Understanding Revelation 20 in its Context

Revelation 20 contains probably the most well-known feature of the Book of Revelation. If you ask someone about what they associate the Book of Revelation with, sometime along the line, they will turn to Revelation 20 in their minds and think of the millennial text and the picture in chapter 20 of the thousand year reign. So what I want to do is talk a little bit about chapter 20 and not only focus on the millennial text and the idea of the Millennium itself, but again look at the chapter as a whole as far as how it functions within Revelation, but we will talk a little bit about the Millennium and a way to understand that that I think is consistent with the rest of the book and how it functions.

One of the most important principles for understanding this section I think, beginning with chapter 20, is that we saw that 19:11 begins a new section in the book, a section that spans from 19:11 all the way through 21:8, and we said chapters 17 and 18, and the first few verses of 19, and then 21:9-22:5 are two paired sections, comparing and especially contrasting to Babylon/Rome and the New Jerusalem. Then in between is section comprised of 19:11-21:8 that uses various images to portray and to interpret the meaning of the second coming of Christ. So with 19:11, I think we’re at the very end of history. We’re at the second coming of Christ, and that entire section portrays a variety of scenes that describe what will take place when Christ returns to earth at his second coming.

What is significant then is that chapter 20 should be seen in light of this broader series of events. I think what we’ll see is chapter 20, as well as all the way from 19:11 through the end of chapter 20, probably once more conveys a series of events or scenes that roughly describe the same event. That is 19-20 should not necessarily be taken as a series of events that will occur in chronological order, remember John will preface his vision with “Then I saw,” that indicates primarily the visionary sequence in which he saw
it, not necessarily the sequence in which things will happen. So, the events in chapter 20 should not necessarily be seen as happening in the strict chronological order but should be seen in terms of a variety of perspectives or a variety of ways of looking at what happens when Jesus Christ returns, or to explore the meaning and the significance of what takes place when Christ returns to consummate God’s plan for history.

In chapter 19, in verses 11-21, we saw that Christ returns in the form of a battle that probably signifies a final judgment where all the people of the earth are judged but also including the two beasts, the beast and the false prophet from Revelation 13. Now in chapter 20, we find that chapter 20 being a further scene of judgment scenes primarily. So the main theme of chapter 20 is still one of judgment, in my opinion. In chapter 20, we’ll see now that Satan will also be judged and deposed much like the beasts were. So one important feature we’ve already suggested is, intriguingly, that chapter 19 and 20 judges or removes, the two beasts and the dragon in the reverse order they were introduced in chapters 12 and 13.

Chapter 20 combines three different scenes, all of them divided with an “I saw.” The first scene is found in the first three verses, and they’re all linked, and that is the binding of Satan in the Abyss for a thousand years. The second scene is in chapter 20:4-10, and that is the resurrection of the saints who were martyred and their thousand year reign, followed by a final battle by Satan. Satan is released and mounts a final war. Then the third and last scene in chapter 20 is in verses 11 through 15, and that is the Great White Throne judgment.

Text of Revelation 20

The first two scenes are bound together by the mention of the thousand year period that we’ll look at. What I want to do then, before examining each of these three scenes in chapter 20, is to read it, chapter 20, and start with verse 1.
Verses 1-3

“And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss and locked, and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended.

Verses 4-6

[And after that, he must be set free for a short time.] I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and they reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

Verses 7-10

“When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out and deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—and to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God’s people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”
Verses 11-15

