

The Millennium: The Ironic and Subversive Victory of the Martyr-Church

What is the Millennium of Revelation 20:1-6? The Millennium of Revelation 20:1-6 is a time during which Satan's sway over the nations is restricted by the authority of Christ and the Church of the Martyrs reigns with Christ as priests of God.

1) The Rhetoric of Revelation

a) Dramatic Irony:

- i) Definition: The juxtaposition of apparent and hidden plots in a narrativeⁱ
- ii) Example: Joseph (Genesis 37-50)

b) Subversion:

- i) Definition: A challenge to social convention through paradox, patterns of reversal and inversion, and parodyⁱⁱ
 - ii) Example of Paradox: "But many who are first shall be last" (Matt. 19:30); Servants of Christ are "impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything" (2 Cor. 6:8b-10).
 - iii) Example of Patterns of Reversal and Inversion: "For God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor. 1:27-29).
 - iv) Example of Parody: "Who is like the beast?" (Rev. 13:4) is a parody of the OT boast "Who is like the Lord our God?" (Psalm 113:5; cf. Exod. 15:11; Micah 7:18; Isa. 40:25; 46:5).
- c) In Revelation martyrdom is an ironic victory. As the dragon's agent, the beast "was allowed to make war on the saints and *to conquer them*" by putting them to death (Rev. 13:7). But this apparent victory of the beast is actually the demise of the dragon: "And they (saints) have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death" (Rev. 12:11).
- d) This perspective on Christian martyrdom subverts the worldly wisdom of defining power as brute force, exposing the anti-Christ authorities of earth to be mere beasts, while the saints are the true humanity—not bearing the mark/name/image of the beast, but the seal of the living God.

2) Millennial Perspectives

a) Premillennialism: The kingdom is the physical presence of Christ, reigning from earthly Jerusalem, between this present church age and the new creation.

i) 2 Camps of Premillennialism:

- (1) Historic Premillennialism: After the church endures the assaults of the Anti-Christ, Jesus will return to vanquish the Anti-Christ and his kingdom, bind Satan, vindicate His suffering church, raise Christians from the dead, and bring all nations under His

administration—the faithful saints serving as His vice-regents. After a thousand years (or a long reign) Satan will lead one last rebellion against Christ, which will end in the final judgment of the wicked and the demise of Satan.

- (2) Dispensational Premillennialism: Ethnic Israel is God’s earthly people, while the Church is His heavenly people. Once God has gathered all the saved from the world into the Church, He will take the Church from the earth and resume His purpose for national/ethnic Israel. Once the Church is gone (raptured), the Anti-Christ will establish a covenant with national Israel, which he will break, leading to a great persecution of the Jews. At the end of this 7 year tribulation (Daniel’s seventieth week), Jesus will return to vanquish the Anti-Christ and his kingdom, bind Satan, vindicate Israel, and bring all nations under His administration—Israelites serving as His vice-regents. After a thousand years, Satan will lead one last rebellion against Christ, which will end in the final judgment of the wicked and the demise of Satan. Some Dispensationalists understand the New Jerusalem to include Jews and Gentiles together.ⁱⁱⁱ
 - ii) Dispensationalism is rejected by the Reformed Church as heterodoxy because it posits 2 distinct peoples of God and two plans of salvation. Dispensationalism emphasizes discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments, whereas Reformed theology emphasizes continuity in God’s covenants from creation to new creation.
 - iii) Historic Premillennialism is a minority position in the Reformed Church.
 - b) Postmillennialism: The kingdom is the reign of Christ from heaven through the Church’s preaching of the gospel on the earth. The kingdom begins with a small nucleus centered around Christ during His earthly ministry. When He ascended to heaven to sit at the Father’s right hand, He bestowed His Spirit on the Church, giving us the commission to “make disciples of the all nations.” The gospel will prevail over all kingdoms leading to a golden age of peace in submission to Jesus as Lord (the Millennium). At the end of this golden age Christ will return to judge the living and the dead and live with His saints forever in the new creation (renewed and cleansed by the gospel proclamation).
 - c) Amillennialism: The kingdom is the reign of Christ from heaven through works of providence and the faithful witness of His saints in word and suffering. The kingdom was inaugurated with the incarnation of Christ, with His enthronement occurring at His ascension to the Father’s right hand. He is currently putting all enemies under His feet through judgment and salvation. The Church’s conflict with evil will persist until the consummation of the kingdom and will reach fever-pitch just prior to Christ’s coming. When Christ comes again, the kingdom will be consummated, the wicked will be judged, Satan condemned, and the new creation (renewed and cleansed by Christ) established as our eternal dwelling with God.
- 3) Literary Context of Revelation 20
- a) The last in a series of visions wherein each vision culminates in final judgment/salvation.
 - i) 7 Seals (6:1-8:1)
 - ii) 7 Trumpets (8:2-11:19)
 - iii) 7 Unnumbered Visions Depicting Conflict between the Dragon/Beast and the Kingdom of Christ Culminating in the Harvest of Salvation and Judgment (12-14)
 - iv) 7 Bowls (15-16)

