



THE REIGN OF SATAN

The End of Evil

October 15, 2017

Revelation 20

The Thousand Years

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit[a] and a great chain. 2 And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3 and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.

4 Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. 5 The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

The Defeat of Satan

7 And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison 8 and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. 9 And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven[b] and consumed them, 10 and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Judgment Before the Great White Throne

11 Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small,

standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. 13 And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

20:1-3 The subjugation of the dragon

The description of the subjugation of the 'dragon' (Satan) continues without a break the account of the conquest of the evil trinity which had gathered 'the kings of the whole world ... for the battle on the great day of God Almighty' (16:14). The paragraphs should never have been separated. After the judgment on the antichrist and the false prophet and the multitudes they had deceived, the ultimate enemy is dealt with, namely the devil, who had inspired the rebellion against God. No great contest is necessary; an angel *seized him, bound him with a chain, threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him*—a fourfold means of ensuring that he was removed from all contact with humanity on earth (for the symbolism see Is. 24:21–22). As the text states, this was to *keep him from deceiving the nations any more*—until a time decreed by God when he should be released for a short period, *i.e. until the thousand years were ended*. The release, as the imprisonment, are for the accomplishment of God's inscrutable purpose.

Note. The thousand-year kingdom of Christ. The 'binding' of Satan for a thousand years coincides with the 'reign of Christ' for a thousand years (20:4). This thousand years' reign has gained for itself the name 'millennium' (*mille* is Latin for 1,000), and the doctrine is called 'chiliasm' (*chilias* is Greek for 1,000). The limitation of the Messiah's reign to a thousand years is not found in the OT, but the kingdom over which the Messiah rules is typically represented as a kingdom of this world, centred in Jerusalem. Is. 65:17–25 and 66:22–23 speak of the creation of new heavens and a new earth, but the description of the kingdom of God therein is wholly in terms of this world (a joyful Jerusalem, human longevity, stability in homes and farms, happy children, peaceable animals). Some apocalyptic writers emphasized this conception of new creation, so among the Jews it became common to distinguish between the reign of the Messiah in this world and the kingdom of God in the new world (though not without the Messiah). Great diversity about the length of the Messianic kingdom existed among the rabbis. Suggestions were that it would last forty years (corresponding to Israel's years in the wilderness), or 400 years (Israel's stay in Egypt), or 4,000 years (from creation to the present). Other views were that it would last 365 days (Is. 63:4 speaks of a 'day' of vengeance and a 'year' of redemption) or 365,000 years (Ps. 90:4 speaks of a day as a thousand years with the Lord). This latter scripture became conjoined with the idea of history as recapitulating the week of creation: as the six days of creation were followed by God's Sabbath rest, so the six days of human

history would yield to the Sabbath of history, the kingdom of the Messiah, which would be followed by an eighth day without end. This view is stated in ch. 15 of the Epistle of Barnabas, a Christian work roughly contemporary with Revelation. For John the 'thousand years' probably indicated the character of the kingdom of Christ rather than its length, *i.e.* it speaks of its nature as the Sabbath of human history, and so links with the teaching in Hebrews of the kingdom as the Sabbath-rest that awaits the people of God (Heb. 4). Doubtless John would have been confirmed in this interpretation by his reading of Ezk. 36–48, where Israel's restoration to their land under the Messiah, the new David, (chs. 36–37) is followed by the rebellion of Gog (chs. 38–39) and the promise of a new Jerusalem with a new temple (chs. 40–48). The prayer Jesus taught his disciples would have been yet more important ('your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'; Mt. 6:10); and John would also have known the beatitudes ('Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven ... Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth'; Mt. 5:3, 5).

Paul's exposition of the kingdom of Christ in 1 Cor. 15:22–25 is closely related to John's exposition and indicates the likelihood of its being an established tradition in the early church. Certainly it was so in the early centuries, but it was opposed by some significant Christian leaders in favour of more extravagant interpretations. Augustine's interpretation, that the millennium is the period of the church between Christ's first and second advents, became the official teaching of both the Catholic and Reformed churches. It is exemplified in Hendriksen's commentary on Revelation (*More than Conquerors*, IVP, 1939); he identifies the binding of Satan (20:1–3) with his ejection from heaven (12:9), the thousand years of the church's power (20:4–6) with its time of triumphant witness (11:2–6; 12:14–15), the onset of the armies of Gog and Magog (20:7–9) with the persecution of the church by the antichrist (11:7–10; 13:7–8), the ensuing destruction of those armies (20:9) with Armageddon (19:19–21), and the last judgment (20:11–15) with the Messianic judgment (14:14–20).

This is a plausible and interesting interpretation of the text, but seems to entail insuperable difficulties. In 12:9 Satan is cast out of heaven, where he may no longer accuse the saints before God, *to* earth, where his war against the church *intensifies*, because his time is short; in 20:1–3 he is taken *from* earth and imprisoned in the Abyss, that he may no longer corrupt humanity. The judgment of 14:14–20 is aligned with the Messianic judgments of the last times, above all that which happens at Christ's coming (19:19–21); whereas the last judgment of 20:11–15 is of all generations of humankind. The conquest of the evil powers is described in the indivisible passage 19:19–21:3, and that takes place at Christ's advent in glory, which is followed by his thousand years' reign. Add to that the impossibility of reconciling the assumption of John, shared by the prophets generally, that the Lord may come soon (1:3; 22:20) with the notion that the thousand years' kingdom will precede his coming, one has difficulty in attributing this scheme of interpretation to him. John well knows that the kingdom of God was established through Christ's redemption (ch. 5; 12:10–12); the kingdom that the Lord will bring at his second coming will be the triumph of that which he brought through his incarnate ministry, hence the revelation of that which

has been in the world from Easter onwards.

Why, then, does God permit the release of Satan at the end of the thousand years? John would have answered, 'It is so written'. The prophecy of Gog's attack upon Israel (Ezk. 38-39) is set *after* God's restoration of the people to the kingdom. Gn. 1-3 supplies much of the symbolism of the city of God in Revelation; John's meditation on those chapters could have suggested to him that as Satan was allowed to enter the Garden to expose the nature of human hearts, so he will be allowed to do the like in the final paradise, so that all hostility to God can be brought into the open and be annihilated before his reign is made absolute. Like other apocalyptists, John would have known that the fulness of God's kingdom cannot be attained within the limitations of this world, not even in a restored paradise; the goal of creation can be reached only through resurrection like that of Christ.

20:4-6 The millennium

The description of Christ's kingdom is extraordinarily brief; no word is given of the conditions of life in the thousand years, only a bare statement of who will exercise rule in it. There is reason to believe, however, that the extended description of the city of God in 21:9-22:5 applies to the kingdom in the millennial age as well as in the coming eternal age. 19:6-7 celebrates the marriage of the bride at Christ's coming; 21:9 reveals the bride to be the holy city Jerusalem. The hosts of Gog surround *the camp of God's people, the city he loves* (20:9), which must be the city of God, the new Jerusalem in the world. The nations walk in the light of the city and bring their glory into it; but nothing unclean enters its gates (21:24-25), and the leaves of the tree of life heal the nations (22:2). Such statements are even more appropriate to the city in the world than in the new creation. There is not a line in 21:9-22:5 that could not apply to the kingdom in this world, which suggests that it means life in history as well as in eternity.

4 Who are those *seated on thrones*? Dn. 7:9-14, 27 give the answer: 'the saints, the people of the Most High', with which Rev. 5:9-14 and 19:7 agree. Of these 'saints' John makes special mention of the martyrs and confessors of Christ, for the encouragement of all who may be called to tread the path of martyrdom. **5** *The rest of the dead did not come to life* almost certainly relates to the dead without Christ; John would not deny the resurrection of the church at Christ's coming (see the comments on v 4; *cf.* on 11:11-12; 1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thes. 4:16). **6** The fifth beatitude declares the blessedness of those who share in *the first resurrection*. *The second death has no power over them* (*cf.* v 14 and on 2:11), and they will be *priests of God and of Christ* as they reign with him. Their reign, therefore, is their service of God and humanity.

20:7-10 The last insurrection of evil

As mentioned above, John here follows Ezekiel's prophecy of the invasion of Israel's land by Gog and Magog after the Messianic kingdom has been established. Whereas in Ezk. 38 'Gog of the land of Magog' comes from the north to invade the holy land, in John's vision Gog and

Magog stand for *the nations in the four corners of the earth* (8). They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the city God loves—a city some 1,400 miles (2,200 km) long, wide and high (21:16)! The event is as symbolic as Armageddon and represents an attack on the manifestation of Christ's rule in the world. **9b–10** The would-be destroyers are themselves destroyed, and the devil is thrown into the fiery lake, never to trouble humanity again.

20:11–15 *The last judgment*

If the fleeing of heaven and earth from the face of God is to be viewed as the precursor of the new heavens and earth (*cf.* 2 Pet. 3:10–13), the spectacle of the great white throne as the one reality on which humankind can gaze is indeed an awesome sight. But the description is likely to be symbolic, to enhance the terrifying grandeur of the scene—the last overwhelming theophany from which creation wants to escape but cannot (*cf.* 6:12–17).

12 *The dead, great and small, stand before the throne, i.e.* all humankind is summoned to judgment. Is the church exempted from this? 20:4–6 suggests that it is, but in that case believers will have been judged earlier (*cf.* 3:5; 2 Cor. 5:10), but John gives no hint of this. The passage stands for the necessity of all to be judged, saints and sinners alike, and there's plenty of time for it to happen! The judgment proceeds according to two criteria: first, *according to what they had done*, and secondly, the testimony of the books. This latter feature is taken from Dn. 7:10, which reflects both ordinary court procedure and the habit of Persian kings to record every detail of events in their provinces. The important thing is that the joint testimony of the two criteria agrees, and the book of life will reveal it.

14–15 *Death and Hades* represent the fact of dying and the condition entered on after death. Both *were thrown into the lake of fire*, a circumstance that shows the sheer pictorial nature of the scene, including the lake of fire. Into that *lake* were thrown any whose *name was not found written in the book of life*. That *lake* has its origin in the Abyss, the home of the monster, the enemy of God, and traditionally the abode of evil spirits and the place where fallen angels were punished. It is the alternative to the city of God. Accordingly, John represents the same reality by the very different symbol of life outside the city (21:27) in contrast to life inside the city (21:24–26). Significantly it all begins in connection with the new creation, the work of God in Christ; we can be assured that grace and truth (Jn. 1:17) will be as truly united in the judgment as they were in the cross of Christ.¹

1. John says nothing to place this chapter in the time sequence. He simply says that he *saw an angel*. Except that he came from *heaven*, the angel is not distinguished in any way.