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

Revelation 20:1-3: Binding of Satan

So what I want to do is look at each of those three sections. The first one then being verses 1-3, the vision of Satan being bound and thrown into the Abyss for a period of a thousand years, after which he will be released for a short period of time. Now recall again that the two beasts have already been judged and thrown in to the lake of fire, the beast and the false prophet. Now Satan is introduced, and his judgment now is introduced, but in two stages. Part of the background for this is the dragon from chapter 12. You perhaps noted some of the connections back to chapters 12 and 13. The mention of a dragon which, just like he was described back in chapter 12:9, is called the “ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan”. So now that same dragon from chapter 12 is reintroduced here. Again, the figure of a dragon symbolizing chaos and evil and resembles or draws on the sea monsters from earlier Old Testament texts, for example. But now Satan’s demise is introduced, but in two separate stages. So, it’s interesting Satan isn’t simply thrown into the lake of fire. His judgment is introduced in two separate stages. First of all a binding in the pit, the Abyss. Then, second, he’s let out and finally thrown into the lake of fire towards the end of chapter 20.
Now, we’ve already been introduced to the Abyss. We’ve seen that the Abyss, or pit, throughout Revelation has played a role in indicating the house of the demons, the home of demoniac beings, the prison of the demoniac beings. The locusts come out of it in chapter 9, and the locusts clearly identify with demoniac figures. The beast comes out of the Abyss in chapter 11, and now Satan is thrown into the Abyss and it is locked. So, Satan is returned to the Abyss as a kind of the prison house of the demoniac beings. Now the text begins by an angel coming down with a chain ready to grab the dragon and bind him. Again, it’s sort of interesting that God does not do this, or not even Jesus does this, but all that is required is for an angel to do this, again suggesting that there is no dualism in the book. God is portrayed as sovereign, so his angelic beings can do things like this, even binding Satan. It’s possible that this is the same angel in chapter 9:1 that came down with the key to the Abyss to allow the locusts out.

Locked Up

What I want to suggest is this: not only the idea of locking Satan in the Abyss but letting him back out so that he goes into judgment in the lake of fire in the final judgment. This two-fold, or two-stage judgment of Satan seems to reflect a common conception of how demoniac evil beings are judged from the Old Testament and also apocalyptic literature. So, for example, if you go back to Isaiah 24:21-22 – it’s a section that deals with section 24-26 of Isaiah that’s often labeled the little apocalypse – But in Isaiah 24:21-22: “In that day, the Lord will punish the powers in heavens above and the kings on earth below. They will be herded together like prisoners bound in the dungeon. They will be shut up in a prison and be punished after many days.”

Notice that it is two-fold. First, they will be bound in a prison and then sometime later they will be judged. You find similar language in some other apocalyptic texts. For example, in first Enoch chapter 10 and verses 4-6:

“And secondly the Lord said to Raphael: [which is an angelic being], ‘Bind Azazel hand and foot and throw him into the darkness.’ And so he made a hole in the desert, which
was in Dudael and cast him there. He threw on top of him rugged and sharp rocks. And he covered his face in order that he might not see light and in order that he may be sent into the fire on the great day of judgment.”

So notice again this Azazel, which may be some key demoniac leader, may be even Satan himself, thrown into a pit covered over with rocks until the day of judgment. You see the same scene in another apocalyptic text, Second Enoch. In chapter 7, we read, this is verses 1-2. “And there I perceive prisoners under guard, hanging up, waiting for the measureless judgment. And those angels have the appearance of darkness themselves.”

So now you have another picture of angelic beings in prison, locked up, waiting for the day of judgment. So, this is not their final judgment. They’re locked up until the final judgment.

You could also read II Peter 2:4 where we find Peter appealing to and relying on this same imagery and the same story. Perhaps also I Peter 3, “the spirits in prison” in that section as well. But, II Peter 2:4, “For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but he sent them to hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment.” So note again this theme of demoniac angelic beings locked up in prison, awaiting the day of judgment. And the idea is that they be let out of prison to go into their judgment. I’ve already mentioned this may lie behind the description of the beast back in chapter 17, where he was described as the “one who was, who is not and who is coming,” but he goes into judgment. But here I think the author is drawing on that image from the Old Testament from apocalyptic literature the same image you find, for example, in II Peter 2:4 and probably Jude 6 as well. Now John draws on that to depict the final judgment of Satan himself. The archetypal evil, demoniac being, which is Satan himself. Now he is also judged in two stages: first of all, locking him in prison; second, letting him out to go into judgment. And so, I think that provides the model for why John depicts Satan’s judgment in two stages here.
Jesus also talks about the binding of Satan, for example, in Matthew 12:29, where he talks about the binding of the strong man. God’s kingdom can only arrive if someone comes to bind the strong man, which is Satan himself. Luke 10:18 talks about Jesus saying, “I saw Satan fall like lightning.” And some have suggested this is the imagery that John draws on, or that John is reflecting Jesus’ teaching. That is certainly possible, but probably we should see it that Jesus’ own teaching, the inauguration and arrival of the kingdom of God, was the initial binding. Now we see the final binding of Satan and the final judgment that takes place at the second coming of Christ. Again, I think it’s an important principle to understand that from 19:11 through to chapter 21 we find the series of events that I think takes place at the second coming of Christ. So the binding of Satan, when Jesus’ kingdom brought God’s kingdom to earth at his first coming, was an initial binding that now finds its consummation in the final binding of Satan at the second coming of Christ. In other words, as Grant Osbourne says in his commentary, “Satan is completely bound in the Abyss, and he cannot escape.” And the reason it said he’s bound in the Abyss is so he’s no longer able to deceive the nations. This was his primary role starting in Genesis 3 where he deceives Adam and Eve. In Revelation 12:9, he’s described as deceiving the nations. Once again, notice the connection between chapter 20 and chapter 12 and we’ll see a couple of other connections later. So, Satan is no longer able to deceive the nations but when he is, and we’ll ask why that might be, but when he finally is released, he is able to find the nations receptive once more to his deceiving, then mounting a final assault or attack on the people of God later on in chapter 20.

