision Daniel sees that all “the kingdom and the power and the greatness of the kingdoms under all the heavens will be given to the people of the saints of the Most High” (Dan. 7:27).<sup>69</sup>

We could also cite Matt. 19:28, Luke 22:30, and 1 Cor. 6:2-3 as further biblical support that Christians will be seated on thrones. Christians sitting upon their heavenly thrones has already

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<sup>68</sup> See Gieschen’s excellent article, “Sacramental Theology in the Book of Revelation,” *CTQ* 67/2 (April 2003): 150-159, where he concludes, “In summary, these texts support the understanding that the texts from Revelation that speak of sealing or writing the Name on the forehead are depicting the baptismal rite and resulting baptismal reality.”

<sup>69</sup> Brighton, *Revelation*, 556.

been alluded to in Rev. 4:4 and 11:16, where “twenty-four elders” symbolically represent all Christians. Thus, that John sees Christians sitting on thrones here should not surprise us.

This reality of Christians sitting on heavenly thrones is one that already begins during their earthly lives. Again, Brighton notes:

In Rom. 5:17 Paul says that all those “having received the free gift of righteousness in life will rule through the one Jesus Christ” . . . The dynamic in Rom. 5:12-21 is that while sin and death have reigned over all descendants of Adam, grace and life and righteousness have come *already now* to all in Christ. In Baptism Christians have *already* died and risen with Christ (Rom. 6:1-4), and so in that sense they have already begun their new life and reign with Christ, although the new life of the Christian on earth remains a struggle against sin (Rom. 6:5-23; 7:7-25).<sup>70</sup>

Thus, upon baptism, a Christian rises to new life in Christ and begins truly living and reigning with Him from that moment into eternity. The throne the Christian occupies in heaven is a continuation of the throne he already sits in by virtue of faith on earth.

We also need to understand the judgment that Christians are given in this text. This does not refer only to the judging that Christians will do with Christ in heaven, but already occurs on earth through the church’s ministry. Christ has given His church the Office of the Keys (John 20:21-23; Matt. 16:16-19), which “is that special authority which Christ has given to His church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.”<sup>71</sup> Already here on earth, the Church Militant exercises judgment on Christ’s behalf through called and ordained ministers of the Word via the Office of the Keys.

**2. *John sees the souls of those having been beheaded on account of the witness of Jesus, that is, on account of the Word of God.***: First, these souls who were beheaded refer to all Christians. Beale, after pointing out that 6:9 is parallel to this text, states:

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 556-557.

<sup>71</sup> Luther’s Small Catechism (St. Louis: CPH, 1986), 27.

Assuming that 6:9 is in mind, the change from “those who were slain” (τῶν ἐσφαγμένων) to “those who were beheaded” (τῶν πεπελεκισμένων) could specify that only actual martyrs are meant, but more likely it is figurative for varying kinds of persecution. The phrase in 6:9 was figurative for all degrees of persecution up to death . . . which 1:9 and 12:11 substantiate, which also say, respectively, “on account of the word of God and the witness of Jesus” and “on account of their witness” . . . At the very least, not just decapitation is in mind, since Christians were killed in other ways as well (e.g., crucifixion).<sup>72</sup>

Thus, these “beheaded souls” symbolize all Christians who have died in the faith, regardless of their manner of death.<sup>73</sup>

There is an important theme in Revelation that is being emphasized here, namely, that Christ is the “true and faithful martyr” (1:5; 3:14; 19:11) and that those who believe in Him, by virtue of His faithfulness, bear witness of Him (1:9; 2:13; 6:9; 12:11; cf. also Luke 24:44-49; John 15:27; Acts 1:8). Christians are faithful witnesses of *The Faithful Witness* and they will gladly suffer persecution, even to the point of death, for Him. Furthermore, by testifying of Jesus, they are testifying of the Word of God. The testimony of Jesus is equated to the Word of God in Revelation, another important theme that often gets overlooked. Rev. 1:2 should be translated “who bore witness to the Word of God, *that is* (epexegetical καὶ) to the testimony of Jesus (1:9 as well). It is Jesus’ word that the churches keep (3:8, 10) and it is Jesus who is explicitly identified as *The Word* (19:13; cf. also John 1:1ff.). Thus, these faithful martyrs John sees in heaven are those who keep the Word of God by testifying of Jesus, which is true of all Christians of all times.

