

THE THOUSAND YEAR REIGN AND PREMILLENNIALISM

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Premillennialism is an insidiously threatening doctrine which is one of some antiquity. While its roots date back to the turn of the first to second century A.D., it is yet a doctrine foreign to Scripture. Sadly, its proponents will wrest, or twist, Scripture as "unlearned and unstable" ones did to Paul's writings and other Scriptures "unto their own destruction" (2 Pet. 3:16, KJV). Only a modicum of error added to Truth turns the resulting product into false doctrine.

The writer is grateful to Brian Kenyon and the Florida School of Preaching and is honored to have been given an opportunity to participate in this series of lectures on *Do You Understand the Biblical View of End Times?* Just in the last week of preparing this manuscript, the writer studied with one whose view of the end times was a confusing amalgamation of Biblical prophecy, premillennial speculation, and modern political events. In short, the prospect did not truly know what he believed; in reality, he had shortchanged the God of heaven by deeming Him incapable of succeeding in His plan to establish the kingdom in the first century. Such error and ignorance and slighting of God is sad ... and damning.

The specific topic of this study is "The Thousand Year Reign and Premillennialism." The writer has been tasked with this assignment: "Examine Revelation 20:1-10 and related passages to show what the text actually teaches and whether or not its teaching fits in with premillennialism." To accomplish this purpose, the writer will do three things: first, he will give a sentence by sentence commentary of the passage at hand; second, he will give evidence of the misapplication of this passage by premillennialists; and, third, he will provide a refutation of the premillennialists' misapplication.

EXPOSITION

In his *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, Robert R. Taylor, Jr., called his discourse on Revelation 20 "The Most Abused Chapter in the Book of Revelation." Beneath that heading, he--correctly in this writer's estimation--wrote, "In my judgment the two most misused and misunderstood chapters in the New Testament are Matthew 24 and Revelation 20" (395). Equally correctly, W.B. West wrote,

When we come to Revelation 20, we come to what many consider the most difficult of all the chapters in the Bible. I would suggest, however, that it is one of the easiest chapters to understand, if you will study it through first-century glasses. It is easy to understand if we will sit where John sat when he wrote it, if we will sit with the members of the seven churches addressed in Revelation 1-3 (133).

A first factor, then, which must precede an exposition of such a misunderstood and misapplied passage is a consideration of the audience of the writer. The premillennialist practically believes that John was writing to inhabitants of the twenty-first century--a few decades ago they similarly practically thought that the audience was twentieth century man. Both John and Jesus plainly identified the audience of the book. The Holy Spirit inspired John to write, "John to the seven churches which are in Asia" (Rev. 1:4). Jesus told John, "What thou seest, write in a book, and send *it* unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea" (Rev. 1:11). Jesus Himself addressed his letters to the individual seven churches of Asia (Rev. 2:1,8,12,18; 3:1,7,14). Even more specifically, the aforementioned verses show that the Revelation was addressed to the seven churches of Asia **of that day**.

A second factor which must precede an exposition of such a misunderstood and misapplied passage is a consideration of the type of language employed by the Biblical prophet,

John. John wrote in what is called **apocalyptic** language. The title Revelation is actually a translation of that very Greek word which, not coincidentally, begins the book; Revelation begins, "αποκαλυψις ιησου χριστου"; that is, literally, "Revelation of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 1:1, Textus Receptus). Apocalyptic writing was symbolic--excellent examples of this genre may be found in Daniel 7,9, and 11; Ezekiel 1; Zechariah 6; Matthew 24; and elsewhere--but intended to be understood by its audience. The writer's father wrote that an apocalypse is "an unveiling, an uncovering, a disclosure. Through it, God would make known to man what had not been previously revealed; it would no longer be a mystery. God expected/expects man to be uplifted, strengthened, exhorted, and comforted by its understandable,¹ dependable message" (Cates 98-99).

Apocalyptic language is understandable; however, in order to be understood, certain rules/principles of interpretation must be applied--a number of these rules follow:

First, "one must **not** read his own ideas and pet theories into the Scriptures" (Cates 109)--such is eisogesis [reading into the Word] rather than exegesis [reading out of the Word] and is hermeneutically neither valid nor acceptable under any circumstances, regardless of genre!