But at this point, for this thousand years, he is not able to deceive the nations, although it’s not exactly clear at this point why he’s not permitted to deceive the nations, at least I don’t think so. So now that Satan has been bound and again what I want to emphasize is I think the main theme of chapter 20 is still one of judgment, of the binding and the final judgment of Satan himself. It does end with a scene of final judgment, but the binding and judgment of Satan seems to be the primary point in chapter 20. Now that Satan has been bound for a thousand years, the next few verses, especially verses 4-6 tell
us what happens during that thousand years. In fact, you could remove verses 4-6 and 1-3 would flow naturally into 7-10. Verse 7 begins when the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison. Again, I think, reflecting those apocalyptic texts and Old Testament background of how the demons are dealt with and judged. But verses 4-6 are kind of, in a sense, an insertion, not a digression. It is the midst of this two stage binding and judgment of Satan you find verses 4-6 describing what happens during that thousand year period. The saints come to life and are raised and now they reign with Christ for a thousand years. Until that period of a thousand years is over, then Satan is let out again.

Those Who Sit on the Thrones

But what I want to do is look at this text again from the standpoint of how it has often been looked at in church history, but I want to keep an eye on how it is actually functioning, in the broader context, and in the book of Revelation. The text begins with a vision of thrones in verse 4. The thrones clearly recall, this used from throughout the book, all the way back in chapters 4 and 5, the notion of kingship, and authority, and sovereignty. So now the author sees thrones, plural, but he doesn’t tell us how many thrones. Some have speculated this is the twenty-four thrones of the elders from chapter 4 and 5. That’s possible, but John doesn’t say that it’s the twenty-four elders; he just uses the plural thrones, and then he says, “On which were seated those who had been given authority to judge.” It’s also interesting that he doesn’t tell us even who it is sitting in the thrones. Another way of putting it is, what is the relationship between those who sit on the thrones in the first half of verse 4 and now the second half of verse 4 where John says, “And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony”? Is this a separate group? So do you have one group seated on thrones, and now do you have a different group, those who have been beheaded because of their testimony? Or, I wonder if we should take this as referring to the same group again from different perspectives. John sees thrones and those seated on them, now he’s going to describe in
more detail who those people are who are seated on the thrones. That’s, I think, one way of looking at it.

Those Sitting on the Thrones

Some have suggested those seated on the thrones in verse 4 are angelic beings, one of the reasons being because the background for this text seems to be Daniel 7. We’ve seen that Daniel 7, as well as the whole book of Daniel, throughout Revelation, that Daniel 7 has played a critical role at points. In Daniel 7, it seems to be the heavenly counsel that renders judgment in Daniel 7. Some have suggested those on the thrones in the first part of verse 4, would be the heavenly counsel, perhaps angelic beings, and they’re the ones now that render judgment. Then the souls of those beheaded would be the saints; those who have suffered and who have died at the hands of the beast. However, I wonder though if first of all when you look at texts like back in 3:21, where one of the promises to the overcomer is, “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne.” I realize that’s singular there, “just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.” So, is it possible that we should see these thrones as the ultimate fulfillment for the overcomers? These overcomers now occupy the throne. Furthermore, whatever the case those who are raised, the souls of those beheaded in the second part of chapter 4, because of their testimony, they are the ones in the rest of chapter 4 who reign. They come to life and they reign, which is exactly what the thrones are there for.