v) **7 Unnumbered Visions Depicting the Defeat of Christ's Enemies and the Victory/Salvation of the Saints (17-22)**

- (1) Judgment on Babylon (17:1-19:10)
 - (a) Description of Babylon (17)
 - (b) "Lament" for Babylon (18)
 - (c) Rejoicing at Judgment on Babylon (19:1-10)

(2) Judgment on the Beast (19:11-21)

(3) Judgment on the Dragon/Satan (20:1-10)

- (4) Judgment on Everyone Not Named in the Book of Life and Death of Death (20:11-15)
- (5) All Things New (New Heavens; New Earth; New Jerusalem (21-22)

b) Literary Parallelism/Recapitulation

- i) This era of Redemptive History is retold from various angles to give believers understanding of their present situation and future hope.
- ii) 20:1-10 does not follow chronologically from 19:11-21. The "battle" of 20:7-9 is the same as the "battle" of 19:19-21, both using Ezekiel 38-39 as the prophetic background, but focusing on the defeat of different enemies (the beast and then the dragon).
- iii) 20:1-6 is parallel to the previous visions which describe life between the first and second advents of Christ. The Millennium began with the enthronement of Christ at His ascension and will end with the consummation of the Kingdom at the return of Christ, the bodily resurrection of the saints, and the New Creation.

4) Exposition of Revelation 20:1-6

a) Summary: ***The Millennium of Revelation 20:1-6 is a time during which Satan's sway over the nations is restricted by the authority of Christ and the Church of the Martyrs reigns with Christ as priests of God.***

b) Revelation 20:1-3: ***Satan's sway over the nations is restricted by the authority of Christ.***

- i) Angels are agents of God/Christ
- ii) The key to the bottomless pit=**authority** over the realm of the dragon/beast (cf. 9:1, 11; 11:7; 17:8)
- iii) Such **authority** belongs to Christ Jesus (Rev. 1:18; 3:7; cf. Matt. 28:18)
- iv) "Seal" is a metaphor for **authority**
- v) "Chain" is a metaphor for **restraint**
- vi) How is Satan **restrained**?
 - (1) Not absolutely
 - (2) "so that he might not deceive the nations any longer"
 - (3) The nations, which were delivered over to Satan's deception in the Old Testament, are opened up for the gospel under the New Testament.
 - (a) Example: Acts 13:4-12 Paul effectively rebuked Elymas, a "son of the devil," who was poisoning the mind of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, who consequently became a believer.
 - (b) Example: Acts 19:11-20 Jewish exorcists tried to use the names of Jesus and Paul as power authorities to cast out an evil spirit, but the evil spirit mastered them because they were not true followers of Jesus. Yet the name of Jesus was glorified,

and many who practiced magic arts confessed and repented, burning their books of magic and believing in Jesus.

vii) Satan will be unrestrained for a little while at the end of this period to “deceive the nations” (v. 8), and meet Christ in a final battle (19:19-21; 20:9).

c) Revelation 20:4-6: ***The Church of the Martyrs reigns with Christ as priests of God.***

i) Thrones for the martyrs: “I saw thrones and they sat^{iv} upon them and judgment was given^v to them^{vi}, even^{vii} the souls of those who had been axed because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the Word of God, and who did not worship the beast or his image and did not receive the mark upon the forehead and upon their hand” (v. 4a).