Second, one must not interpret within the same context some elements literally and others figuratively [e.g., one would not take the ribs in the mouth of the beast "like to a bear" (Dan. 7:5) to be literal ribs--they are as symbolic as the rest of the elements of the vision].

Third, one must only assign interpretations "when sufficient evidence warrants them" and not try "to be too detailed" (Cates 109,110) but "take **visions as a whole**" (Walker 221) not demanding "too many points of analogy" (Dungan 215) [e.g., no significant importance is given

by Daniel to the toes of the colossal image of Daniel 2, so Bible interpreters should not force a symbolic meaning upon them].

Fourth, one must recognize that the meaning of some symbols will be expressly given elsewhere in the passage [e.g., Dan. 2:38] or will find parallel usage in other apocalyptic passages [e.g., compare Dan. 7:7,8 and 7:24 with 8:5-8]; accordingly, Dungan wrote on figurative language, "Let the author give his own interpretation" (204).

Fifth, one must not accept an interpretation which violates "the teaching of **clear, non-symbolic, indisputable language in other contexts and passages**, in interpreting apocalyptic language. Some make the fatal mistake of reinterpreting clear passages to the contrary in the light of a misinterpretation of symbolic passages" (Cates 110) [such has led many to completely ignore John 18:36 and Colossians 1:13 due to their threats to premillennial assumptions regarding the nature and timing of the Lord's kingdom].

Sixth, one must get the same interpretation "that the reader in the first century would have gotten from the text" (Walker 218) [the Revelation was written not written to a modern audience; why would the meaning address those whom the book did not?].

Seventh, one may use "the facts of history and biography ... to assist in the interpretation of figurative [especially apocalyptic-DFC] language" (Dungan 211) [such as studying Daniel 11 in light of the history of Alexander, the Ptolemies and Seleucids, especially Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and the Maccabees].

A third factor which must precede an exposition of such a misunderstood and misapplied passage as Revelation 20 is a consideration of the context of the passage at hand. Obviously, Revelation 20:1-6 falls between Revelation 19 and 20:11; accordingly, these equally apocalyptic

passages must be taken into consideration when seeking the meaning of Revelation 20:1-10.

Early in the vision (Rev. 6:9-11), martyrs were crying out for vindication not knowing when the Lord would avenge them. Over the course of the book, the empire which had troubled them was methodically destroyed. Revelation 19 is the culmination of destruction as Satan's allies (the beast, the kings, the armies, the false prophet, those belonging to the beast, those who worshipped the beast, and the remnant) were defeated either pictured as cast in the lake of fire or merely slain. That left Satan--and any not tied directly or indirectly to the oppressive empire of the martyrs of John's day--to be dealt with by God. Moving past Revelation 20:1-10, one sees in Revelation 20:11 a white throne, righteous judgment, and then the end of death and the grave and the punishment of the rest whose names were not in the book of life (cf Rev. 13:8); that is, who were unrighteous. Revelation 21 shifts the scene from the condemnation associated with judgment to the reward associated with it. It is between the battles of Revelation 19 and the judgment and meting of reward beginning in Revelation 20:11 that the text at hand falls!

So Satan's allies lie destroyed. In the margin of Curtis A. Cates, Sr.'s Bible is this note: "[There-DFC] remains one enemy of the church who has not been defeated." Revelation 20:1 shows an angel with the ability ["in his hand"] and authority ["key"] to bind, or limit, Satan--as the forces unleashed in Revelation 9 had been bound prior to verse 2.

Revelation 20:2,3 shows that the ferocious, deceptive, accusing Satan was indeed bound by the angel for a complete period of time [the multiplying of a number, 10 (symbolizing completion), by itself three times (an intensifying (Workman, "Millennium" 199) or even a Divine number) indicates a truly complete time as "a thousand hills" in Psalm 50:10 indicated the complete number of hills--that is the cattle on the 1001st hill were as much His as the ones on

the 999th or 1000th hill]. The angel then cast Satan (preventively, not punitively) into the bottomless pit till the end of that complete time. He was prevented from deceiving the nations--not individuals nor the church. Satan's influence could still be felt; he could still be destructive [as a criminal whose hands are tied might still be able to kick]. Ultimately, Satan would be loosed to be able to afflict through other nations.