So, I wonder if the best way to look at it, again, is to see both halves of verse 4 as simply different ways of depicting the same group. So, John sees thrones and those seated on them. Then, second, he sees the same beings but now he describes them as the souls of those that were beheaded because of their testimony and those who do not worship the beast or his image. Now they came to life and they reigned on those thrones for a thousand years. So probably, 4a and 4b, the two groups, both introduced by “I saw,” probably describe the same group.
Now, one other thing to draw attention to in verse 4, most translations translate the first part of verse 4 “I saw thrones on which were seated, those who were given authority to judge.” That is literally and wouldn’t lead the text as “judgment was given to them.” Another way to read this, and I think better way to read it is, “Judgment was given for them” or “judgment was given on their behalf.” That is a judgment is being rendered in their favor. So the picture, obviously and later on the text says, and they reigned, but the point of this then would be that judgment is given or rendered on their behalf or in their favor. That is going back to Daniel 7 and especially verse 22, the saints here are finally vindicated. This is the vindication of the saints. This is the ultimate answer to the cry of the martyrs. Now, they come to life and they reign for a thousand years. That is judgment is given and rendered on their behalf, and judgment is rendered in their favor.

Now, in fulfillment of Daniel 7, they are vindicated by being raised to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years, which is the exact period of Satan’s binding in verses 1-3. Now, why this is important? We said chapter 20, especially through verse 10, is primarily dealing with the judgment of Satan. But in the midst of that, we’ve already noted some connections with chapter 12, and that is that Satan is identified in the exact same way that he was in chapter 12. “He is the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the devil or Satan,” chapter 12:9. Notice also the description in verse 4 of the souls under the altar who have been beheaded, which actually goes back to chapter 6:9-11, “The souls under the altar who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus, because of the word of God.” But now notice also that it says that they had not worshiped the beast or his image and they had not received his mark on their forehead or hands, which takes you back to chapter 13 as well. So what I think is going on here as a part of the judgment of Satan is in chapter 20, now you have as part of that judgment the vindication of the saints who suffered at the hands of Satan and the beast. Thus, there are all those connections back to chapters 12 and 13 and also the fifth seal those who had been slain and who now were under the altar. So here is the vindication of the saints.
What I want you to notice is part of Satan’s judgment, note the complete reversal that takes place. Satan ruled and put the saints to death; now you have a complete reversal. The saints come to life and now they reign, while Satan has been locked up in the Abyss. He’s no longer able to do his deceptive work and he’s no longer able to engage in any activity. Now everyone can perceive the complete vindication of the saints. That reversal is important. The exact reversal of chapters 12 and 13 where Satan’s kingdom reigned supreme, and he was able to put to death saints. Remember pursuing the seed of the woman and the authority he gave to the two beasts. So Satan ruled. He put the saints to death. Now there is a complete reversal, Satan is bound, his kingdom is taken away, and now the saints reign. They come to life so that we find that they are vindicated.

Those Who Have Been Beheaded

Another question that arises is: “More specifically, who are these souls who have been beheaded?” Are they the same group as those who worshipped the beast or the image and had not received the image on the mark on the forehead. Some have perceived two different groups. Those who had actually been beheaded and then anyone else who refused to worship the beast, so that could be people who lived. So that the assumption is not everyone was martyred or killed for their faith and John is only aware of only one person so far, and that is Antipas, though he thinks others are coming. But some would suggest we have different groups here, those who have been martyred for their faith and another group that is a little broader than that, everyone who did not worship the beast and his image and who refused the mark back in chapter 13.

However, I wonder if we can really separate these two so easily. That is, when I read Revelation, I doubt that John would have perceived those who refused to worship the beast and this image and who refused to receive the mark would not have at least in the visionary narrative of John is those people would have suffered the ultimate consequences, and that is martyrdom, use as in our 21st century, that is somebody who dies for their faith. So I doubt that John would have conceived of someone who refused
to worship the beast and his image and refused the mark that that person would not have been slain or killed or martyred because of their refusal to conform and to submit. So I doubt that we should see two separate groups here. Instead I think probably this image of those who refused to worship the beast and those who refused to worship the beast and those who refused the mark on their forehead are those then who are slain and beheaded because of their testimony and faithful witness but probably this group, this is meant simply to represent the entirety of God’s people. This is again according to the book of Revelation, John perceives that anyone who maintains a faithful witness and refuse to follow the beast, the end result is going to be suffering and death. So I think that this is simply John’s way of depicting the entirety of God’s people, not necessarily suggesting every last one of them, as we know is not the case. In John’s historical context and also in his visionary narrative, to maintain a faithful witness and to refuse to follow the beast results in martyrdom or death because of one’s faithful witness. So, I think then verse 4 should be understood as representing one group of people, those on the throne and then those who are beheaded because of their witness and refusal to follow the beast. That is a representation of the entire people of God, now at the end of history, being vindicated because of their suffering.