(1) Rev. 13:15 “And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain.”

(2) Rev. 11:7 “And when they have perfected their testimony, the beast that rises from the abyss will make war on them and conquer them and kill them.”

(3) At the visionary level all faithful witnesses are martyrs (e.g., 11:7). Historically, not all faithful witnesses became literal martyrs; yet, those who did embodied the ideal of being “faithful until death” (Rev. 2:10).

ii) The martyrs found their lives by losing them: “They lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years” (v. 4b). The unbelievers (20:15) and apostates (21:8) lost their lives by saving them: “The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years were completed” (v. 5a).

(1) The First Resurrection (v. 5b-6)

(a) Experience of reigning with Christ: “They lived and reigned with Christ” (v. 4b).

(b) Blessed and holy experience: “Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection!” (v. 6a).

(c) Protected from Second Death (Lake of Fire): “Over such the second death has no power . . .” (v. 6b).

(d) Priestly reign with Christ: “. . . but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with Him for a thousand years” (v. 6c).

(2) “First” is pre-consummation reality, while “second” is consummation reality.

(a) In 21:1 & 4, “first” is contrasted with “new.”

(b) Double Binary Implied

(i) First Death (21:4) and Second Death (20:6, 14)

1. First Death=Physical Death

2. Second Death=Lake of Fire/Hell

(ii) First Resurrection (20:5) and the Second Resurrection (20:13?)

1. First Resurrection=Faithful Witness Climaxed in Martyrdom (Ascent of Soul to Heaven/Regeneration)

2. Second Resurrection=Bodily Resurrection

(c) The overlap of the present age and the age to come (already/not yet) means that believers still suffer the vicissitudes of what is “passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31; 2 Cor. 5:1-5, 17).

- (d) The first resurrection is not the bodily resurrection of the consummation, when death has passed away as one of the “first things.”
 - (e) At the visionary level, the first resurrection is the martyrs’ continued union with Christ in life and priestly rule (ascent of the soul to Christ).
 - (f) At the historical level, the first resurrection is the participation of every faithful witness for Christ in His life and priestly rule.
- 5) Conclusion: The binding of Satan and the first resurrection of the Martyr-Church complement each other in God’s purpose to bring the gospel to the nations.

ⁱ “Rhetorical Patterns,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, edited by Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 720-27.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ The insistence on literalism by Dispensationalists leads down some rather bizarre and speculative paths, rather far afield from the “letter” of the text. Leading Dispensationalist John F. Walvoord, while acknowledging that this is not specifically taught, infers “based on the implication that [the New Jerusalem] has been in existence prior to its introduction” from heaven in Revelation 21 that the New Jerusalem “is a satellite city suspended over the earth during the thousand-year reign of Christ as the dwelling place of the resurrected and translated saints who also have access to the earthly scene.” [John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ: A Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, paper, 1989), 312-13.]

^{iv} ἐκάθισαν aor. act. ind. 3 pl. from καθίζω “they sat” (cf. KJV, NASB); not a participle, as ESV

^v ἐδόθη aor. pass. ind. 3 sg. from δίδωμι “was given” (cf. KJV, NASB, ESV); not a participle, as NIV

^{vi} αὐτοῖς is a dative plural. It could be translated either “to them” or “for them.” The former fits the immediate context better, because thrones imply not only rule, but also judgment. The latter fits the larger context better as an *inclusio* with Revelation 6:10.

^{vii} epexegetical or explanatory καί, “it defines more closely those whom John saw seated on thrones.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, Word Biblical Commentary 52c (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1073.]