¹ Beasley-Murray, G. R. (1994). Revelation. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., pp. 1451–1453). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

John does not describe his appearance. He concentrates on what he does. The final unimportance of Satan is perhaps indicated in the fact that it is not the Father who deals with him, nor the Christ, but only an unnamed angel. The angel had *the key of the Abyss* (see note on 9:1) and *a great chain*. Both are clearly symbolical for there cannot be a key to the abyss nor can a spirit be shackled with a chain. But they show that the angel had authority over the abyss and that he could restrain Satan.

2. The angel *seized* the evil one, who is given all four of the titles by which he is designated in this book: *the dragon*, the *ancient serpent*, the *devil* and the *Satan* (see notes on 12:3, 9). The angel proceeded to tie him up for *a thousand years*. We should take this symbolically. One thousand is the cube of ten, the number of completeness. We have seen it used over and over again in this book to denote completeness of some sort and John is surely saying here that Satan is bound for the complete time that God has determined.

3. The angel *threw Satan into the Abyss* and proceeded to lock and seal it. Satan is completely controlled (cf. Isa. 24:22). He is locked up not as a punishment, but in order that (*hina* introduces the purpose) he may not deceive the nations during the thousand years. Those who interpret all this of the end-time object that Satan is so obviously active that it is nonsense to talk of him as bound during the present age. They remind us that elsewhere John stresses his present activity (12:12).

But we must bear in mind John's singular ability to concentrate on one thing at a time (in ch. 4 he can describe heaven with no mention of the Lamb!). We must remember also his complete indifference to the possibility of reconciling one of his pictures with another (see note on 1:17). It is true that he can picture all the evil on earth as coming from a very active Satan. But it is also true that he never thinks of Satan as having a free hand. Again and again he uses the expression 'is given' when he speaks of the authority to do any evil act. Here he says specifically that Satan was restrained, not from all evil, but *from deceiving the nations* during *the thousand years*. From verse 8 we see that this means that Satan cannot gather the nations for the final cataclysm. The End is in God's control, not Satan's. John may also mean that, though Satan is busy, he is restrained from doing his worst. He cannot destroy the church. He cannot even destroy the martyrs, for they reign with Christ. The period of restraint will end, for Satan *must (dei)* be loosed, though only *for a short time*. This is God's way of bringing on the End and because it is God's plan Satan *must* be released. If we ask where the nations come from when all have been destroyed (19:18, 21) the answer probably is that those associated with the beast and the false prophet have been defeated, now also those associated with Satan.

iv. The first resurrection (20:4-6)

Attention is concentrated now on those who have suffered for Christ's sake. They reign with him through the thousand years. This section is thus contemporaneous with the preceding. We expect the reign of Christ but we get that of his people.

4. John saw *thrones* (cf. Dan. 7:9). He does not say where they were. Those who see a literal millennium usually place them on earth (cf. v. 1). But John does not say this. He uses 'throne' forty-seven times in all, and except for Satan's throne (2:13) and that of the beast (13:2; 16:10) all appear to be in heaven. That would fit the present passage. John does not say how many thrones there were nor who sat on them. But he goes on to speak of those slain for Jesus' sake as reigning through the thousand years, so presumably it is these who sit on the thrones.

To them was given *authority to judge*, or the Greek may mean that justice was done: 'judgment was given for them'. The passionate concern for justice throughout this book (and for that matter throughout the New Testament) is not to be missed. John saw the thrones first and then *the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God*. In that he speaks of souls only and not of bodies (contrast 1 Cor. 15) it may be that he is thinking of a temporary state. For the thousand years the souls of the martyrs reign with Christ in bliss, but the final state awaits the general resurrection.

Beheaded (*pepelekismenōn*) strictly means 'killed with an axe'. In the Roman Republic public execution was by beheading with an axe, but in the Empire this had given way to the use of the sword. But here the word clearly means 'executed', irrespective of the method. We cannot confine it to the beheaded. Some take the following words (introduced with *kai hoitines*) to introduce another class (so Swete). In that case the word would probably point to those later called confessors, people who in a persecution were not executed but suffered a smaller penalty such as imprisonment. But NIV is almost certainly right in taking the words to explain the preceding (so Charles, Beasley-Murray, and others), for from 13:15–17 it appears that those who would not receive the mark of the beast were slain. John's concern here is with the martyrs. For *testimony for Jesus* see note on 1:2 (where the same expression is translated 'testimony of Jesus'). With this is linked *the word of God*. This will point to much the same activity, but there will be in mind also the fact that this could be used as a designation of Christ (19:13).

From the positive things they stood for, John moves on to the negative. They did not worship *the beast* nor *his image* and they refused *his mark*. Then he says they *came to life* (*ezēsan*, 'lived'). This is not the usual word for resurrection (though cf. John 11:25). It appears to mean that the martyrs, though slain in ignominy, lived on in heaven with Christ. But not only did they live, they *reigned with Christ a thousand years*. They have not lost everything. They have gained royalty and triumph.

5. The martyrs are thus differentiated from others. *The rest* must await the conclusion of *the thousand years*. Grammatically, *this is the first resurrection* could refer to this raising at the end of the thousand years. But the sense seems to require that it be taken to denote the raising of the martyrs to life in glory with Christ. It is a strong point of the pre-millennial view that a first *resurrection* implies a second. Other views make the two resurrections of different types, but the pre-millennial view does not. On the other hand

John speaks only of one resurrection. He never speaks of a ‘second resurrection’ to correspond to the first. And the expression could be taken to mean ‘the first group to enjoy resurrection’ (Ford).

6. For *blessed*, etc. see note on 1:3. To have a *part in the first resurrection* is a singularly blessed and holy experience. One negative blessing and two positive ones are singled out. *The second death has no power* over such people (see note on v. 14). Positively they are to be *priests of God and of Christ* (cf. 5:10; Isa. 61:6; note also the close connection between God and Christ). And they are to *reign with him for a thousand years*. The supreme joy of the blessed ones is that they are associated with Christ in priesthood and royalty.

v. Satan’s final overthrow (20:7–10)

John reverts briefly to a theme he has mentioned several times, namely the gathering together of all the forces of evil at the end-time to do battle with God. Here he deals with it very shortly. The triumph of God is speedy and certain.

7. At the end of the millennium *Satan will be released*. We might have expected an angel to set him free, just as an angel had confined him, but John does not say how it will be done. His *when* is *hotan*, ‘whenever’, so that the time is also uncertain (as far as it goes this supports a symbolical meaning for the thousand years).

8. Upon his release Satan will resume his deceitful activities, but on a larger scale. Like the ‘unclean spirits like frogs’ he will gather the nations for the final battle (16:13–16). The expression *Gog and Magog* seems to mean all people. Gog is mentioned in the Bible only in a genealogy (1 Chr. 5:4), in a prophecy (Ezek. 38–39), and here. Magog is found similarly in genealogies (Gen. 10:2; 1 Chr. 1:5), the Ezekiel passage, and here. Magog appears to be the land from which Gog came (Ezek. 38:2, though in LXX Magog seems to be a prince). In later Judaism Gog and Magog were thought of as two leaders. In apocalyptic writings, for example, they often symbolize the forces of evil. For John the combination is another way of referring to the hosts of the wicked. He has in mind the last great attack of evil on the things of God. Satan will gather all his armies. He will assemble the greatest possible number to oppose God (*in number they are like the sand on the seashore*). This is the decisive moment, the final battle (cf. 17:14; 19:19).

9. John changes to the past tense, *they marched*, but it is the same sequence. *The breadth of the earth* is a curious expression in this connection. It probably means that their armies were very large. They encircled ‘the camp of the saints’ (NIV, *God’s people*) and ‘the beloved city’. Both expressions appear to mean the people of God. The ‘camp’ sees them as ‘soldiers of God’, and there might also be an allusion to the encampments of God’s people during their wilderness wanderings. ‘The beloved city’ should surely be understood over against ‘the great city’. This latter we have seen to mean people in organized community, organized against God. The former will then signify spiritual people, willingly under the dominion of God. John is picturing the hosts of evil as taking up a threatening position over against the

servants of God. We are prepared for a great battle. But none comes. Exactly as in 19:19–21, John goes on immediately to the annihilation of the wicked. This time it is done by *fire* which *came down from heaven* (cf. Ezek. 38:22). Consistently John thinks of the power of God as so overwhelming that there cannot be even the appearance of a battle when he wills to destroy evil.

10. *The devil* is now characterized as him *who deceived* (cf. v. 8). *Them* will refer to the nations (v. 8). The devil is now finally *thrown into the lake of burning sulphur* to join *the beast and the false prophet* (19:20) in torment *day and night for ever and ever*. There is no intermission and no end.

vi. The last judgment (20:11–15)

John speaks now of an awe-inspiring judgment. All the dead are judged. This is the final overthrow of the wicked and even of death and Hades. Beasley-Murray points out that in chapters 6 to 19 we have the judgment of God in history, here his judgment on history.

11. John depicts a scene of infinite majesty. He saw *a great white throne and him who was seated on it*. He does not tell us whether this was God or Christ but ‘he that sits on the throne’ usually means God (e.g. 5:1, 7, 13), so it is probably the Father who is meant here. Sometimes we are told that Christ is to be the Judge of all (Matt. 25:31–46; John 5:22), while Paul can refer to both the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10) and that of God (Rom. 14:10). We should understand that the Father is the Judge, but that he judges through the Son (he ‘has entrusted all judgment to the Son’, John 5:22).

Of this scene Kiddle says, ‘every irrelevance is cast aside, until the theme is stated in stark simplicity; nothing is allowed to distract our eyes from the spectacle of the Judge, and the judged. It is John’s rare power of laying bare an essential truth, without swerving aside into unnecessary qualification and expansion, that is responsible for the omission of Christ’s figure in the last Assize.’ John invests the scene with the greatest solemnity. There was something so terrible in the demeanour of him on the throne that earth and heaven themselves *fled* away from him. *There was no place for them*, i.e. they were completely destroyed.