So, the beast then reigned and killed God’s people and now as part of his judgment, concomitant to his judgment is also the vindication of the saints rendering a verdict despite the verdict of Satan and despite the verdict of the world and the saints. Go back to chapter 11, where the beast put the saints to death and the entire world gloated because this was a victory and the saint’s testimony appeared to be in vain and the saint’s witness appeared to be futile. Now they are vindicated. Satan is locked away and shut up, so now the saints can be vindicated and shown that their witness and their suffering was not in vain because as we’ve said it is an exact reversal to what happened in chapters 12 and 13 where Satan reigned and Satan put to death through the beast those who opposed him, the people of God who maintained their faithful witness. Now in an exact reversal, the saints come to life, they receive life, and now they reign.
Revelation 20:4-6, The Millennial Text

The period of a thousand years has probably engendered more speculation and also more confusion and more debate and discussion than perhaps any other issue in the book of Revelation. I’m going to show you why it’s rather ironic that that is the case. But, chapter 20 of Revelation, verses 4 through 6, in disproportion to that brevity of these two verses in this section in relationship to the rest of the book, this section has almost emerged as the centerpiece of the entire book. I want to talk about a little about this thousand years, but this reference to a thousand year period, the coming to life and reigning of the saints, especially in the end part of verse 4, which is the only place where you find a reference to the saints coming to life and reigning for a thousand years. That’s basically the only reference to the Millennium. But this text by itself has created or been responsible of the creation of entire theological systems. It’s been responsible for creation of entire views of eschatology or end-time events. It’s played a role in confessional statements of our churches and various groups and in doctrinal statements of our churches. It’s also played a significant role in identifying theological approaches and hermeneutical approaches to interpreting the book of Revelation itself. So often you’ll have people say, “Do you interpret Revelation pre-millennially or from an amillennial perspective or post-millennial perspective?” We’ll look at those views in just a moment, but the point is these verses by themselves, these three short verses, seem to have emerged as the centerpiece of Revelation and not only responsible for creating entire theological and eschatological systems of how we understand the end times, but also are responsible for labeling different approaches to how we read the entire book of Revelation based solely on these verses.

Three Approaches to the Millennium

Now what I want to focus on for the moment is this mention of the thousand years. This mention of the thousand years is responsible for, and it has resulted throughout church history in, the creation of eschatological systems, that is, ways of looking at the end times and the Millennium. This reference to a thousand years has played a crucial
role throughout church history and throughout our theological thinking about end-times. Three general approaches have emerged, and hopefully I don’t need to spend too much time in this, because you’re familiar with these approaches and you can certainly read about them in numerous textbooks that introduce you to these different systems and ways of looking the Millennium and looking at the end-times. But there are three different views through the history of interpretation Revelation in the church and throughout the church’s articulation of its beliefs about eschatology or end-times. They have been labeled: premillennial, post-millennial, or amillennial. These all come from this text. Again, this is the only place in the Bible that you explicitly find reference to a millennial reign or to a thousand year reign, and nowhere else do you find it. This doesn’t mean that the Bible doesn’t refer to it anywhere else. Many have found precursors to this in some Old Testament expectations of an earthly reign, an earthly kingdom, such as Daniel 7 and elsewhere in sections of Isaiah and Ezekiel and Jeremiah. Some have found references already in the Old Testament. Some have found references in, for example, I Corinthians 15 in Paul’s discussion of Christ reigning until he subdues his enemies, then he hands the kingdom over to the Father. There seems to be a progression, and some have seen Paul in sort of nascent terms, referring to what John now refers to in more detail here in the Millennium. But the point here is that this is the only place in the Bible we find explicit reference to the Millennium. Again, that doesn’t mean it’s nowhere else or that it’s not important at all because this is the only place, but it’s important to state at the outset that the place we get the notion of the millennial kingdom is right here.