Revelation 20:4 pictures the church persecuted by the Roman Empire finally having the answer to their prayer of Revelation 6:9-11. These are "souls of them that were" martyred by beheading "for the witness" or for their stand for the Word of God and their testimony. These had not worshipped Satan (Rev. 13:15) as those in Revelation 13:12 had. These had been sealed by God (Rev. 7:3,4; 9:4; cf 2 Tim. 2:19), not Satan (Rev. 13:16; 14:9-11). Now the judged martyrs have judgment (or vengeance against their enemies) given to them as they sit on thrones. Where? "The thousand-year reign takes place in heaven. The souls of the righteous dead are in heaven, not on the earth" (Whitten 241).

Revelation 20:5 speaks of the rest of the dead; that is, not the martyrs. Who this represents is debatable: is this the inhabitants of the nation that had killed the martyrs and had been killed by the sword of Christ (Hailey 394); is this those who died in sin (Waldron, 507); is this those who have died to sin (Jackson, Thousand 218; Workman, "Satan" 541) but who had not necessarily been martyred; is it the state of the persecuted church (Workman, "Satan" 541); or is it the state of the vindicated church (Taylor 401-402; West 138)? One thing is certain: These are described as "blessed and holy" in the next verse, so must have been Christians! The latter three possibilities are complementary--this is the church, especially of that day!

Revelation 20:6 shows the state of the resurrected: Blessed, holy, not threatened by the second death which awaited Satan and his minions (Rev. 20:10; 19:20; 20:14,15; 21:8)! These righteous would, rather, serve God and Christ and reign with Them.

Revelation 20:7,8 has nothing to do with those of verses 4-6. This is after the fall of their persecutors and after their exaltation; rather, this has to do with the world when Satan is again given some liberty. Satan affects other nations inspiring them to fight against God.

Revelation 20:9 shows that the efforts of nations influenced by Satan and minded like Rome will also be to fight against the church--they would encompass "the camp of the saints." The writer's father would refer to such a revival of Satanic influence as "Satan's Waterloo." Regardless of the time in history, though, as always the Lord is with His people to fight for them and these new allies of Satan are, as Rome had been, destroyed by God.

Revelation 20:10 shows that Satan would ultimately join Roman and his false prophet in "the lake of fire." The point of the book of Revelation is confirmed in this verse, for God is victorious--and so is His church, though persecuted through the ages.

MISAPPLICATION

Hermeneutics could be made subjective--and was in this writer's mock debate while he was assigned the promoting of the error of premillennialism as a student in a denominational doctrines course--but doing such fails to appreciate that the Bible will mean the same to all men who reason correctly (Isa. 1:18). God's Word, specifically prophecy, is not "of any private interpretation" (2 Pet. 1:20); in fact, it will have only one meaning. The reader is invited to imagine the confusion which would have existed in the early church if one Christian had the gift of prophecy (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:10,28; 14:1ff), but those who judged ascribed numerous,

disparate meanings to the same prophecy--it is significant to note that there could be several prophesying, but only one judge (1 Cor. 14:29)! Moreover, these prophecies were required to mesh with other prophets' prophesying in order to be deemed valid (1 Cor. 14:32), and, therefore, educational and comforting (1 Cor. 14:31)!

Admittedly, this section of Scripture could be difficult; however, difficulty does not excuse false doctrine. Gary Workman wrote, "Surely if verses 4-6 were not in the Bible, no Christian would ever have thought of an earthly, millennial reign of Christ. Yet the inclusion of these verses fails to support it" ("Satan" 533).