12. *The dead stood before the throne, great and small*. None was excepted. *Books were opened* (cf. Dan. 7:10). John does not say what books these were, but the context shows that they were books in which were recorded the deeds of all people. *Another* book sets this one off from the rest. As it is called *the book of life*, it is that in which are inscribed the names of those to whom God gives eternal life. Sweet points out that NEB, ‘the roll of the living’, misses the truth that the book ‘embodies the redemptive intention of (the Lamb’s) sacrifice; cf. those “written for life” in Jerusalem in Isa. 4³’. *The dead were judged* according to what was written, *according to what they had done*. It is the common New Testament teaching that judgment is on the basis of works.

13. The separate mention of *the sea* and *death and Hades* as giving up *the dead* in them is a way of indicating that all the dead are included. None is overlooked. It is carping criticism to complain that the sea was destroyed in verse 11 and is in existence here. We have seen many times that John does not try to keep his visions consistent (see on 1:17). Earlier his thought was that in the end the universe will pass away. Here it is that all the dead, wherever they have died, are included in the judgment. He expresses both ideas vividly as befits a seer relating visions.

Some have said that only the wicked are in mind here, affirming that in Revelation Hades is never neutral but that it always refers to the abode of the departed wicked. This is sharply criticized by Kiddle: 'If "Hades" is so evil that the righteous may not dwell there, "Death" also is so evil that the righteous may not die; the two are wedded in one phrase. We must set ourselves against such absurdities: "Death" is the common fate of men, Christian and pagan together: and "Hades" is their common destination, until the Judgment day brings release.' Some, again, think that the mention of the dead in the sea separate from those in Hades means that those who perish at sea do not go to Hades. But John is not concerned with the minutiae of the disposal of the dead. He is affirming strongly that all the dead, wherever they are, are included in the judgment. And he repeats that all were *judged according to what they had done*.

14. Just as the beast and the false prophet and the devil had all been thrown into the lake of fire (19:20; 20:10), so now *death and Hades were thrown* into the same *lake*. This is not an easy idea, but John appears to mean that death and Hades are ultimately as powerless as the other forces of evil. Finally there is no power but that of God. All else is completely impotent. The end of the verse explains that being cast into this lake *is the second death*.

15. The chapter ends with the affirmation that anyone whose *name* did not appear *in the book of life ... was thrown* into this *lake*. John sees a sharp division into the saved and the lost. In the end people will either share in the bliss of heaven or find their place in the lake of fire.²

Satan Removed into the Abyss (20:1-3)

The Context: The proclamation of the seventh bowl "It is done!" announced the accomplished destruction of Babylon (16:17). Its doom was then elaborated with new images and from new perspectives (chaps. 17-18). The antithesis to its doom are the Hallelujah choruses which celebrated the reign of God and the marriage of the Lamb (19:1-10). With Antichrist's power base laid waste (16:17-18:24), John's vision of 19:11-21 moved from the seventh bowl (16:17) to elaborating the sixth and the fifth bowl. The brief reference to the battle of Armageddon (16:16) became the subject of 19:11-21.

² Morris, L. (1987). *Revelation: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 20, pp. 223-230). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

The outcome of this battle is the destruction of Antichrist and the false prophet together with their supporters. Thus Christ's parousia signifies not only the marriage of the Lamb (19:6–8), attested through hallelujah choruses in heaven and on earth, it also involves clearing the earth of all anti-God forces. The interlude after the sixth bowl had also mentioned the dragon whom John's hearers know to be the ultimate cause of evil. The elimination of the antagonist who had been mentioned first (chap. 12) is narrated last. Moreover, his elimination is narrated in two visions, representing two stages that are separated by a thousand years (20:1–10).

Such a two-stage elimination of Satan was unknown in the Old Testament, the Jewish and Christian tradition. Therefore the question arises, Why would John introduce it at this point? He could have knocked off the dragon together with the other two beasts in 19:20, as any attentive hearer would have expected. The answer to this question is of necessity hypothetical, since our knowledge of the religious context of the communities that John was addressing is rather limited and dependent primarily on what he said. I am suggesting that John had at least three reasons for presenting the elimination of Satan in two stages. One, it gave him the opportunity to undercut the gnosticizing idea that the believers' resurrection had already happened in their baptism (cf. 2 Tim. 2:18). Two, it gave him the opportunity to reinterpret the apocalyptic notion of a preliminary messianic interim kingdom, prior to the appearance of the kingdom of God, and to introduce the millennial reign with Christ as the beginning of the eternal kingdom. Three, he could interpret Ezekiel's Gog-Magog prophecy, which may have bothered some of his people.

1–3—After the judgment of Antichrist and the false prophet comes the devil's turn. In a new vision John saw an angel descending from heaven who simply **seized the dragon, ... bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit**, the abyss, a cavern beneath the sea (cf. 11:7; 13:1). What God had accomplished in primal times when he bound and imprisoned the powers of chaos will be repeated in the end time (Isa. 24:21–22). The first stage of the dragon's defeat was his expulsion from heaven (12:7–9). His next defeat was inflicted by those who "have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (12:11). The "short" time in which he could vent his fury on God's people on earth (12:12, 13–17) has now ended. His thousand-year imprisonment in the abyss constitutes his preliminary punishment and the total liberation of the earth from sin, idolatry, and the devil. He can **deceive the nations no more**. The anti-God nations have been eliminated already (19:21). Who those nations of v. 3 are and where they come from will be discussed when we meet "Gog and Magog" in v. 8. Here we note that with **the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan**, in the abyss, the ultimate cause of evil is removed from the *earth*. His removal is an aspect of Christ's parousia.

Interlude 1: The Millennial Reign with Christ (20:4–6)

These three verses have caused more confusion than any other in this letter and their interpretations by second- and third-century chiliasts were the reason why quite a few

bishops and synods in Eastern churches did not want to include Revelation among the canonical writings of the New Testament.

The difficulties that interpreters have had with this text in centuries past continue to this day. The magisterial commentary on Revelation in English by R. H. Charles illustrates rather well the problems that scholars encountered in the concluding chapters. Charles found the text beginning with 20:4 to the end of Revelation so confusing that he theorized that John must have died before completing his work and that beginning with 20:4 a “faithful but unintelligent disciple” tried to bring his master’s work to conclusion. Unfortunately this disciple produced an ending “full of confusion and contradiction,” making it “impossible for us to accept the text as it stands” (Charles, 2:144–147). While German scholars thought that the text beginning with 20:4 came about by the fusion of two sources or authors (Bousset), or three (Johannes Weiss), or four (Spitta), Charles was satisfied with just one, but a rather unintelligent one. “We stand aghast at the hopeless mental confusion that dominates the present structure of these chapters,” beginning with 20:4 (Charles, 2:145).

The difficulties that Charles had with the present text were largely of his own making. First, he assumed that John meant to compose an apocalyptic timetable, and therefore Charles saw interpolations and dislocations of the text even prior to 20:4. For instance, the first four trumpets (8:7–12) were regarded as an interpolation, because their cosmic catastrophes belong to the end, not in chap. 8. The price he had to pay for rejecting the recapitulation theory was his hypotheses of transpositions and later additions in the text. Second, he ignored that John wrote a letter, not a treatise on the “Semitic philosophy of religion” and of history (Charles, 2:144). Through his letter, John addressed specific people and communities, and he exhorted them also in his new Jerusalem vision to abstain from idolatry, fornication, and so forth. Charles found these references of 21:8, 27; 22:15 to be absolute contradictions to the nature of the new Jerusalem and the new creation (Charles, 1:50–55; 2:145–226). True enough, but irrelevant. He missed the significance of the letter genre for interpreting Revelation. Third, Charles, like many before and after him, failed to see that John’s millennium is not a preliminary messianic interim but the beginning of the eternal kingdom of God and of his Messiah (cf. 11:15). Charles’s penetrating questions and the difficulties he encountered with the text enable us to pursue an alternative to his solution which begins by leaving the text as is.

When we consider the historical context in which John wrote, it seems probable that already in some of his messages (chaps. 2–3) he was also arguing against gnosticizing notions of an overly realized eschatology. The false apostles, the Nicolaitans and Jezebel (2:2, 15, 20), presumably spoke of their baptism, or rebirth, in terms of their “first resurrection” (cf. 2 Tim. 2:18). At any rate, the expression “the first resurrection” was foreign to apocalyptic traditions. On the other hand a letter like Ephesians could say that God “raised us up [the living believers] with him [Christ], and made us sit with him in the heavenly places” (Eph. 2:5–6). Ideas like these could be developed into the notion that our “first resurrection” has taken place in baptism and that our present life is to be unencumbered by tribulations and crosses but lived according to the knowledge of the depths of God or of Satan and that the future has little importance for us. If this describes part of John’s context, then the interlude (20:4–6) gave him an opportunity to set the record straight. “The first resurrection” for him presupposes the death of believers and the parousia of Christ. It will take place in the millennial kingdom, not before. First comes death, and only then the resurrection, just

as it is also in 1 Corinthians 15, not the other way around, as gnosticizing teachers held. Realized eschatology, which John affirmed (1:5–6; 5:9–10), is inseparable from its future dimension. The millennium signals “the first resurrection.”

No one denies that John’s context was also characterized by diverse apocalyptic traditions. I am suggesting that he and his people were aware of speculations concerning a temporary messianic interim kingdom prior to the appearance of the eternal reign of God. Traditions about a preliminary messianic interim kingdom are *not* found in the Old Testament or in the New Testament. They appear among some rabbis, for example, Rabbi Akiba (martyred about A.D. 135), who thought that the Messiah’s reign would last 40 years on the basis of Ps. 90:15 in conjunction with Deut. 8:2–3. Other rabbis reached different conclusions concerning its duration all the way up to 7,000 years. (For details, see Billerbeck, 3:824–827). Messianic interim kingdom speculations appear also in the apocalyptic tradition of Judaism. According to 4 Ezra 7:26–33, the Messiah shall rule for 400 years on earth over those who are alive at the time of his coming. Then the Messiah as well as all human beings shall die and the world shall return to primeval silence for seven days, as it was at the beginning. After that follows the final judgment. Also in 2 *Baruch* the Messiah’s rule on earth is of limited but unspecified duration. When his time is over, he returns to heaven and the final judgment commences (2 *Baruch* 29–30; cf. 40:2–3).