Now just very briefly, the three primary approaches to the Millennium and by the way there are probably sub-classifications within these approaches, but I don’t want to go into a lot of detail on those. So these are not homogeneous. That is, when we talk about pre-millennialism, that doesn’t mean that everyone looks at the Millennium in the exact same way. There can be sub-classifications and subcategories that different views should fall into.
Pre-millennialism

First of all, the view known as premillennialism, suggests two things. Number one, that there is a future millennial reign, there is a future period of time that has not yet taken place where Christ will reign over the earth with his saints in fulfillment of Revelation 20. Second, and this where the world “pre” comes in, the prefix “pre,” Jesus Christ will come back before that event. So, we’re anticipating the time when Jesus Christ returns in the future. When he returns, he will set up his millennial reign on earth. So that’s what’s known as pre-millennialism. “Pre-” Christ comes before the Millennium. He is the one who sets up the millennial kingdom. The kingdom does not arrive until Christ comes at his second coming so all these plagues and bowls and things happen and then, finally, Christ returns, he judges (chapter 19), and then he sets up his millennial kingdom on earth. So the Millennium is solely future, it has not taken place yet, and will not take place until Christ first comes back. Now there’s variations within this. One that we’ve kind of referred to is an approach that interprets Revelation rather literally. It often sees Revelation 20, the Millennium, as the place where all of Israel’s literal, physical, national promises get fulfilled. So all the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament of a Davidic king ruling on this throne over the nation, a rebuilt temple, the Israelites being restored to their land, many people see that, see the Millennium in chapter 20, as the place where that will occur. But not everyone thinks this way is a premillennialist. The main point with premillennialism is that it’s future and that Christ comes back first to set it up and to inaugurate it.

Post-millennialism

A second view is what is known as post-millennialism. This view is not nearly as common as the first one, although there is a strong minority that still holds to it. Basically post-millennialism, like pre-millennialism, post-millennialism thinks that the Millennium is still future and that it will occur on earth. So it agrees there is a future Millennium, a future reign that will take place on earth. However, where they differ is they think that the future Millennium on earth will be a result, just very basically and
maybe too simplistically, that it will be a result of the church’s mission, the church preaching and spreading the Gospel, and through the power of the Spirit, that will result eventually in a golden era being inaugurated, being called the Millennium. After the Millennium and after that reign on earth, and after that golden era, then Christ will come back, hence post-millennialism. So they agree the Millennium is future. Like the first view, premillennialism, the Millennium is a future period of time on earth, where, as a result of the preaching of the Gospel and the work of the Spirit, there will be a golden age where righteousness will reign supreme, but then Christ comes after that event, at the end, to set up the new heavens and the new earth, so it is called “post-millennialism.”

Amillennialism

The third view that also has a little bit of variation in it is the view known as amillennialism. Again, this is a very common approach, has been common from centuries in the early church. The word “a” unlike the other two prefixes which were temporal, “pre” and “post,” the word “a” is sort of a primitive construction which means no or not, so literally no Millennium. In a sense that’s a misnomer because they’re not saying there’s no Millennium at all, they’re saying there’s not a future, physical, earthly Millennium. There’s no future specific period of time. Instead, what amillennialism says is the entire church age is a Millennium. The period between the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ, the whole period is a Millennium symbolized by a thousand years. This is a time during which the saints reign with Christ from heaven. There are all kinds of New Testament texts that demonstrate that Christ has been raised to heaven and seated in heaven at the right hand of God from which he rules over all creation and that we reign with him. Some suggest that the Millennium is what happens at the death of the saints when we die and go to heaven, then we reign with Christ from heaven. But the point is the Millennium is not restricted to any one period of time, hence amillennialism. Instead, the millennial thousand years, symbolizes the entire sweep of the church age, the entire sweep of church history from which Christ rules from heaven and the saints rule with him.
The Millennium Throughout Church History

What is important to recall, before I make a couple of observations related to the Millennium, is that Christians throughout church history have generally been tolerant of different views of the Millennium. It’s interesting when you look at some of our early creedal statements in the early centuries of the church that they don’t really have a millennial statement in them, but the church has been tolerant of different views of the Millennium and godly intelligent Christians throughout the centuries have held all three of these views, and some have even changed their mind at times on different views. So the point is, there’s never been an official position of the church. There’s never been an orthodox position. None of these views have been the orthodox official position of the church. Instead, they’ve tolerated various approaches to the Millennium and I think that should color the way we look at the Millennium today.