J. Barton Payne's "highly premillennial" (Jackson, Principles 33) Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy twists many Scriptures in support of that heresy. On Revelation 20, Payne suggest the requirements "of the temporary restraint of Satan during the future Messianic kingdom as in Genesis 3:15c" (625), an "essentially unobjectionable" though "subject to modification" literal thousand year reign "upon the earth and not in heaven" "prior to the final judgment" (626), "the first resurrection [the Rapture-DFC], of Christ's own people" (626), and a reigning with Jesus "designated for those who escape Armageddon" (627).

Similarly, W.E. Blackstone's premillennial Jesus Is Coming states that "the literal reign of Christ, with His saints, for a thousand years is plainly stated in the twentieth chapter of Revelation" (37); in fact, it also says, "The teaching is so plain that 'wayfaring men shall not err therein' (Isa. 35:8)" (38)--that is, even the fool should recognize this plain fact. Answering this error's detractors, Payne wrote,

But those who oppose this 'blessed hope,' of the premillennial coming of our Lord [sic-DFC] usually begin their arguments by the assertion that the doctrine of the Millennium

is nowhere taught in Scripture except in this 20th chapter of Revelation, and that the symbolical character of this book forbids our founding any doctrine upon it (ibid.).

He goes further not to defend the doctrine from Scripture [where it certainly is nowhere else found!], but from the Jewish Talmud (ibid.)²; he does not answer at all the problem of inserting the literal thousand into an otherwise figurative context. Later, Blackstone required again that Christ's "coming must be pre-millennial" (63).

What of the doctrine of premillennialism--is it really plainly taught in Revelation 20? No. It is neither plainly nor confusingly taught there or anywhere else in Scripture!

REFUTATION

Homer Hailey rightly wrote, "The theory [premillennialism-DFC] must read into the passage (vv. 1-10) all that it claims to draw from it, for the following are not mentioned in the text: (1) the second coming of Christ, (2) a bodily resurrection, (3) a reign of Christ on earth, (4) the literal throne of David, (5) Jerusalem of Palestine, (6) conversion of the Jews, or (7) the church on earth. A theory that rests on a passage of Scripture in which not one of its particular tenets of doctrine is found cannot be true!" (390). Jackson also wrote, "Most all of the key components of the millennial theory are conspicuously absent from this context" ("Thousand" 98); he noted there was neither "the Rapture, the Tribulation Period, the restoration of Judaism, the Antichrist, or even the second coming of Christ" nor anything about "Jerusalem, David's throne, the kingdom [in the premillennial sense-DFC] of Christ, or the Lord's presence upon the earth"; nonetheless, "many people take for granted that these elements are found in Revelation 20" (99).

One is reminded of the principles of hermeneutics associated with understanding apocalyptic literature; how many are violated by the premillennial misinterpretation of Revelation 20! That doctrine completely reads its "own ideas and pet theories into the Scriptures" (Cates 109). That doctrine definitely and unwarrantedly mixes literal elements into the figurative context. That doctrine presses details too far and interprets when sufficient evidence does not warrant interpretation. That doctrine ignores how the same symbols are used elsewhere. That doctrine defies the plain teaching of non-symbolic passages. That doctrine does not produce a meaning which the "the reader in the first century would have gotten from the text" (Walker 218). That doctrine also ignores that history can show that the events of the passage relate to the fall of the Empire which had persecuted that people!

CONCLUSION

This study has provided an exposition of Revelation 20:1-10, a representation of how the passage is used by premillennialists, and a refutation of that pervasive doctrine. May the student of God in this study and all others do so "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15)!

END NOTES

¹The writer is reminded of a wonderful statement made by the American orator Daniel Webster; he wrote,

I believe that the Bible is to be understood and received in the plain and obvious meaning of its passages; since I cannot persuade myself that a book intended for the instruction and conversion of the whole world, should cover its true meaning in such mystery and doubt, that none but critics and philosophers can discover it (10).

²Even the postmillennial Loraine Boettner, abbreviating and paraphrasing Martin G. Selbrede's work "Revelation 19:11-20:10: A Postmillennial Analysis" (387), regarded the thousand years as a "new symbol" introduced in Revelation 20 (396).

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