There are two reasons why we may assume that John was aware of apocalyptic messianic interim kingdom traditions. One, they do turn up in Papias and in subsequent chiliasts of the church. We know that in the aftermath of the catastrophe of A.D. 70 Jewish Christians such as Philip and his four prophesying daughters (Acts 21:8–9) moved from Palestine to Asia Minor (Eusebius, *C.H.* 3.33.3). John himself may have been one of them. Some of them brought apocalyptic messianic interim traditions with them which later appeared in chiliasts like Justin, who was converted in Ephesus around A.D. 130. These Jewish Christians of John’s time may have hoped that the Messiah Jesus would return, rebuild Jerusalem, fulfill the prophecies concerning the Jewish people, and convert them. And then, after a messianic interim, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, and the kingdom of God would come. Naturally this reconstruction is hypothetical. But, we may ask, where did chiliasts, like Justin, get their ideas? Not from our letter, but through other persons’ traditions. Moreover, we know that in chap. 11 John incorporated Jewish-Christian traditions about Jerusalem. And it is fairly clear that in the text before us, 20:4–6, he dealt with and changed a messianic interim tradition. For him, there is to be no rebuilding of historic Jerusalem by the Messiah. All that is left is its name, the new Jerusalem, which will be borne by a community that shall descend from heaven.

Two, John’s literary structure suggests that he combined the sequence of Ezekiel 37–48 with another sequence found in an apocalyptic tradition similar to 4 Ezra 7 and that he gave a new twist to both. John followed the outline of Ezekiel 37–48 in his concluding chapters. Thus the millennial reign with its resurrection of the saints (20:4–6) alludes to Ezekiel 37; the battle of Gog and Magog (20:7–10) alludes to Ezekiel 38–39. In his new Jerusalem vision he made use of Ezekiel 40–48. His modifications of Ezekiel’s visions are most obvious in the absence of a temple within the new Jerusalem (21:22), in the vision of the final judgment (20:11–15) which is lacking in Ezekiel, and in what looks, at first sight, like the notion of a messianic interim reign which is also not found in Ezekiel. With respect to a messianic interim kingdom, followed by a final judgment, apocalyptic traditions, similar to 4 Ezra 7, supply the missing link.

While John retained the notion of a final judgment, he radically reinterpreted the idea of a preliminary messianic kingdom. In contrast to apocalyptic traditions, like 4 Ezra 7, he insisted that it will not be the living who shall reign with Christ but the dead martyrs and saints who are raised from the dead (20:4–6). Moreover, and even more important, those who reign with Christ after their resurrection shall no more die, just as the resurrected Christ shall not die at the end of the millennium. When Gog and Magog march against them (20:7–10), they are secure. Fire consumes their enemies, as Ezekiel had promised, and Satan receives a punishment worse than he had before. Nor does the disappearance of earth and sky bother the resurrected saints (20:11). Why should it? It does not seem to bother God (20:11). So why should it trouble those who have death behind them and Christ and God before them? How could it disturb the coregents of Christ who serve as priests of God (20:6)? John felt no need for a vision telling us, his hearers, that the millennial saints will be secure, when earth and sky flee away (20:11). If we, John's hearers, have paid any attention to the text (rather than figuring out dislocations and interpolations), we ought to know by now that the saints have been "sealed" and that cosmic cataclysmic upheavals do not destroy them (cf. 7:1–8). Just as the Egyptian plagues did not bother Israel of old, so (John told us twice) their eschatological counterparts, the trumpet and bowl plagues, are not directed against the saints, because they are God's eschatological people, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. So why should the dissolution of earth and sky in 20:11 affect the resurrected Christians, when it did not affect the believers before the last day, according to 6:16–7:8? This question has to be answered by the advocates of the messianic interim theory! Our hypothesis is that John was aware of messianic interim kingdom speculations and that he undercut them. For him, the millennium is the beginning of the consummated kingdom of God and his Messiah and not a preliminary kingdom which is to be superseded by God's eternal kingdom.

What, then, should we make of the "new heaven" and the "new earth" (21:1) in relation to the millennium? The new heaven and earth are referred to in one single verse. They are important only as the place for the saints, the new Jerusalem (21:2). The new heaven and earth are our heaven and earth without idolatry, death, and the devil, but with God and Christ in the midst of his people. This new world is indeed the millennial world, even as the new Jerusalem is none other than "the beloved (millennial) city" (20:9). This conclusion is reinforced by the last beatitude of the epilog. There John's hearers are called blessed, provided they wash their robes that they may **enter the city by the gates** (22:14). This invitation to enter the city by the gates is undergirded by Jesus' threefold promise in the epilog: "Behold, I am coming soon" (22:7, 12, 20). The **gates** of the city link the beatitude with the gates of the new Jerusalem (21:12, 21, 25), even as the promise of Christ's imminent coming links **the city** of 22:14 with the millennial city of 20:9 and the heavenly city of 21:2–22:5. It would be rather absurd to assume that, from John's point of view, the invitation in the form of a beatitude to "enter the city by the gates" (22:14) could find its fulfillment only a thousand years after the (second) coming of Christ. But such absurdity would have to be maintained if the identity of the city in 22:14; 21:2; and 20:9 were to be denied. But if the city in the three texts is the same city, namely, the heavenly "new" and

“beloved” Jerusalem, then the idea of a preliminary messianic interim has vanished like smoke into nothingness.

The same conclusion, that the new Jerusalem of 21:2–22:5 is identical with the beloved millennial city of 20:9, is reached when we consider the first appearance of the image of “the new Jerusalem” in the promise to the conquerors of 3:12. As in the epilog, so here Jesus’ promise “I am coming soon” is explicitly stated (3:11). Again we would argue that it would be absurd to think that the presence of the conquerors in the new Jerusalem would be realized a millennium after Christ’s parousia. But if both cities are identical (3:12 and 20:9), then there is no basis for turning the millennium into a messianic interim.

One final example: 21:2, 9 refer to **the Bride of the Lamb** and identify the Bride as the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. In 19:7, 9 the Bride has made herself ready and “those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” are called blessed. One can hardly imagine that the bride will have to wait a millennium before the marriage supper commences. If not, then there is no messianic interim kingdom, distinct and separated from the new Jerusalem. Moreover, the Bride appears once more in the epilog, where she is identical with the present faithful church of John’s time. “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’” The Bride, the present church through whom the Spirit is speaking, calls upon Jesus to come. His parousia signals the consummation of the union, the marriage supper (19:7, 9) and with it the revelation of “the Bride, the wife of the Lamb” (21:2, 9). In short, a messianic interim kingdom is as improbable as an interim marriage. On the contrary, the millennium is not an interim but the beginning of the life of the world to come, inaugurated by Christ’s parousia.

Thus far we have suggested a hypothesis, namely, that John was aware of messianic interim kingdom speculations and that he modified them by undercutting them in his millennium vision. In contrast to modern interpreters, we hold that John did not reconcile two, originally distinct, eschatological expectations: the national expectation which hoped for a messianic kingdom of unlimited duration on earth (e.g., *Psalms of Solomon* 17) and the apocalyptic expectation of a transcendent eternal kingdom beyond history. While 4 Ezra 7 clearly reconciled both expectations by making the messianic kingdom into a temporary interim on earth, prior to the final judgment and eternal life in “the paradise of delight” (4 Ezra 7:36), John did not follow this pattern. We have shown that, for him, there is no interim that is superseded by something more glorious than the millennium.

We now have to comment briefly on the way John structured his material. He created a two-stage elimination of the devil with a thousand-year interim in between. That is the only interim he will allow, the devil’s interim. Between the devil’s imprisonment in the abyss and his demise in the lake of fire the earth is free from his deception for a thousand years (20:3, 7). When he makes his final appearance on earth he meets his final doom. His two-stage elimination created space for an interlude on the millennial reign with Christ and on the Gog-Magog prophecy. The millennium signals the inauguration of the eternal reign of Christ and God (cf. 7:9–17; 15:2–4; 19:6–8), even as the destruction of Gog-Magog

completes the eternal doom of Satan (20:10). This interlude in two parts shows a new beginning and a final ending. The new beginning will be elaborated in 21:1–22:5. As for the devil, he is finished, and God’s proclamation in 21:5, “It is done!” applies also to him. Satan’s two-stage destruction, placed on either side of the millennium vision, indicates the protection and invulnerability of the resurrected saints (cf. 7:1–8; 11:1–2, 11–12; 20:8–9). The sequence of visions from 19:11 to 21:8 is both logical and chronological: first, aspects of the parousia of Christ to whom the church owes its redemption (19:11–20:10; cf. 1:7 and chap. 5); and second, aspects of the parousia of God to whom the world owes its existence and who as “the Alpha and the Omega” determines judgment and salvation (20:11–21:8; cf. 1:8 and chap. 4).

4–6—Most of v. 4 (from **Then I saw thrones** to **or their hands**) is one sentence in Greek. The construction of this sentence is difficult and raises several questions. Typically, John mentioned the seats first (cf. 4:2; 14:14; 19:11; 20:11) and only then those sitting on them. But what kind of **thrones** are these and who are the ones sitting on them? Are these judgment thrones on which the heavenly court is seated in accordance with Dan. 7:9–10? In that case, John envisioned the heavenly tribunal, consisting perhaps of the 24 elders (4:4), taking their seat on judgment thrones in order to pronounce a verdict, because the authority to execute judgment was given, **committed**, to them. This interpretation is possible, but so is another one.

The background of this verse is Dan. 7:22. There “judgment was given for the saints,” they were vindicated and they “received the kingdom.” In this case, the thrones that John saw are royal thrones rather than judgment thrones, and those who are sitting on them are the vindicated saints. Moreover, he saw a second group, the martyrs who had been **beheaded** and who had **not worshiped the beast** (cf. 13:2–18). They too received the justice that the beast had denied them. They were rewarded for their faithful perseverance unto death (2:10; 11:18) in answer to their prayer (6:9–11). Their position on thrones fulfills Christ’s promise to the conquerors (3:21) that they will reign with him. While it is not easy to decide between these two interpretations, I would lead toward the second alternative in view of v. 6c (“they shall reign with him a thousand years”).

Grammatically it is possible to distinguish two groups of martyrs that are connected by **and who** (Greek, *kai hotines*). The second group would consist of those who resisted the worship of the Antichrist and bore the consequences (13:7, 15). The first group would be the martyrs prior to the appearance of the beast. However, it is also possible that our text envisions only one group, namely, the martyrs. Therefore some interpreters have limited the millennial reign with Christ to martyrs only. Psychologically this would be rather devastating for those Christians in John’s churches whose husbands, wives, children, parents, and grandparents had died in faith without martyrdom. They would be lumped together with the rest of humanity and would have to wait for another thousand years after the parousia until their turn would come in the final judgment. Perhaps, but not likely! Moreover, we must take note that in v. 9 we hear of “the camp of **the saints**”; the meaning

of saints in Revelation cannot be restricted to martyrs only.