I was raised in an environment where unless you held one of these views, your whole view of the Bible was held in suspicion, your ability to interpret the rest of the Bible was held in suspicion. They questioned your whole spirituality and your whole relationship with Jesus Christ was held in suspicion. I think church history as well as some of the comments I want to make about this chapter should remind us that if ever here we need to approach the text in humility, here if ever we need to be tolerate of different views and approaches. I do not say that to mean your view of the Millennium is not important and it really doesn’t matter and this text doesn’t matter and you can kind of or should sweep it under the rug and just ignore it. No; it’s important to read this text, it’s important to decide what you think about it and to realize the implications of how you read the text, but I think more importantly that what position you hold is how you hold it and what you do with it.

Observations and Principles for Understanding Rev 20

So, before I state how I approach this text and how I look at it, I want to make a handful of observations that I think should guide whatever approach we take and however we read it. First of all is, I take it that the reference to a thousand years should
be understood symbolically as we’ve seen all the other numbers and all the other time periods throughout the book of Revelation whether it’s three and a half years or forty two months or 1,260 days or whatever -- half an hour, an hour, and the number 7, the number 12, etc. I think we should take the one thousand years in the same way we take other numbers and other references to the time periods, as symbolic. In other words, the thousand years does not necessarily refer to a specific period of time that lasts for a long time. It could. In other words, it could refer to almost any type of period of time. It could refer to a period of time of almost any length and duration. So the number “thousand” probably signifies as we’ve see the number 10 usually indicates fullness and completion, so now you have 10 times 100, which is a large number. What the thousand then, signifies is a period of time that represents or the thousand represents fullness and completeness and could refer to a period of time of virtually any duration, whether short or rather very long, but I doubt that John intends for us to take this as a reference to a literal period of one thousand years of 360 days. Instead, the importance of this is the symbolic value of 1,000. It’s a large round number indicating fullness and completion that could refer to a period of time of virtually any duration.

Second is, but this is disputed, but I would suggest that in my view this is an important principle that goes back to our discussion of Revelation 19:11. I think we need to read chapter 20, this reference to a thousand year reign, however we understand it, we need to read it as referring to what happens at the second coming of Christ. That is, 19:11 all the way to the end of chapter 20 and end of 21:8 comprises a series of images or scenes that refer to what happens at the second coming of Christ. So 19:11 with the heavens being opened, we said, introduces a new scene and therefore I think that the entirety of chapter 20 and this reference of a thousand year reign must be seen in the context of the broader series of images that are different scenes or different ways of interpreting the meaning and significance of the second coming of Christ. So, whatever we make of this thousand years, it seems to me that it is to be associated with and it happens at the coming of Christ, starting with chapter 11. One of the big issues is: how
do we relate chapters 19 and 20? Chapter 19 is the final judgment scene, the rider on the white horse in verses 11-21. How do we relate that chronologically to chapter 20? A key feature in this in some or a key assumption, in some millennial schemes is that events of chapter 20 have to happen after chapter 19. That may indeed be true but again we have to demonstrate that; we can’t simply assume that because as I’ve suggested I don’t think, as we’ve seen this elsewhere in Revelation, John does not always present things in a way that indicates their chronological order. Instead, he’s more interested in giving us the sequence in which he saw the thing. So sometimes John can refer to the same event or the same time period but look at it from different perspectives. So chapters 19 and 20 may relate chronologically, but it’s possible through that chapter 20 could be another way of looking at the same event as chapter 19 but from a different perspective. But in any case, I want to make it clear that I’m preceding with the assumption that I think I find in the text that starting at 19:11, everything through chapter 21:8 refers to what happens at the second coming of Jesus Christ.

