

The Millennial Reign of Christ
Revelation 20:4-6
(Presented at Westover Hills Church of Christ
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Introduction

1. I recently saw in the opening of an article on Revelation these words, “Anyone who thinks he has said the last word on Revelation is a fool.”
2. Given the controversies that have surrounded the interpretation of Revelation over the years, this “wake-up call” exhorting the guild of interpreters to humility is appropriate.
3. It is even more relevant and to the point when we come to interpret the millennium passage of Revelation 20:4-6.
4. As most people know, Revelation 20 is the only place in the Bible that talks about the binding of Satan and the reign of Christ for 1000 years. It is a crucial text studied by Christians with regard to their expectations about end-time events.
5. We will look at it today in a somewhat catechetical sense. We will ask several key questions about the text and attempt to answer them briefly. We will not try to overwhelm with a maze of data, but seek simple clarity with reference to a couple of the most common questions asked about this text.

A. What does Revelation 20:4-6 say?

1. Revelation 20:4 echoes Daniel 7:9. It starts off with a judgment scene. Thrones are set up. Notice they are not for God or even for the Lamb only (Christ), but for those beheaded for the testimony of Jesus – in the narrative story of Revelation, those who had not submitted to emperor worship (i.e. the mark of the beast).
2. These sit on the thrones after having come to life and they receive dominion over the new order for 1000 years (cf. 3:21; 5:10).
3. This seems to refer to events contingent upon what we usually call “the second coming of Christ.” John refers to it as “the first resurrection” (20:5b).
4. John seems to presume a second resurrection in 20:5a, which the NRSV correctly puts in parenthesis. “The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.” This second resurrection refers to the final judgment of unbelievers. This is discussed in more detail in 20:11-15.

Summary

I understand this passage to say that Christ will return and, with his faithful martyrs, will exercise dominion over a new order. *Important:* The focus is on the vindication of the martyrs. It is God's answer to the cry of Revelation 6:8, "How long will it be?"

Notice: Nothing is said here as to whether the righteous of all ages will be present. John probably presumes the presence of all of those who were faithful through the crisis he sees looming at the time of his writing. But his point here is to highlight reversals. In God's new world, the table will be turned on the idolaters.

- B. Is the 1000 years a temporal sequence or a symbol for the qualitative blessings of the new order?
1. I believe it is the latter.
 2. Just as the 3-1/2 years of Crisis (see 11:3; 12:6) is not the literal duration of the Crisis (but a figure for a short period), so the 1000 years is a figure, for the ultimate triumph of God and his people.
 3. The reference to a thousand is difficult, but it seems to be connected with the idea of the restoration of the glory of creation before the Fall. Following Psalm 90:4,15, Genesis 2:17 could be read that Adam's life was approximately 1000 years (Genesis 5:5). Now true Adamic existence, interrupted as a result of sin, upon the binding of Satan (20:1-3), returns.
- C. What about the interpretation of Revelation 20 by modern day dispensational premillennialist interpreters such as those theories which inform the enormously popular "Left Behind" series and other well known evangelical writings?
1. This model of interpretation is not viable for the following reasons:
 - a. It is built on a vain attempt to "salvage" the literal fulfillment of the Old Testament prophetic vision of the end – including the actual rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and the literal restoration of animal sacrifices. The New Testament (including Revelation) spiritualizes these prophecies (e.g. Joel 2:28-32 as used in Acts 2:14-22). Revelation itself does not have a literal temple in God's new creation.
 - b. Consequently, the elaborate scenario of the restoration of the state of Israel, its persecution during a seven-year period, and the subsequent reign of Christ on earth for 1000 years with a restored Israel, is an exegetical pipe dream not justified by Revelation 20 or any other biblical text.
 - c. Moreover, there are real theological dangers here:

- (1) Unqualified support for any policy of the State of Israel vis-à-vis a concern for justice among the surrounding nations.
- (2) A pre-occupation with international politics which supposedly has society careening toward Armageddon in place of a biblical understanding that God has already reclaimed the nations decisively in Jesus Christ; the church, as the community of the end-times, already with its communal life, lives in anticipation of another reality not dependent on the politics of the age.
- (3) The popular idea that Jesus will “rapture” Christian believers suddenly and then will stage a series of returns to the earth, ultimately to reign for a thousand years, is not only a distortion of Revelation 20:4-6, but many other biblical texts. It presumes all sorts of bizarre ideas ranging from the notion of people being given “a second chance” to be saved, to the rebuilding of a Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Biblical eschatology holds out marvelous hope for the people of God. Dispensational premillennialism gives biblical eschatology a lead name.
- (4) Much of the “Left Behind” ideology presumes that because of events in the Middle East today this *is* the last generation before the rapture. Christians are exhorted in scripture to be ready for the end, which may come at any time. But the idea that this is the last generation invests in us and our time, a sense of self-inflated importance that is not appropriate for biblical faith.

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