**3. John sees those who did not worship the beast nor his image, and did not receive the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand:** This is a further description of the same group of Christian souls. Here, it is very clear that John sees all Christians. No Christian worships the

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<sup>72</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 998.

<sup>73</sup> See textual note on τῶν πεπελεκισμένων above for further discussion.



beast and no Christian has the mark of the beast applied to them. The book of Revelation makes it very clear that Christians worship the One True God. It is impossible for them to worship the beast, for in doing so they would no longer be Christians. There is no middle ground – either one worships Christ or one does not! Furthermore, the mark of the beast belongs to Satan’s attempt to mock the Holy Trinity. Since God’s saints are sealed with the Divine Name at baptism (7:3), he tries to duplicate this by marking his own with a “blasphemous name” (13:16). All unbelievers readily receive this mark of the beast, but, since Christians have the Divine Name sealed upon their foreheads, there is no possibility for the mark of the beast to be applied to them. Brighton offers a nice summary:

But the followers of Christ do not have such a mark, for they do not belong to the beast and the dragon. They have their own mark by which they are identified as saints of God in Christ. For God has sealed them on their foreheads (7:3; cf. 9:4) with the seal of the name of the Lamb and the name of God the Father (14:1; 22:4). Those who bear the mark of the beast are destined for hell (19:19-21), while those who bear the mark of the name of Christ and his Father are destined for eternal life with God in the new heaven and earth (22:1-5).<sup>74</sup>

Thus, John sees the souls of faithful Christians who have died and are now in heavenly glory. He uses three descriptive phrases to describe them, but there is only one group in view. This is made evident by the sentence that concludes the verse:

***And they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years . . . This is the first resurrection***

It seems very odd that John would describe Christian martyrs as “living.” Certainly, the “reigning” part can be easily understood, for, as shown above, the Scriptures are full of references to Christians sitting on thrones in heaven. But, what does he mean by “they lived”?

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<sup>74</sup> Brighton, *Revelation*, 559.

The way one interprets the “thousand years” will play a crucial role in how one interprets the “first resurrection” (v. 5b), to which this sentence refers.<sup>75</sup> Historic premillennialists, who interpret the “thousand years” literally believe this “first resurrection” is a physical, bodily resurrection, which occurs prior to the millennium at Christ’s Second Coming. Dispensationalists magically change this “first resurrection” into a two-phase bodily resurrection, the first phase occurring at the Rapture and the second at Christ’s Glorious Appearing about seven years later. These views are predicated upon the fact that the “thousand years” are literal. But, the amillennialist, who holds the proper view, knows that the “first resurrection” is a spiritual resurrection and refers to the conversion of believers.

Besides understanding the “thousand years” literally, the usual argument against interpreting this “first resurrection” as a spiritual resurrection (conversion) is that the same verb, ἐζήσαν, is used in 5a in reference to “the rest of the dead” who “*did not live* until the thousand years were brought to completion.” The argument is that the same verb must refer to the same *kind* of resurrection. Mounce summarizes:

If “they came to life” in v. 4 means a spiritual resurrection to new life in Christ, then we are faced with the problem of discovering within the context some persuasive reason to interpret the same verb differently within one concise unit. No such reason can be found. Alford’s much-quoted remark is worth repeating: “If, in a passage where *two resurrections* are mentioned . . . the first resurrection may be understood to mean *spiritual* rising with Christ, while the second means *literal* rising from the grave; - then there is an end of all significance in language, and Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to anything.”<sup>76</sup>

Mounce is certainly correct by noting that we must discover “within the context some persuasive reason to interpret the same verb differently within one concise unit.” However, he is dead wrong by concluding that “no such reason can be found.” And, as we will see, if Alford truly

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<sup>75</sup> See textual note on Αὕτη ἡ ἀνάστασις ἡ πρώτη, p. 17.

<sup>76</sup> Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 366.

means what he says, then Scripture is indeed “wiped out as a definite testimony to anything” for him, because Scripture does speak of two *different* resurrections, one *spiritual*, the other *physical*, within the same passage elsewhere. Let us begin by looking at the immediate context.

We have two central facts laid before us in this passage: 1) Satan is bound for a “thousand years”; 2) The saints live and reign for “a thousand years.” No one would argue that two periods of a “thousand years” are referred to here. It is obvious that these two things happen simultaneously throughout the same “thousand years.” The fact that we have shown that Scripture proves that Satan was bound during Christ’s first advent means that the living and reigning with Christ must have begun at the same time. If this is so, then the first thing the context tells us is that we have two different groups being resurrected at different times, for the second group does not “come to life” until *after* the “thousand years.” Thus, we have one group that “lived” *during* the “thousand years” and another that “lived” only *after* the “thousand years” were completed. But, this fact alone does not yet prove our case. We still must prove that two different *kinds* of resurrections are in view here. For that, we turn to the Scriptures.