John was aware of representative figures (e.g., the two witnesses of chap. 11, the harlot of chap. 17). It is quite possible that he did envision only one group in v. 4, namely, the martyrs. They would then function as representatives of the whole church that resisted compromise, overcame lukewarmness, and persevered in the faith. Just as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel represented “the saints of the Most High” (Daniel 3; 7:22), so the martyrs here represent the faithful church. There is no reason to limit the millennial reign to martyrs only. Christ’s promises to the conquerors are not exhortations to martyrdom (cf. 2:26; 3:21). His promise of 5:9–10 (cf. 1:6) is addressed to all the saints, not just to martyrs. The faithful people of God, ransomed from many nations, are a “kingdom” because they have been elected to reign with Christ (5:10; 20:6; 22:5). The vision does not tell us where the thrones are located. Hearers who paid attention would assume that these thrones are in heaven, because thus far all thrones, with the exception of those belonging to Satan and the beast, were located there. However, in the second part of the interlude we hear that “the saints” and “the beloved city” are on earth. We will have to wait to find out how they got there (cf. 21:2, 9–10).

They came to life again, and reigned with Christ a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life again until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. The souls of the martyrs under the altar had asked, Lord, “how long” until our vindication comes about (6:10)? When we now hear that they came to life again (Greek, *ezēsan*) and when this is identified as “the first resurrection,” then coming to life can only refer to their “bodily” resurrection from the dead, not to some spiritual immortal life of souls. The Greek verb here is identical with the verb in 1:18 and 2:8 which beyond doubt refers to the resurrection of Christ, who is “the first-born of the dead” (1:6). The resurrection of the saints is also implied in John’s statement, “The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended” (v. 5). With death behind them, with Satan exiled from the earth, the resurrected saints reign with Christ **a thousand years**, which is the beginning of their eternal reign.

A **thousand** years equals the third power of ten (ten times ten times ten) and symbolizes the ideal time or a new quality of time. It is the time of the resurrection and of the revelation of the reign of Christ, which until then had been hidden under tribulations demanding endurance (cf. 1:9). It is most doubtful that John arrived at the number 1,000 as a result of combining Ps. 90:4 (a thousand years are but a day in the sight of God) with Gen. 2:1–3. In that case, he would have understood the seventh day as the day of the Messiah lasting a thousand years. However, in distinction from other apocalypticists and second-century chiliasts, John did not indulge in speculations concerning the duration of history on the basis of a world-week. At any rate, we should note the symbolic significance of all numbers in this book as well as the fact that we are dealing here with “time” beyond our time. A thousand years indicates a long time, in contrast to three and a half years (11:2–3; 12:6, 14; 13:5). Equally important is the realization that John did not describe the reign of the resurrected saints over others. The objects of their rule are not mentioned but

only the reversal of their former condition; they had been dead, but now their true status is revealed as coregents with Christ and as **priests of God** (cf. 1:6; 5:10). There is no evangelistic activity envisioned here (contrary to Caird and others), because no people other than the saints are on earth (19:21). The focus does not lie on diverse activities but on freedom from all evil, including death. With a beatitude John addresses the hearer/reader. **Blessed and holy is he who shares the first resurrection!** The first resurrection constitutes the reward of God's faithful people who are raised from the dead to new life with Christ a long time before "the rest" of humanity shall meet their maker. In short, the millennium is nothing other than the *special* resurrection of Christians that precedes the *general* resurrection of the dead. We suggested that the phrase "the first resurrection" may have been a slogan of people who connected it with their baptism. Be this as it may, John interpreted it along traditional Christian (Pauline) lines. In 1 Thess. 4:16 we read; "The dead in Christ will rise, *first*" (cf. 1 Cor. 15:23). John interpreted their precedence in terms of a temporal priority of a thousand years. **Over such the second death has no power.** The second death refers to the condemnation in the final judgment (20:14–15). Implicit in the beatitude is an exhortation for John's hearers and readers to persevere lest the second death catch up with them. For the resurrected saints, the final judgment has happened already in that justice was done for them and they live in all eternity as kings and priests in freedom and in worship. Their reign and worship are the antithesis of the idolatry and brutality of the beast.

Interlude 2: Satan Cast into the Lake of Fire (20:7–10)

We suggested that John's second reason for constructing a two-stage elimination of Satan with a thousand-year period in between lay in his, or his people's, interest in Ezekiel's Gog and Magog prophecy. He could also allude to a parallel and a contrast with Genesis 3. Just as Satan entered the garden in the beginning, so in the end he is permitted (he "must," v. 3) to appear on an earth that has already been cleared of idolatry and death. Note, the dead are not on earth but in the netherworld, in Hades (20:13). The resurrected saints do not die at the end of the millennium, even as the resurrected Messiah does not die again, contrary to 4 Ezra 7:29. So then the devil makes his encore on an earth freed from sin and death. Too bad for him!

This episode shows Satan's perversity and futility. Having been beaten in heaven (12:7–12) and twice on earth (12:11; 20:1–3), he tries again his old trick of deception (20:3, 8, 10), just as he had done in the beginning (Gen. 3:4). This is why Satan is called here "that ancient serpent" (20:2). Now he deceives **the nations which are at the four corners of the earth, that is, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea.** For Ezekiel, Gog from the land of Magog was the leader of an army, probably of Scythians, that would march against Jerusalem from the north and would be destroyed with fire and brimstone (Ezek. 37:1–38:22). Since Ezekiel's time, Gog and Magog had been thought of as rulers of a mythical army. For John, the nations of Gog and Magog are an army of demons from the netherworld (cf. 9:1–11, 16–19). Passages led from

“the four corners of the earth” to the realm of demons below. When this demonic army, in numbers like the sand of the sea (cf. 9:16), **marched up** and **surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city**, it is all over. No battle takes place, for the battle has already been won by the slain Lamb, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, and victory needs only to be revealed on earth. Hence **fire came down ... and consumed them** and Satan was cast into the lake of fire. From there the abyss would have looked like a cozy place. **The beloved city** is the counterimage to “the great city” (11:8). It cannot be located on a map, for it is none other than the new Jerusalem. The protection of the saints, the folly of the devil, and the elimination of the underworld are the theme of this subsection.

The Judgment of the Dead (20:11–15)

A new vision, the sixth of seven judgment visions, brings a new aspect of the parousia, which is the overthrow of heaven and earth. While John related the millennium chronologically to the general judgment (20:5), he did thus relate it to the dissolution of the world. The latter, we remember, had already happened at the opening of the sixth seal when “the sky [the same Greek word as “heaven”] vanished like a scroll that is rolled up” (6:14). No answers are given to silly timetables or questions such as: How can there still be a sea to give up the dead (20:13), when the earth has already vanished (20:11)? Where does the great white throne stand since earth and heaven have passed away? On the sea? What will happen to the saints who reigned with Christ when the earth is literally pulled out from underneath them and the sky also disappears? Would they not experience “a second death” in spite of 20:6? We should keep in mind that John’s images change like pictures of a kaleidoscope and that his images are metaphors used to express eschatological aspects. John’s point in this vision is that with the parousia not only Christ, but God, becomes visible. His majestic great **throne** radiates the color of heaven, **white** (2:17; 3:4–5; 4:4; 7:9; 14:14; 19:11). From the presence of him who is the Holy One, the earth, polluted by idolatry, greed, and bloodshed, must flee (cf. Dan. 2:35 with reference to the king’s image “not a trace of them could be found”). John expected not only the transformation of the church through the resurrection of the saints and martyrs but also the transformation of the whole world. Both are aspects of the parousia, and the sequence of visions should not be translated into a temporal sequence. A world free from idolatry and death differs radically from the present one. Once again, the dissolution of our earth and sky does not affect the resurrected saints any more than it affects God or Christ. The saints already live on the new earth, or, if you will, in a dimension free from idolatry, sin, death, and the devil that have left their imprint on our world.

A preview, strikingly different from the present vision, had been presented in 14:14–20. There “one like a son of man” was sitting on a white cloud reaping the earth’s harvest with his sickle. Here it is God seated on the great white throne before whom the dead appear. Both visions are aspects of the same truth: God, Christ, shall come to judge the living (19:11–21) and the dead (cf. 1:7–8). Consistency would have required a reference to “the second resurrection” (cf. 20:5–6). Though this is obviously implied, John avoided speaking

of a second resurrection in this vision. For him the concept of “the first resurrection” was important, probably because his opponents had located it in their baptism, rebirth, or reception of the Spirit. At any rate, the resurrected saints are not subjected to the general judgment of this vision, because only the **dead** are judged. The judgment and vindication of the faithful church, represented by the martyrs, took place at the beginning of the millennium (20:4; cf. 3:5).

John’s emphasis in this vision is threefold. First, no one is so **great** that he or she could escape God’s judgment, and none are so **small** and unimportant that they will be overlooked. Even “the sea gave up the dead,” and those eaten by the fish are not forgotten either (*1 Enoch* 61:5). All will have their day in court before him whose eyes pierce through the facades behind which humans hide their true being. Second, two different kinds of **books** are opened. In one set of books is written **what they had done**, and the dead are judged accordingly. This notion is found in apocalyptic traditions (Dan. 7:10, “the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened”; cf. *1 Enoch* 90:20; 4 Ezra 6:20). Nothing is forgotten, whether good or bad (cf. Matt. 25:37–40). Also Paul, the preacher of justification by faith alone, insisted that God’s judgment is according to works (Rom. 2:6–16; 14:10–12; 1 Cor. 3:13–15; 2 Cor. 5:10; 9:6; 11:15; Gal. 6:7; cf. Col. 3:25; Eph. 6:8; 2 Tim. 4:14; 1 Peter 1:17; Matt. 7:13–27; Acts 10:42; 17:31; etc.). The final judgment reveals whether our faith, worship, and confession are genuine or phony. In this respect faith and worship are like fire. Just as fire clings to fuel, so faith clings to God’s word of promise. And just as fire produces heat and light, so faith and worship produce endurance (1:9), love (2:4, 19), patience (3:10; 13:10), the conquest of idolatry (12:11), doing what is right (22:11), keeping the commandments of God (14:12), and persevering in the testimony of Jesus and the word of God (20:4). The redemption through “the blood” of Christ (5:9; cf. Rom. 3:24–25) is to find expression in conduct, that is, in doing what is right (22:11). Conversely, the principle that a person is what he or she does will result in the exclusion of “the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, ... murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars” (21:8; cf. 21:27; 22:3, 15). For John, the relationship to God and Christ, established by divine initiative (5:9), has to be lived and expressed in conduct, in works, otherwise faith degenerates into a “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” illusion (3:17).