The third thing I’ve actually already mentioned, I related to point two and I already got into that that is chapters 19 and 20 should not necessarily be taken as a series of chronological sequence of events. So the rider and the white horse coming together to judge may not necessarily happen first and then Satan is bound and then after he’s bound then the millennial reign and then after the millennial reign, Satan’s released and then the final battle and then after that takes place the Great White Throne Judgment. That’s possible, but we can’t assume that John is presenting the exact chronological order in which these events may take place. I’ve already said that it’s possible and I would argue that it’s more likely he’s exploring the meaning and significance of what happens when Christ returns by using different images and different scenes to describe roughly the same events or same time period when Christ returns.

The last thing I want to say, the last observation I want make to say is we’ve already noted, this is the only place in the New Testament where you find the reference to the thousand year reign. I don’t want to make a whole lot out of that because, for
example, we don’t find the word Trinity used in the Old and New Testaments, but that doesn’t mean it’s not important and it hasn’t been important for the church. So I don’t want to say because we don’t find the explicit wording “one thousand year reign” or “millennial reign,” “millennium” is not a Greek word. “Millennium” is the Latin word for “1,000 years” and we’ve brought that then over into English. But because we don’t find the reference to one thousand year earthly reign elsewhere in Revelation that does not mean that it is not important, but it is interesting that when I read the text of Revelation 20:4-6, the reference to the Millennium is rather cryptic. In other words, it really does not tell us what happens except that the saints come to life and they reign. That’s all that it says. It doesn’t tell us who they reigned over and maybe that’s not the point. Maybe the point is again is simply that they reigned in contrast to the beast and Satan who reigned previously. It does not explicitly even say where they are when they reign. It doesn’t say whether they reign from heaven or from earth. I mean, look at the text; it simply doesn’t say.

Now the assumption seems to be that in light of the emphasis in Revelation that the kingdom of the world must become the kingdom of our God and Savior, the assumption would seem to be -- and that the fact that Satan ruled over the saints on earth -- the assumption seems to be, and I think it is a valid one, that this reign takes place on earth. But it’s interesting; John doesn’t clearly say that. And also the fact that in chapter 1 and chapter 5 we find references to the saints reigning for ever and ever, that this now seems fulfilled, but intriguingly, it says very little about where the saints are, who they reign over. It doesn’t tell us anything else that happens during this thousand year period. Is this a time when Israel’s promise is fulfilled, or is this a time where there is a lengthy reign where Christ comes and sets the political, economic, religious systems all in order? The text doesn’t tell us that. I find it rather interesting that it’s rather cryptic and unclear as to some of these questions we have. Instead, I think when you read the text, one of the reasons why this is so brief is because this is merely a prelude.
The Main Point of the Millennial Text

Well, first of all, I think the main point is chapter 20 is about the judgment of Satan, not primarily about the millennial kingdom. Second, I think that the reason why this is so short is that the coming to life and reigning here is a prelude to Revelation 21 and 22. When you read 21 and 22, this is where all the fireworks go off. This is where the full disclosure of the reward of the saints, the vindication of the saints, the reign of the saints, Revelation 22:5 ends with the saints reigning for ever and ever. I think chapter 20 is simply an anticipation and a preparation for that. So, chapters 21 and 22, this is where all the fireworks take place. This is the climax. This is what we’ve been waiting for. Not chapter 20, the Millennium. It’s 21 and 22. Interestingly too, in response to those that would say, “Well, the Millennium is necessary because that’s where all the physical promises in the Old Testament get fulfilled.” The problem is that all the Old Testament texts that refer to the physical promises in the Old Testament now occur in Revelation 21 and 22, as we’ll see. So the main goal of the book is not Revelation 20; it’s 21 and 22. And so I think that our interpretation should reflect Revelation’s own emphasis. Our interpretation of the book of Revelation and our interpretation of chapter 20 should reflect should reflect Revelation’s own emphasis that chapter 20, the Millennium, actually tells us very little. I’m going to suggest why and how that influences the way we interpret this. But that our focus should not be on that but our focus should be on chapters 21 and 22 because this is where the climax of God’s intention for history, the climax of God’s vindication and reward for his people, the climax of God’s redemptive history, is finally reached, not in chapter 20, but in 21 and 22. So our understanding of and our interpretation of the Millennium in Revelation 20 should reflect that.

So in the next section then, based on some of these observations, I want to suggest how I read chapter 20 and what I think it’s doing as far as its meaning and as far as how it functions within the context of chapter 20 but also within the context of the book as a whole.