The first thing we find when we search the Scriptures is that they clearly teach that there will be one, and only one, bodily resurrection, which will occur at Christ’s Second Coming on the Last Day:

One general resurrection of the body is a central truth in Biblical eschatology. The Scriptures clearly teach that the Triune God will raise all the dead bodily at Christ’s second coming, will give to the believers eternal life, and deliver the unbelievers to eternal damnation . . . (John 5:28-29; cf. Dan. 12:2; Acts 24:15) . . . This “general” resurrection will occur at Christ’s second advent, which is the “last day” (John 5:28-29; 6:39-40, 54; 1 Thess. 4:16; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Cor. 15:23). The premillennialist opinion that there will be two, three, or more bodily resurrections separated by periods of time simply cannot be sustained on the basis of what the Scriptures themselves teach concerning the resurrection of the dead.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> CTCR-LCMS, *The End Times*, 27.

The possibility of our text speaking about two or more *physical* resurrections is summarily defeated by the clear testimony of Scripture. There will be only one bodily resurrection and it will take place on the Last Day. But, our text does in fact speak of *two* resurrections. Does Scripture elsewhere speak of two different *kinds* of resurrections? Yes!

The passage that more than any other makes it clear that there are two different *kinds* of resurrections is John 5:25-29:

(25) Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and *is now here*, when *the dead* will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear *will live* (ζήσουσιν). (26) For as the Father has life (ζωὴν) in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life (ζωὴν) in himself. (27) And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. (28) Do not marvel at this (i.e., that the *dead will live now!*), for an hour is coming when *all who are in the tombs* will hear his voice (29) and *come out*, those who have done good to the resurrection (ἀνάστασιν) of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection (ἀνάστασιν) of judgment.

Clearly, our Lord is speaking here about two different *kinds* of resurrections. The first occurs when “those who hear the voice of the Son of God . . . will live” (this is the future tense of the same verb, ζάω, that is used in our text). Who are these that “hear the voice of the Son of God”? They are “the dead,” which refers to being spiritually dead, the state of all human beings upon conception since the Fall of Adam (cf. Rom. 5:12, et. al.). These spiritually dead people hear Christ’s voice *now* (“is now here”) and come to life. The *second resurrection* is the bodily resurrection which is still in the future (“the hour *is coming*”) and will involve all *who are in the tombs*. This refers to the state of the dead *body*, not to the soul. The souls of believers are in heaven and the souls of unbelievers are in the Abyss (Hell). Thus, we have a clear passage in Scripture that enlightens our understanding of the two resurrections in our text. The first is spiritual, the second is physical. Brighton concludes:

Here in the same context, the same discourse, *two different resurrections are described, one spiritual and one physical*. The spiritual resurrection takes place in the present time

through conversion to faith in Christ, while the physical resurrection will occur at a future time, that is, “at the consummation of the age.”<sup>78</sup>

We also have the writings of Paul which further prove that the NT teaches two different *kinds* of resurrections. In Eph. 2:1-6, Col. 3:1-4, and Rom. 6:1-5, Paul speaks about a spiritual rising with Christ, noting that those who were once dead now live by virtue of being baptized into Christ. Once again, Brighton concludes:

As John does in Jn 5:19-30, Paul also uses death to characterize the state of unbelief and separation from Christ, and resurrection language for conversion and newness of life in the state of faith as the result of being baptized into Christ, who has already been raised physically from the dead (Rom 6:1-5; Eph 2:1-6; Col 3:1-4).<sup>79</sup>

These passages simply highlight the major theme that runs throughout Scripture, i.e., redemption comes only through the Person and work of Jesus Christ. The entire Bible has Jesus Christ at its center. The message is clear throughout: Sin brought death into the world and only Jesus Christ, who is The Life, the source of life, the creator of life, can bring new life back into the world. How did He accomplish this? He took on human flesh, lived the perfect life that God’s law requires, suffered and died on the cross as the ultimate sacrifice that was absolutely necessary to atone for the sins of the world, and rose again after three days. He has forever solved the problem of sin. Human beings are conceived in sin and the only way they can be brought to life is through faith in Christ, which comes when they “hear His voice.” They hear His voice through the preaching of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit creates faith in their hearts, bringing them from death to life. This is the clear testimony of Scripture throughout, and this is what John refers to in our text as the “first resurrection.”