Just as the **books** (plural) containing the records of good and bad works are mentioned twice, so the vision contains two references to **the book of life** (singular! 20:12, 15; cf. 3:5; 13:8; 21:27). Also the idea that the names of the elect are written in a book is traditional (e.g., Phil. 4:3; Luke 10:20; Dan. 12:1; *1 Enoch* 47:3). John did not relieve the tension between personal accountability and divine election but depicted it by juxtaposing two kinds of books, that is, the book of life and the record of works. Divine election and human responsibility may not be balanced on the same ledger. Before the judgment throne we cannot invite God to a recital of our good works, nor can we blame him by pointing to the omission of our names from the book of life. This book of life is under the control of the Lamb (21:27) who “loves us [present tense] and has freed us from our sins” and has elected us coregents with him and “priests to his God” (1:6). This election, ratified by the blood of the Lamb, must be ratified by the elect with their lives, their conduct, and their death (cf.

3:5; 14:13).

Perhaps an additional significance of the “book of life” in this vision may lie in John’s distinction between the empirical Judaism of his time and place (cf. 2:9; 3:9) and faithful Israel. John, who was so deeply immersed in Moses, the prophets, and psalms, may have alluded to Israel’s election with this symbol of the book of life (cf. Exod. 32:32–33). Certainly, John did not consign faithful Israel of the old covenant to the lake of fire.

The negative formulation of v. 15 (if anyone’s name was not found in the book of life, he or she was thrown into the lake of fire) serves as contrast between the millennial reign on one side (20:4–6) and the new Jerusalem on the other (21:2–4). It should not lead us to the false conclusion that the final judgment resulted in the universal condemnation of all to “the lake of fire” (e.g., Rissi). The text is silent on the question of how many were saved, because the judgment is God’s sovereign prerogative and revelation is not the communication of information to satisfy curiosity.

The third and final emphasis of this vision lies in the abolition of death. The earth had already been liberated from death at “the first resurrection.” Now, with the demons destroyed (20:7–10) and the judgment of the dead completed, the netherworld will be cleared of its last two residents. **Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.** Again John is dependent on Christian tradition. “The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor. 15:26; cf. Isa. 25:8). Death and Hades (the realm of the dead) are pictured here as two personified beings of the netherworld (cf. 6:7–8). Their destruction is final. They, together with the satanic triumvirate, are the only ones mentioned explicitly to be subjected to the lake of fire. As in the case of all humans, their fate is left unspecified.³

THE MILLENNIUM

Revelation 20:1–3

20:1–3 Revelation 20 contains some of the strangest portions of the book. This chapter provides a description of the thousand-year period where evil powers are repressed, a time period known as the *millennium*. Christ reigns during this period, along with the martyrs who have been raised from the dead in the first of two resurrections.

Christians have often debated about the exact meaning and time of the millennium. Some believe that the millennium began with the resurrection of Christ and that we are now living in this thousand-year period. Others believe that the passage refers to a thousand years of peace before the Second Coming of Christ—a time that has not yet begun. Still others believe that the millennium follows the Second Coming.

In Revelation, after the thousand-year period is over, the power of evil is unleashed.

³ Krodel, G. A. (1989). *Revelation* (pp. 325–341). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

Then comes the final battle, the dragon, and the resurrection and final judgment of all human beings take place. This is a complex chapter and must be dealt with in detail in fairly brief sections.

The beast and its image have been destroyed. But the dragon, the power behind the other manifestations of evil, still remains. Now the dragon is captured and put out of commission for a thousand years. This is an interim of peace, before the devil is released from captivity and allowed to be active again for a brief time.

But John's vision does not provide a clear calendar. What is important for him, and for the Christians to whom he writes, is that a time will come when evil apparently will be overcome. Yet the ultimate source of that evil—the dragon, or Satan—is not completely destroyed. There is no thought here that God could not have overcome evil all at once. It somehow serves God's purpose to permit this interlude of peace, this time without evil, and then allow evil again to hold sway. What will Christians do if the persecution ceases and if there is no opposition to the church? Will Christians forget to be faithful in such times of peace? What will happen if there is a long time of peace, and then the dragon is let loose again, however briefly? Will Christians who have been used to the good times remain faithful? That is part of the issue here, even as it was part of the issue in the letters to the church at Sardis (3:1–6) and at Laodicea (3:14–22).

The millennium is pictured as part of the history of this world, here on earth. The vision implies that the new earth will not become a reality until there is a redeemed old earth, which is what occurs during this thousand-year break in the power of evil. The power of evil lessens, and redemption begins its work, to be completed by the transformation of the world at the end of history. This is a much more optimistic view of history than one that sees evil having full sway until the end, with no time on this earth when evil is in abeyance.

THE TWO RESURRECTIONS

Revelation 20:4–6

20:4–6 The chapter continues with further description of the thousand years before the final destruction of the dragon. It speaks of two distinct resurrections. In the first resurrection, the martyrs who died for their faith—here specifically spoken of as those who had been beheaded—are raised to rule with Christ during the thousand years. Those who had been beheaded are only a small portion of the martyrs. (Roman citizens convicted of capital crimes were often beheaded; others were given more gruesome executions.) Thus, these martyrs represent only a small portion of the faithful.

Who exactly is raised at this point? If they are all the faithful, then who is to be raised at the second resurrection? Are they only the martyrs who died before the millennium and not the faithful who come during the thousand years? John does not answer the questions that immediately come to our minds, for his is not a specifically drawn blueprint. He does

wish to make clear that the martyrs will be vindicated. Their faithfulness has been established, and they will suffer no further testing. They are ready to reign with Christ when the time comes. They fulfill their role as the priestly people during this time. Others are not yet ready for such a role. They have not yet been raised and will not be until the thousand years are over and the dragon is again let loose. Does that mean that they could again face testing and fall away? Such questions are not answered by this text.

What is the character of this peaceful interlude? The idea of a thousand-year reign of Christ with the saints before the end of history has little currency in the rest of biblical literature. In fact, the thousand years spoken of in this passage often have been interpreted in a very different way. For instance, in the fourth century Augustine assumed that there had been six thousand years of human history before Christ and that the thousand years spoken of here began with the birth of Jesus. This interpretation meant that history would end in the year 1000, with the thousand years being the time of the church. Medieval Christians believed this interpretation, and as the year 1000 approached, there was great consternation that the final judgment was about to begin and that history would end. It is no wonder that after 1000, when life went on, there was great rejoicing and a sense of renewal. Part of the rationale for this was that history was seen as involving a gigantic week: six days of a thousand years each, plus one day—a sabbath—of one thousand years. The year 2000 raises some of the same questions, so it is not surprising that there has been a renewed interest in issues of the millennium.

The idea of two resurrections is also rare in biblical or early Christian literature. There are several issues involved here. It is clear that those who are *in* Christ cannot be separated from him by death. We know that the idea that when people die their souls go directly to heaven, and that heavenly life is life eternal, is not biblical in origin. The Bible speaks rather of an eternal life whose fullness comes with the resurrection of the body. Yet the notion of a time between a Christians's death and resurrection seems to involve a separation from Christ that is quite unacceptable.

In the book of Revelation, the martyrs are already in heaven, although they are not yet enjoying the fullness of eternal life. (The passage dealing with the opening of the fifth seal [6:9–11] shows the souls of the martyrs under the altar in heaven, where they are told to rest a while longer. This evidently takes place before their resurrection.) Rather than try to develop a clear calendar of future events, perhaps we should simply trust that future to the One who has created time and eternity, and whose love has been revealed in Jesus Christ.

THE FINAL CONFLICT

Revelation 20:7–10

20:7–10 When Satan is released, many follow him. Gog and Magog are frequently mentioned in Jewish apocalyptic literature. In Ezekiel 38:2, Gog is referred to as “the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal” of the land of Magog. In Ezekiel’s vision, when Israel is

crushed by the Exile, the prophet is given the vision of the Valley of Dry Bones, indicating the resurrection of the nation (Ezekiel 37). In the vision, after this resurrection, Gog leads an invasion against the renewed Israel. Ezekiel 38–39 describe the battle and destruction of Gog and Magog, complete with the invitation to the birds to consume the flesh of the fallen (Ezek. 39:17–20), as mentioned in Revelation 19:17–21.

Evil does not die quickly. Even the thousand years of peace have not ended the ease with which some will follow Satan when he makes his appearance. Revelation 20:8 says that the followers of Gog and Magog are as numerous as the sands of the sea. Satan deceives the nations at the corners of the earth. This may seem a strange description, but it is leading to a very important symbolic point. There is a center of the earth, and there are four corners. The camp of the saints is in the beloved city (20:9), which is at the center. The armies that march against it come from the corners. The beloved city is Jerusalem, whose heavenly transformation will be seen in the next chapter.

There is no real battle. The armies of Gog and Magog gather around the saints, who are in the beloved city. Fire comes down from heaven and kills all the evil ones. At that point, the devil joins the beast and the false prophet in the lake of fire forever.

THE FINAL JUDGMENT

Revelation 20:11–15

20:11–15 There have been so many almost-final struggles, after which evil has come back to plague this world. When the real end comes, however, it is described in very brief terms. Yet these few verses describe the goal of all else that has gone before and lead the way to the fulfillment of all the promises given to the faithful. All that John sees now is God on the throne, radiant in purity. When the throne is mentioned earlier in the vision, it is usually surrounded by the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures. The One on the throne was the object of their worship (see especially chaps. 4 and 5). Now, however, there are no elders, no living creatures, no earth, and no heaven. All are gone. Only God on the throne remains. The time of judgment is at hand. The disappearance of the earth may be expected at the end of history, but the disappearance of heaven is unexpected. Yet heaven is as much the creation of God as is the earth, and God is beyond all creation. Even those who are part of the first resurrection are not in this vision. All will have to be renewed when the judgment is over. All will be part of a new creation, beyond judgment.