***5a. The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years were brought to completion.***

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<sup>78</sup> Brighton, *Revelation*, 562-563.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. See also Beale’s discussion on the NT evidence that supports this view (*The Book of Revelation*, 1004-1005).

While the saints “lived and reigned with Christ” throughout the “thousand years,” those who remained dead, i.e., had not experienced the spiritual resurrection, “did not live until the thousand years were brought to completion.” There is debate as to whether or not this phrase is original,<sup>80</sup> but, whether or not it is makes no difference in our interpretation. The context tells us exactly to whom “the rest of the dead” refer. These are unbelievers who were never brought to faith in Jesus Christ. Without such faith, they remain dead throughout the “thousand years.” That is, they remain dead in their sins and have no part in the true life that comes only through Christ (cf. John 10:10; 11:25; 14:6; 17:3; Eph. 2:1, 12; 4:18; Col. 1:21; 2:13; Matt. 8:22; Ps. 51:5; Rom. 5:12; 6:23; et. al.). John adds this sentence to emphasize the distinction between believers and unbelievers – believers *live*, unbelievers *remain dead!*

After the “thousand years” are brought to completion, unbelievers will be resurrected. However, they will in no way experience the “life” that believers experience. Their “coming to life” on the Last Day will simply consist of their souls being reunited with their physical bodies, but their state of being dead will continue throughout eternity, even as the believer’s state of being alive, which begins the moment he is converted to faith in Christ, will continue throughout eternity. Simon J. Kistemaker sums this up nicely:

In this chapter the souls that enjoy eternal life are contrasted with the rest of the human race, who remain dead. Notice that John devotes much attention to the saints who receive eternal life but only one line to the unbelievers. God never grants “the rest of the dead” eternal life; they are cut off forever from the source of life and are condemned to remain forever separated from God. The emphasis in verse 5a is on the negated verb *to live*, which indicates that all those who have worshipped the beast and have his mark are devoid of spiritual life.<sup>81</sup>

In sum, John describes two different *kinds* of resurrections in our text – a *spiritual* resurrection (conversion to faith in Christ) and a *physical* resurrection (the general, bodily

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<sup>80</sup> See textual note above.

<sup>81</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, *Revelation*, New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 539.

resurrection of all the dead on the Last Day). That this is what John sees is made even clearer when he goes on to describe the general, bodily resurrection later in the chapter. In 20:11-13, John sees the Final Judgment scene (cf. Matt. 25), where all the dead are gathered together to stand before the “Great White Throne” to receive their judgment. This is the one and only bodily resurrection that Scripture throughout teaches. This is deliberately contrasted to the “coming of life” of the saints during the “thousand years,” showing that John sees both the spiritual resurrection of the saints and the physical resurrection of all on the Last Day.

**6. *Blessed and holy is the one having part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and they will reign with Him for (the) thousand years.***

John concludes the text by stating the condition of the souls who “lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.” They are “blessed and holy,” for they have experienced the “first resurrection.” This is the condition not only of the souls in heaven, but of all believers in Jesus Christ. The book of Revelation teaches that believers are blessed because they have a) read, heard, and kept the words of the prophecy of Revelation (1:3; 22:7); b) died in the Lord (14:13); c) stayed awake and kept their *baptismal* garments on (16:15; 22:14); d) been invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:9). What all of these blessings indicate is the relationship believers have with their Lord Jesus Christ, who is *the* Blessed One. Believers are not blessed because of anything in themselves. Nothing they do on their own can make them blessed. It is precisely because they are united to Christ through faith that they are blessed.

It is for the same reason that they are called “holy.” Christ is *the* Holy One (cf. Ps. 16:10; Isa. 41:14; 49:7; John 6:69; et. al.). Holiness is an attribute of God and, because Jesus is God, He is, by nature, holy. Human beings cannot ever hope to become holy, for holiness belongs to God alone. However, through faith in Christ, believers are covered in Christ’s holiness. They

can rightly be called “holy” because, through Spirit-wrought faith, they are in Christ and He is in them (cf. Paul’s consistent use of ἐν χριστοῦ throughout his letters).

Because believers in Christ have experienced the “first resurrection” and are “blessed and holy,” they have no need to fear the “second death,” for “it has no power over them.” We have already heard of this “second death” in Rev. 2:11, where Christ says, “The one who conquers will not be hurt by the *second death*.” Throughout Revelation, “the one who conquers” refers to all believers in Christ, who are conquerors because He has conquered for them. But, what is this “second death”?

We need not look far to find a definition, for Rev. 20:14 tells us exactly what the “second death” is, namely, “the lake of fire.” The “lake of fire” is the place where Satan and all unbelievers will abide eternally and “will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (20:10). In short, the “second death” is *eternal death*. It is the opposite of eternal life. We can also conclude that, just as believers begin to experience eternal life the moment they are converted and continue to experience it after death, but will experience it in full when they are raised on the Last Day, so unbelievers begin to experience eternal death the moment they are conceived and continue to experience it after physical death, but will experience it in full on the Last Day. The “second death” can have no power over Christians who are alive in Christ. But, unbelievers, who are dead in their sins, will experience the full and horrifying effects of the “second death” throughout eternity.

As we have seen, the “first resurrection” refers to the *spiritual* resurrection of believers (conversion), the second resurrection refers to the general, *physical* resurrection of all people on the Last Day, and the “second death” refers to the *eternal death* of unbelievers. But, the fact that there is a “second death” means that there must be a first death. What is the *first death*?



Many commentators, even those who recognize that the “first resurrection” is spiritual, see the first death as the physical death that all people suffer at the end of their earthly lives.

Beale argues for this view:

It is clear that “the second death” in v. 6 is the spiritual death of the unrighteous, involving conscious, eternal suffering . . . On the other hand, the death of the righteous in v. 4 (e.g., “the souls of those *beheaded*”) is literal, physical death. Therefore, there is a *first death* of believers that is physical and different in nature from the *second death* of unbelievers, which is spiritual. If there are thus two different kinds of death, it is plausible that the corresponding resurrections would also differ. The resurrection of believers is spiritual, whereas the resurrection of unbelievers is physical.<sup>82</sup>

As interesting as this argument is, it does not hold water for it fails to account for the death that all people suffer when they are conceived in sin.

The first death does not refer to physical death, but rather to the death into which all people are born (Rom. 5:12; 6:23; Ps. 51:5). It is from this death that believers are “resurrected” at conversion: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were *dead in our trespasses*, made us *alive together with Christ* – by grace you have been saved – and *raised us up with him* and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:4-6). It is this “rising from death” that the father of the prodigal celebrates, “It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found” (Luke 15:32; cf. also Rom. 6:1-11; Col. 2:13; et. al.). If the first death does not refer to the state of unbelief that we are all born into, then from what do the saints rise in the “first resurrection”? To say that they rise from physical death is to negate their spiritual rising at conversion. But, as we have shown, the Scriptures clearly teach that the “first resurrection” refers to conversion, which necessitates the fact that believers were dead prior to coming to faith in Christ. That is to what the first death refers.

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<sup>82</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1005.

We can add more strength to this argument by noting that the physical death that believers must still endure has lost its entire sting (cf. 1 Cor. 15:55-56). In fact, physical death for Christians is a blessing; for it will finally bring an end to the remnants of sin that still affect them after conversion. As Paul says, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). Paul also describes Christians as “more than conquerors” and says that nothing, not even physical death, will be able to separate Christians from Christ (Rom. 8:38-39). Physical death for the Christian is not one to be feared, but one that will reap all blessings upon them. John sees the truth of this in v. 4 of our text.

Thus, the first death refers to “the state of unbelief”<sup>83</sup> and unbelievers, who never experience the “first resurrection,” remain in this first death until they are cast into the “lake of fire” (second death) on the Last Day. The following chart illustrates the interpretation of this commentary:

|  | BELEIVERS                     | UNBELIEVERS                                   |
|--|-------------------------------|---|
| First Death<br><i>(spiritual)</i>                | Birth                         | Birth   |
| First Resurrection<br><i>(spiritual)</i>         | Conversion to faith in Christ | Do not experience                             |
| Second Resurrection<br><i>(physical, bodily)</i> | On the Last Day               | On the Last Day                               |
| Second Death<br><i>(spiritual and physical)</i>  | Do not experience             | Thrown into “lake of fire”<br>on the Last Day |

John ends this section by further describing the saints, who “will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for the thousand years.” In doing so, he removes any remaining doubt as to who he sees in this vision. These are all Christians, both those who are still alive and those who have died in the faith. How can we be sure? Because Scripture tells us that Christians

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<sup>83</sup> Brighton, *Revelation*, 568.

are God's priests the moment they are converted to faith in Christ. Becker offers a nice summary:

We have translated ἔσονται ἱερεῖς with "they will continue to be priests," because they were priests already from the day of their conversion. Peter says that all Christians are a "royal priesthood" (1 Pe 2:9) and at the very beginning of Revelation John had told his readers that Jesus made us priests to God (1:6). In the light of that it would seem as though their priesthood will continue even during the thousand years. In what that priesthood consists during the thousand years we are not told. One of the major functions of a priest is to offer sacrifices. It can be said on the basis of the songs which we hear the redeemed sing in Revelation that these priests are most assuredly bringing their sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise before the throne. Since intercessory prayer is also one of the chief functions of the priestly office we might conceivably find in these words some justification for the statement in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession that the Lutheran Church concedes that the saints in heaven may pray for us (Apol. Xxi [ix], 8).<sup>84</sup>

Believers in Christ are "royal priests," who offer "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 2:5-10). What are these "spiritual sacrifices"? They are the songs of praise and thanksgiving, as well as intercessory prayers, as Becker notes, but there is more to it than that. The thrust of the passage from 1 Peter 2 suggests that the main purpose of God's priests is to proclaim the Gospel to all nations. Certainly Christ has instituted the Office of the Holy Ministry for this purpose, but it is also the purpose of each and every one of God's priests on earth to bear witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ. This is what God's priests will do throughout the entire NT era, until their High Priest, Jesus Christ, returns again in glory. All Christians are living and reigning with Christ throughout the "thousand years."

## CONCLUSION

This passage of Scripture, which has caused so much controversy throughout history, is one of great comfort to believers in Jesus Christ. No matter what believers face in this earthly life, they are assured that they "live and reign with Christ." That assurance will be fully manifest

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<sup>84</sup> Becker, *Revelation*, 314.

when Christ returns on the Last Day. But, the Great News is that we who believe in Christ already have that assurance now! This is the main point of John's vision. It is not merely to point out the glory we will have when we leave this earthly body, but also to show us that, through faith in Christ, we experience that glory here and now. In fact, this is the main purpose of the entire book of Revelation, to assure Christians that their hope in Christ is not in vain, and to assure them of their victory over all the powers of evil in the world via their faith in Christ, who has conquered sin, death, and the devil. Those who view this passage as depicting events that will happen in the future inevitably fail to draw the comfort this passage is meant to convey to them.

This study has proven that the "thousand years" is figurative for the entire NT era, i.e., from Christ's first advent to His second advent. This has been proven by the Scriptures themselves, which testify to the fact that Satan was bound by Christ during his first advent. This assures us that the "thousand years" began at the conclusion of Christ's first advent and will continue until God brings this period to completion. When He does, Satan will be loosed for a "short time" so that he might "deceive the nations" into making a desperate and futile attack on Christ's church. Satan's "little season," which is synonymous with the coming of the Antichrist, will come to an end at Christ's Second Coming, at which time the general resurrection and final judgment will occur. Satan and all unbelievers will be cast into the "lake of fire," experiencing the "second death" for all eternity. Believers, i.e., those who have "lived and reigned" with Christ throughout the "thousand years," will enter into the glorious, eternal kingdom so beautifully described for us in the last two chapters of Revelation. There is no great mystery to all of this, for the Scriptures reveal the meaning of this passage with absolute clarity. When we

allow Scripture to interpret Scripture, we have little trouble understanding this vision given to John.

Thus, all Christians should derive great comfort from this passage. As Brighton concludes:

How “blessed and holy is the one who has a share in the first resurrection” (20:6), in this millennial reign of the Lord Christ! Those who rule with Christ during the thousand years sit on thrones in judgment, suffer persecution because of their witness, and do not bear the mark of the beast or worship its image (20:4). They are blessed, for “over these the second death [“the lake of fire,” 20:14] does not have authority” (20:6). Even now while still on earth, Christians are and will continue to be priests of God and of the Christ, and their destiny is to reign with him now through the millennium and then forever in the new heaven and new earth (20:6; cf. 21:1-4).<sup>85</sup>

Blessed and holy, indeed, are all the saints in Jesus Christ, who live and reign with Him for a “thousand years” and forever more! Amen!

Soli Deo gloria

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<sup>85</sup> Brighton, *Revelation*, 569.

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