The dead come to life again in order to be judged. All of the dead come before the throne. No one can assume that they were so insignificant that their actions do not matter. Both “great and small” are judged. Those who were buried in the sea cannot escape judgment. Death loses its control over the departed. Hades, the place of condemnation, also loses its power. Those held by the sea, by Death, and by Hades all now appear to be judged.

Is this the second resurrection? John does not call it that. It is an appearance before the

throne, a recalling from death for that purpose, but it does not necessarily lead to eternal life. The term “resurrection” usually has this positive connotation, which is missing here. All that is said at this point is that all who have died are to be judged at the end of history. And God is the sole judge.

On what basis are the dead to be judged? On the basis of the contents of books. It would be easy to assume that there are two books: one filled with accounts of evil actions; the other filled with accounts of good actions. But the situation is not that simple. Revelation 20:12 states that “books were opened” as the judgment begins. Then it adds that “another book” was opened, the book of life.

The phrase “the book of life” occurs only once outside the book of Revelation. That is in Paul’s letter to the Philippians where he refers to his co-workers as those “whose names are in the book of life” (Phil. 4:3). The phrase occurs six times in Revelation: three times before chapter 20, twice in chapter 20, and once in chapter 21. In 3:5, Jesus speaks as the one who is able to remove a name from the book of life. In 13:8, that book is spoken of as “the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.” In 17:8, those whose names are not in the book of life are astonished at the appearance of the beast.

In these last two instances, the names in the book are said to have been there from the foundation of the world. The book of life is not a list of good deeds done by various people. Nor is it a list of names of those who have done more good than evil. Morality, as such, is not the immediate basis of the judgment. In the presence of the holy God, no creature can be counted perfectly righteous. The book of life has to do with faith in and faithfulness to Jesus. Those who have faith in Jesus have repented and received forgiveness. They have conquered because they have followed the One who has conquered all evil. This is not “cheap grace,” however. Faithfulness in their earthly lives meant following Jesus rather than the way of the beast. Such faithfulness could lead to great suffering and even death.

These brief verses are packed with important theological issues: the relation of faith and works, and of free will and grace. They affirm the importance of works, but faithfulness is central. Names are written in the Lamb’s book of life from the foundation of the world, but Jesus is able to remove the faithless from such a list. What is made clear is that everyone’s life will be laid open—nothing can be hidden from God’s scrutiny. “The books” are filled with accounts of all that we have done, both good and evil. But beyond this reckoning is the book of life. Those whose names are there are the redeemed, whose evil deeds have been forgiven and whose faithfulness has sometimes been tested by fire.

The judgment includes the condemnation of Death and Hades. They are thrown into the lake of fire to join the beast, the false prophet, and the devil. The power of all of these has come completely to an end. John calls the lake of fire “the second death.” The first death is the one all creatures face. From that death, true resurrection is possible. The martyrs have already received such resurrection, and they do not face this second death. But those judged at the end face the possibility of this second death, from which there is no

resurrection. In the letter to the church in Smyrna, Jesus says: “Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death” (2:11). The devil and his agents, along with Death and Hades, have no future power because they have been cast into the lake of fire from which there is no escape. In 20:15, all those whose names are not in the book of life are also thrown into the lake of fire. How many are these? We are not told. What matters to the Christians who receive John’s vision is that evil will end, finally and completely. What matters ultimately is to remain faithful to Jesus.

With evil gone, the stage has been set for the new creation.⁴

After I published my book *Surprised by Hope*, I had a number of letters and emails from people telling me their experiences with thinking it through, leading study groups on it, and in some cases preaching in the new way I was recommending.

The central point of the book is that, over against the common Western Christian view that what matters is ‘going to **heaven** when you die’, the proper Christian expectation is of a two-stage post-mortem reality. First, those who belong to the **Messiah** go to be ‘with him’, as Paul says in Philippians 1:23. Then, at last, Jesus will appear, as heaven and earth come together in a great fresh act of new creation. That will be the moment of **resurrection**, the moment the dead have been waiting for. Resurrection, the abolition of death itself, giving God’s people new bodies to live in God’s new world, is the great hope both of ancient Judaism and of classic Christianity.

A lot of my readers took to this like ducks to water, which was of course gratifying. But not all their congregations thought that way. One pastor reported that he had preached enthusiastically on this theme the next Easter Day, only to be confronted after the service by his leading lay people, extremely put out because this wasn’t the Easter message they were used to hearing. I suppose that is bound to be the case, granted the way in which so much Western Christianity, ‘evangelical’ just as much as ‘liberal’, has slipped its New Testament moorings in this most vital of areas.

But here in Revelation 20 we are faced with a quite different sort of problem. It is hard enough to get people to envisage a two-stage post-mortem reality, with ‘resurrection’ as the second of two stages. But Revelation 20 seems to envisage a *three*-stage reality: first the **souls** resting under the altar (6:9); then the resurrection of some, not all, to share a thousand-year reign with Jesus; then, after a further flurry of activity and a second ‘last battle’, the final resurrection of all people, of the wicked to hear and face their condemnation, and of God’s people to hear and receive ‘the verdict that leads to **life**’ (Romans 5:18). No other writing, Jewish or Christian, has any mention of this ‘double resurrection’, let alone of the surrounding events. What are we to make of it all?

There are three interlocking problems which are made considerably more confusing

⁴ González, C. G., & González, J. L. (1997). *Revelation*. (P. D. Miller & D. L. Bartlett, Eds.) (pp. 130–136). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

(for us) by John's kaleidoscopic imagery. First, we are naturally puzzled as to why, after the monster and the false prophet have been thrown into the lake of fire, there seems to be not only a delay before the satan joins them there but also a temporary respite in which he is let out of jail one last time to do his worst before being finally overthrown. Why the delay, and why must he again be released?

Second, what is John referring to, in real, historical terms, when he speaks of the thousand years in which these 'first-resurrection' people reign with the Messiah? How does that relate to the subsequent picture of the New Jerusalem in chapters 21 and 22? Is the one a metaphor for the other? Are they describing, or at least denoting, two quite different things? Or what?

Third, how then does this 'first resurrection' relate to the second one (John doesn't call it 'the second resurrection', but his description of this one as the 'first', in verse 6, implies it)? What sort of story can we tell, or should we tell, that will bring out the reference, the meaning and the flavour of these very puzzling six verses?

To begin with, we may note that, just as 1 Thessalonians 4 is the only passage of scripture to describe anything like a 'rapture' (and, as I've argued frequently elsewhere, it doesn't mean 'the rapture' as popularly understood in Dispensationalism), and just as Revelation 16:16 is the only place in scripture to mention a final great battle at 'Armagedon', so Revelation 20—the passage now before us—is the only passage in scripture where a 'millennium' is even mentioned. Those who go in for speculative prophecy-interpretation have, of course, snapped up these and other snippets, taken them (usually) out of their actual contexts, and constructed a quite different world-view in which they play a far more important role than they do in scripture itself. That alone ought to make us wary of following where such interpreters lead—quite apart from the dualistic framework within which such 'prophecy-interpretation' is regularly set, with the wicked world being thrown away while 'the saints' remain safe in heaven, and without any sense of the renewal of creation, so important in this book, as in the **gospels** and Paul.

But all that is merely ground-clearing. Let us consider the temporary binding of the **satan**. Yes, it would be much tidier if the battle in chapter 19 had seen off all God's adversaries. Nobody would have grumbled, I suspect, if the satan had been part of the defeated host, and the book had proceeded straight to the New Jerusalem. But Revelation is seldom tidy, at least not in the way we might like. And we have noticed, twice already, that the sequence we expect is interrupted. It may help to remind ourselves of those two moments.

First, in the sequence of seals, we had to pause between the sixth and the seventh seals; judgment was suspended while the suffering and martyred people of God were 'sealed' (chapter 7). Then, between the sixth and seventh trumpets, we again had to pause, this time while John was given the scroll from which he prophesied about God's witnessing people. Those people were seen under the image of the two, like Zerubbabel and Joshua,

the king and the priest, and like Moses and Elijah, the prophets, through whose death and resurrection the world would come to glorify the true God (chapters 10 and 11).

Those were the two earlier ‘unexpected pauses’, and now we have another one. Again, we note, it concerns the suffering and martyred people of God, who are again celebrated as the true witnesses, the priest-kings who share the Messiah’s rule (verse 6).

This may give us the clue to our first two questions. We must not forget that ‘the satan’ was initially a member of the heavenly council. Though he has fallen from his position, he may still, by God’s permission, play a role. (I am reminded of the role Tolkien gave to Gollum, right up to the climax of *The Lord of the Rings*, and on reflection I guess that Tolkien was aware of exactly this kind of parallel.) The satan’s job was always to ‘accuse’ where accusation was due, to make sure (as a good Director of Public Prosecutions) that nothing reprehensible went unreprehended. Now, one last time, he must play that role, even though as before he will pervert it and try to deceive and accuse in all directions, warranted or not (verse 8). He must ultimately do the worst he can, so that when he is defeated there will be no last tiny remnant of suspicion that anything worthy of ‘accusation’ has been left unaccounted for. He must be allowed a final moment to flail around with his lies and accusations, so that in his overthrow it will be clear beyond the slightest doubt that ‘there is therefore now no condemnation for those in the Messiah Jesus’. Like a boxer staggering to his feet to face the last punch, he must come up one more time, even if only to be knocked out flat on the canvas for ever.

But, before that can happen, the reign of Jesus, with and through his millennial people, must be established by the first resurrection. John itemizes these people not just as martyrs (as opposed to other Christians) but specifically as those who had been beheaded for their witness. We should, I presume, take that symbolically. It may hint at something to do with their true citizenship in Jesus’ **kingdom**; it was Roman citizens who were beheaded, a greatly preferable death to many others the Romans devised, not least crucifixion itself. It seems, in any case, contrary to John’s normal line to suggest a radical difference between one set of martyrs and another.

But should we take the thousand years symbolically as well? Again, I believe we should. John has used all kinds of symbolic numbers throughout his book. It would be very odd if he were suddenly to throw in a rather obvious round and symbolic number, but expect us to take it literally. There were some, around the year AD 1000, who supposed they were about to see the end of this ‘millennium’, but as with other such speculations the date passed without significant eschatological events taking place. But what is the actual reality to which the symbol points?

It appears at first sight very difficult to see this millennium as ‘the age of the church’. Nobody aware of church history would suppose that there has been no satanic attack, no deceiving of the nations (or of the church itself) during that time.

It could be a time still in the future, either the final prelude to the **second coming** of the

Messiah or a period immediately after that coming—the classic ‘post-millennial’ and ‘pre-millennial’ interpretations. Both of these seem to me to miss the point, for reasons too numerous to go into here (I have discussed them elsewhere).

The clue to the passage is, I believe, in the opening line: ‘I saw thrones, with people sitting on them, who were given authority to judge.’ This is straight out of Daniel 7, where the ‘thrones’ were for ‘the Ancient of Days’ and ‘One like a **son of man**’. But Daniel 7 itself interprets the latter phrase corporately, so that ‘the saints of the most high’ receive the kingdom and the authority to judge. It looks, then, as though John is referring not to a thousand-year period *on earth*, but to the heavenly reality which obtains during a particular period. Jesus, according to the whole New Testament, is *already* reigning (Matthew 28:18; 1 Corinthians 15:25–28; etc.); and what John is saying is that the martyrs *are already reigning with him*. This, indeed, is more or less what is said, as well, in Ephesians 2:6, where the church is ‘seated in heavenly places in the Messiah Jesus’. Presumably they aren’t just sitting there doing nothing. Perhaps, after all, John’s ‘millennium’ does correspond to a more widely known early Christian view—though in Ephesians there is no sense that this only applies to martyrs.

As to the ‘binding’ of the satan (verse 2), Jesus declared that he had already accomplished this, which was why he was able to perform exorcisms (Matthew 12:29). The satan was, after all, still able thereafter to work through Judas and others, to accuse Jesus and bring about his death. Perhaps what we are seeing in Revelation 20 is the cosmic version of that story.

Perhaps. At this point above all—above all the rest of the New Testament, in my experience—it doesn’t do to be too dogmatic. We must hold on to the central things which John has made crystal clear: the victory of the lamb, and the call to share his victory through **faith** and patience. God will then do what God will then do. Whether we describe the final events as Revelation 20 has done, or as Paul does in Romans 8:18–26 or 1 Corinthians 15:20–28, it is clear that the one who wins the victory is the creator God, who does so to defeat and abolish death itself and so to open the way to the glories of the renewed creation. That is what matters.

REVELATION 20:7–15

Final Judgment

⁷When the thousand years are complete, the satan will be released from his prison.

⁸Out he will come to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog. He will summon them for battle, a throng like the sand of the sea in number.

⁹They came up over the full width of the earth, and closed in on the place where God’s holy people are encamped, and the beloved city. Then fire came down from heaven and burnt them up. ¹⁰And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the monster and the false prophet had already

been thrown. They will be tortured day and night for ever and ever.

¹¹Then I saw a large white throne, and the one who was sitting on it. Earth and heaven fled away from his presence, and there was no room left for them. ¹²Then I saw the dead, great and small, standing in front of the throne. Books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged on the basis of what was written in the books, in accordance with what they had done. ¹³The sea gave back the dead that were in it; Death and Hades gave back the dead that were in them; and each was judged in accordance with what they had done. ¹⁴Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵And if anyone was not found written in the book of life, they were thrown into the lake of fire.

John was not the first to suppose that after God's great act of rescue and restoration there might be a further challenge, a final fling of the powers of evil against the already-redeemed people of God. In one of his favourite books of scripture, Ezekiel, he found just such a picture, which had already been explored by other Jewish writers, and would continue to be a matter of speculation and interest for some considerable time after his day.

This picture is found in Ezekiel 38. It is no coincidence that this comes straight after the passage (chapters 34–37) which predicts the work of the divine Good Shepherd, the cleansing of Israel's hearts from sin, and the return from **exile** seen in terms of a **resurrection** of the dead. Ezekiel 38 then focuses attention on the nation of Magog, in the far north, and Gog its king. (Israelite geography, and indeed Greek and Roman geography, was a bit hazy once you got north of the Black Sea.) By the time John gets hold of this tradition he appears to treat 'Gog and Magog' as two nations, symbolically representing 'the four corners of the earth'. Anyway, the point is that Gog/ Magog will mount a last, vain attack on God's people, even after their rescue from Babylon. Granted this implicit narrative in Ezekiel, we can perhaps see why, for John, this final episode had to follow the demise of Babylon in chapters 17–19 and the 'first resurrection' of 20:4–6.

Once more we need to say: the release of the **satan**, though unexpected and unwelcome to us, seems to be part of the strange divine plan to ensure that all evil, every trace, is rooted out of the world, allowing the great transformation into 'new **heaven** and new earth' to take place. The **satan**, the **accuser**, must do all he can, and then he too must be destroyed. It is as though, faced with a farmyard full of infected material, one were first to find the ideal broom with which to sweep the yard clean, and then were to throw the broom itself into the fire, its horrible work done. It is, no doubt, difficult for us to hold in our minds the idea of the **satan** as still, even at this stage, doing work which God requires to be done, and then being punished for it. But that is because our minds slip so easily from metaphor into metonymy, from symbol to actual referent (like someone who hears a friend, late for an appointment, say 'I must fly', and is then surprised when the friend, rather than taking a helicopter, gets into his car). It is useless, in other words, to stand in

judgment over the morality of God's dealings with the satan, or indeed with 'Gog and Magog', as though God were the chief military officer of a United Nations peacekeeping force and these other creatures were leaders of recalcitrant or insurgent forces. The whole thing is a set of pictures, of shifting, kaleidoscopic images, pointing beyond themselves to the deepest and darkest mysteries of iniquity. The same is true for the geographical symbol of the nations surrounding 'the place where God's holy people are encamped, and the beloved city'. This has nothing more to do with a location in the Middle East, or indeed elsewhere, than the thousand years has to do with a precise calendrical period.

The point, yet again, is that evil must be allowed, under certain controls, to do its worst, so that it can at last be defeated. Interestingly, though the satan summons the nations for a battle, no battle takes place. The great battle of chapter 19, in which the rider on the white horse wins the victory by means of the sword of his mouth, is indeed the last battle. On this occasion, in an Elijah-like move, fire comes down from heaven and consumes them. Then, and only then, the devil is thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur, along with the monster and the false prophet. Babylon was overthrown three chapters ago; the two monsters met their doom in chapter 19; now at last the dragon has been overthrown as well, and for good.

There remain the last great powers: Death and Hades. 'Death' is here both the fact and the power of death; 'Hades' is the abode of the dead, the place from which they cannot escape except by a great new act of God. In ancient cosmology, the sea was not thought to be part of Hades, so those who died by drowning in the sea, and were never recovered for burial, formed a separate category of the dead. But they too will now be brought to stand before the great white throne, which seems to have replaced the original throne of chapters 4 and 5. Heaven and earth are being shaken, and the throne room itself seems to be under reconstruction.

The point is then that God, the creator, at last takes his seat for the final judgment. Here, as throughout scripture, this judgment will be in accordance with the totality of the life that each person has lived. That, it seems, is what is written in the 'books'.

Countless anxious protestant teachers, worried that this somehow does away with '**justification by faith**', miss the point entirely. We should not necessarily try to fit Paul's way of saying things exactly into John's, but actually things are simpler than that in this case. When Paul speaks of 'justification by faith', he is talking about the present reality according to which all those who believe in Jesus as the risen Lord are already assured of the divine verdict, 'in the right', and are also assured thereby that this same verdict will be issued on the last day. But the way in which the verdict of the last day corresponds to the verdict issued in the present, on the basis of faith alone, is by the work of the **spirit**; and the spirit produces, in the individual Christian, that overall tenor of life (Paul does not suppose that Christians are incapable of sinning) which is 'seeking for glory, honour and immortality' (Romans 2:7).

In any case, the most important book is ‘the book of life’. John has mentioned this several times before (3:5; 13:8; 17:8), where it is said to be the lamb’s book of life, and to have been written before the foundation of the world. This is a vivid way of safeguarding the truth taught by Jesus in John’s **gospel**, ‘You did not choose me, but I chose you’, as well as by Paul in Romans 8:28–30 and elsewhere. But this, like justification by faith, is subject to the proviso that if there is choosing being done, it is God who chooses, and the God who chooses is the triune God who works as father, son and spirit, not as a blind watchmaker or a celestial bureaucrat. When God chooses, he also redeems; when God chooses and redeems, he also works in people’s lives; and the **miracle** of the divine—human relationship, from the very beginning, has always been that human thought, will and action is somehow enhanced, rather than being cancelled out, by the divine initiative and power. To say less than this would be to leave John’s picture of the books as merely a puzzle. To say more would be to wander off into large theological questions to which Revelation gives no attention.

Perhaps the most important thing to note is that, once again, Death itself, along with its home base, Hades, is finally destroyed. John Donne’s poem, ‘Death, be not proud’, ends with the majestic line: ‘And Death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.’ Some writers have tried to suggest that ‘resurrection’ and ‘new creation’ are simply a fancy way of talking about what actually happens at or after death: ‘thinking of death as resurrection’, I remember one such writer saying. Resurrection is then an *interpretation* of death. But that is precisely what John is here denying, much as Paul does in 1 Corinthians 15. Resurrection, in the first-century world, emphatically meant the *undoing* of death, not its reinterpretation. It meant that the processes of bodily corruption and decay were reversed, producing a new ‘physical’ body with ‘immortal’ properties. John is nothing if not a creational theologian. He has told us from early on that God is celebrated as the creator of the whole world, and indeed that all creation joins in his praise. If creation is not gloriously reaffirmed at the last, God has been finally defeated: the satan has won. But it is, and he hasn’t been. The ‘new heaven and new earth’ we are about to witness are that glorious reaffirmation.

So why does John say that ‘earth and heaven fled away from his presence’ (verse 11)? Because, it seems, earth had been corrupted by the evil done within it, and heaven too had been the place from which the satan had conducted his initial rebellion. The first earth and heaven were the pilot project. Now, with all obstacles to the ultimate goal having been removed, they can be dismantled, so that the final reality to which they were advance signposts can at last be revealed. The whore has been overthrown, and it is time for the bride to appear. The dragon, the monster and the false prophet have been destroyed, and it is time for God and the lamb to be revealed, with the spirit enabling the bride to say, ‘Come’.⁵ The rule of death is at an end; the rule of **life** is about to begin.

⁵ Wright, T. (2011). *Revelation for Everyone* (pp. 175–186). London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox.