

THE MILLENNIUM: TRANSITION TO THE FINAL AEON

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At the sound of the seventh trumpet Rev 11:15 announces that “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ, and he shall reign unto the aeons of the aeons.” This verse gives the impression that the transfer of the kingdom is a direct, immediate result of the victory of good over evil. Other NT books that feature the *parousia* present a picture of the eschatological kingdom as being immediately established at the return of the avenging Messiah.¹ In fact, in most of Revelation it would appear that the *parousia* is the gateway to the fulfillment of God’s promises. However, in chapter 20 the Revelator suggests that before God’s kingdom is fully realized, the judgment of the spiritual powers and rebellious nations must be executed and evil must be permanently annihilated.² Rev 20 details the transition between the initial *parousia* and the establishment of God’s eschatological kingdom. This essay does not propose to address the interpretive debates that often govern the various millennial readings of this passage, but rather to examine the text in its literary context and to identify four major events associated with the millennial transition to the final aeon.

Structural Considerations

In order to conduct an honest exegesis, it is necessary to place Rev 20 in the chronological structure of Revelation. This task is complicated by the literary structure of Revelation, which is comprised of a collection of visions that are sometimes recapitulative.³ Trying to construct a consistent

¹Jürgen Roloff comments: “Certainly Paul speaks of Christ finally eliminating the evil powers after his Parousia so that everything can be returned to God’s rule (1 Cor. 15:20-28), but he knows nothing of two resurrections or of a reign of earthly peace between them” (*The Revelation of John: A Continental Commentary*, trans. John E. Alsup [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993], 224).

²Gerhard Å. Krodel notes, “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” (*Revelation* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1989], 325).

³J. Webb Mealy rightly accounts for the repetition of themes with his reminder that Revelation was originally heard and not read (*After the Thousand Years: Resurrection and*

chronology in Revelation may seem as frustrating as picturing the logic behind Ezekiel's "wheel within a wheel" vision. There is no apparent coherent chronology as the revelator shifts easily between the present and different facets of the future. His characteristic rhetorical indicator, *kai eidon*, has no predictable progression.⁴ These obstacles notwithstanding, an understanding of the structure of Revelation is essential to the interpretation of any of its constituent parts.

Rhetorical and literary analyses have demonstrated that Rev 20 is a part of a linear chronological framework that begins in chapter 12 with the beginning of the Satanic rebellion and ends in chapter 22 with the restoration of divine rule.⁵ Chapter 12 provides details about the celestial confrontation between good and evil, when the Dragon (Satan) was expelled from heaven and set up residence on earth, opposing any representation of God. The first six verses serve as a rhetorical *narratio* and highlight the two heavenly "signs" that serve as the protagonist and antagonist for the remainder of the passage.

Chapter 13 describes the "beast" agents through whom the Dragon accomplishes his plans. The beasts exercise so much control on the earth that they are able to limit the transactions of the saints. Chapter 14 commences with a proleptic vision of the 144,000 redeemed in heaven before returning to the eschatological chronology in 14:6. Chapter 14:6-12 is dedicated to the final warning of those who have been deceived by the Devil and his agents. Verses 13-16 indicate the "reaping" of the righteous by "one like a son of man." It is here that the *parousia* takes place in the

Judgement in Revelation 20 [Sheffield: JSOT, 1992], 60).

⁴ Henry Barclay Swete warns against viewing the *kai eidon* as a chronological indicator, arguing that if the author intended such, he would have used *meta tauta eidon* (cf. 18:1; 19:1) (*The Apocalypse of St. John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968], 259). However, the author does not appear to have a set pattern; in 13:11 and 15:1 the *kai eidon* is definitely intended to be understood chronologically. See also Wilfrid J. Harrington: "'Then I saw' links, loosely, a number of visions" (*Revelation* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993], 196).

⁵ Pablo Richard recognizes that "chapter 12 and the present passage are paired to form an enclosure." (*Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995], 149). This is also noticed by Michel Gourgues, who remarks that "everything described since chap. 12 finds its conclusion in chap. 20. The destiny of the faithful as well as that of the adversaries are determined for good" ("The Thousand-Year Reign [Rev 20:1-6]: Terrestrial or Celestial?" *CBQ* 47 [1985]: 681). William H. Shea also sees these two passages as an *inclusio*: "This unique parallel between these two passages provides some evidence of an intent to connect the two narratives" ("The Parallel Literary Structure of Revelation 12 and 20," *AUSS* 23 [1985], 45); see also Derwood C. Smith, "The Millennial Reign of Jesus Christ: Some Observations on Rev. 20:1-10," *RestQ* 16 (1973), 229-230; Jeffrey L. Townsend, "Is the Present Age the Millennium?" *BSac* 140 (1983), 212-213; Roloff, 223; and George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 261.

narrative. After the righteous are reaped from the earth, 14:17-20 addresses the “reaping of the wicked.” These verses should probably be seen as a *transitus by narratio* that summarizes the detailed information that follows.

As John goes into detail about the punishment of the wicked, he sees another “sign” (15:1), which he describes as “great and marvelous” since it indicates God’s vengeance upon his enemies. Now that the righteous have been safely rescued, the seven angels of chapter 16 can pour out the last plagues, indicating God’s vindictive judgment on the wicked. Chapters 17-18 detail the judgment and perdition of the wanton woman and the demise of Babylon.⁶ Before the wicked are defeated, the readers are given in 19:1-10 another proleptic view of their destiny. Chapter 19 describes the initial judgment and demise of the wicked as the rider on the white horse leads the heavenly host to victory.⁷ The defeat of the nations is prefaced by a bragging note as an angel standing in the sun invites the scavenging birds to enjoy the feast of the soon-to-be-decimated enemy. The beast and the false prophet from chapter 13 are first captured and thrown into the lake of fire. Then comes the final annihilation of wicked institutions and people in 19:11-21, as the heavenly hosts conquer the earthly armies and put an end to the beast and the false prophet, who are thrown into the lake of fire.

Satan’s Detention and the Commencement of the Millennium (20:1-3)

Having established a chronological framework in which to place Rev 20, we proceed to exegesis. Rev 20 marks the interim aeon between the old age and the new one. As the interim aeon commences, John sees an “angel coming down from heaven” to the desolate earth (20:1). The angel is described as “having the key of the abyss and a great chain upon his hand.” The angel’s possession of the key to the *abussos* calls our attention to 9:1 where, under the fifth trumpet, a “star had fallen from heaven to earth,” and was given the key to the shaft of the abyss to release the locusts.⁸ Although some have posited that the angels of chapters 9 and 20

⁶Smith sees chaps. 17-18 as a recapitulation “describing events that occurred before the pouring out of the seventh bowl and relating these events to those of John’s day” (228). But see Ladd: “Chapters 18-20 appear to present a series of connected visions. Chapter 18 tells of the destruction of Babylon; chapter 19 tells of the destruction of the beast and the false prophet; and chapter 20 moves on to tell of the destruction of Satan himself—a destruction accomplished in two stages. Antichrist, the false prophet, and Satan form an evil triumvirate, and are closely linked in chapter 13” (261).

⁷M. Eugene Boring sees 10:1-22:5 as the “final literary unit” (“Revelation 19-21: End without Closure,” *PSBSup* 3 [1994], 68).

⁸That angels are symbolized by stars is established in Rev 1:20 and 12:4.

are different,⁹ the two are probably the same. In fact, the context of chapter 9 demands that it is God who commissions this angel to wreak havoc among humans. Furthermore, he is expressly called the angel of the abyss in 9:11. This is just one of several angels in Revelation who have a destroying function (cf. 7:1; 8:15).¹⁰

John expects his auditors to be familiar with the abyss. The actual term, *abussos*, is used by the LXX to translate the Hebrew term for "deep" in Genesis 1:1. Although it appears seven times in Revelation, the term is only used twice by other NT writers. Luke's demons beg Jesus to transfer them to swine rather than the abyss (Luke 8:31), and Paul refers to it as the holding place of the dead (Rom 10:7). In Revelation, the abyss houses darkness and destruction (9:11) and is also the place from which a demonic beast arises (11:7; 17:8). Access to the abyss is obviously restricted and under the control of God's designated angel.

The angel's specific purpose is made clear in vv. 2 and 3. First, he "seizes the dragon, the ancient serpent, the Devil, even Satan." These same epithets are used in 12:9 when the heavenly confrontation between Michael and the Dragon is described. *Drakon* (dragon) is his primary description—the megalomaniac with seven heads and ten horns who is the source of demonic authority through whom the beasts and false prophet operate (13:1-18). *Ophis archaios* (ancient serpent) takes us back to the Garden of Eden and the fall of humanity.¹¹ He is also called *ho Diabolos kai Satanas*. The *kai* consecutive serves to specify the identity of the diabolic power—"the Devil even Satan." Acting as an *inclusio* to 12:9, these epithets indicate the end of the struggle.¹² When the dragon was first cast down, John pronounced a "woe" on the inhabitants of the earth. Now in chapter 20, there are no institutions for the *drakon* to control. There are no people to tempt.¹³ The controversy is about to end.

After arresting the dragon, the angel binds him with the great chain.

⁹Cf. Eugenio Corsini, *The Apocalypse: The Perennial Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983), 364; and M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 305; and Richard, 149.

¹⁰See Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 360.

¹¹Moses Stuart allows for this interpretation, although he feels it more likely to be a parallel for *drakon* (*A Commentary on the Apocalypse* [New York: Newman, 1845], 355).

¹²See Lenski, "These four names certainly intend to take us back to the identical four terms found in 12:9" (*The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963], 568).

¹³J. P. M. Sweet suggests that "the reference to Genesis 3 prepares for the removal of the curse and recovery of the tree of life which is the theme of the next chapters" (*Revelation* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979], 288).

While the imagery is vivid, it is obviously intended to be symbolic. This angel has power over Satan and is able to render him inactive.¹⁴ Satan is sentenced to remain in chains for a thousand years, and then he is cast into the abyss, which is “locked and sealed over him.” There has been much speculation over whether the reference to a thousand years should be taken literally¹⁵ or symbolically.¹⁶ Given the use of numbers in Revelation, I am not so sure that it should be understood literally. John often uses *chilia* to refer to a large amount, as with the 144,000 redeemed and the thousands (and myriads) of angelic troops (cf. 5:11; 7:4-8; 14:1). It seems to me that John intends to convey the lengthy but temporal nature of Satan’s imprisonment in contrast to his destruction, which lasts “for ever and ever” (*eis tous aionas ton aionon* [20:10]).¹⁷

According to 20:3, the purpose of Satan’s abyssal internment is to restrict him from “deceiving the nations.” The Greek term for “nations” (*ethnē*) in this context is used in a similar fashion to the Hebrew *goyim*, which is often translated “Gentiles.” As with the covenant community, the “nations” refer to all people who are not a part of the redeemed community. At first glance it could appear that the reference to “nations” indicates the presence of humans on the earth.¹⁸ However, a brief survey of chronological events will

¹⁴See John F. Walvoord: “The intention is not to represent Satan as merely restricted but as rendered completely inactive” (*The Revelation of Jesus Christ* [London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1966], 291).

¹⁵Cf. Stuart, 356; Walvoord, 295 (“It may also be faithfully held that all numbers in the Revelation are literal.”); Jack S. Deere, “Premillennialism in Revelation 20:4-6,” *BSac* 135 (1978): 71 (“The duration of the saints’ reign is a literal thousand years.”); and Townsend, 213-214.

¹⁶Cf. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of the Revelation: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 209; Ladd, 262 (“While we need not take it literally, the thousand years does appear to present a real period of time, however long or short it may be.”); Swete, 288 (“The period is symbolic—the seventh world-day.”); Lenski, 573; Harrington, 196; Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 235 (“Satan is bound for a perfect period.”); and Sydney H. T. Page, “Revelation 20 and Pauline Eschatology,” *JETS* 32 (1980), 31-32. Symbolic numbers are used frequently in Revelation. Already we have seen the Revelator use 144,000 to define a number that he later describes as a “great multitude” (7:4, 9). The symbolic use of chiliastic language is used by the Psalmist and Peter and is replete in apocalyptic literature. For a good survey of millennial thought in Jewish literature see Barbara Wootten Snyder, “How Millennial is the Millennium? A Study in the Background of the 1000 Years in Revelation 20,” *Evangelical Journal* (1991), 51-74. See also Charles H. Talbert, *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 93.

¹⁷As Talbert recognizes, the notion of binding evil powers before the eschatological judgment is not foreign to ancient Jewish thought (91). See *Isa* 24:21-22; *1 Enoch* 10:4-10; *18:12-16*; *21:1-6*; *54:5-6*; *Jub* 5:10; *T. Levi* 18:12; *Enoch Sim* 53:3; *54:4*.

¹⁸See Ladd, 263.

show that this is not the case. We recall that in Rev 14:6-12 the message of the three angels goes to "those living on the earth and to *every* nation, tribe, tongue, and people" (14:6). Further, the third angel warns the universe about the consequences of receiving the mark of the beast (14:9-11). In fact, the entire pericope suggests that at the end of the aeon only two groups remain: those with the mark of the beast, and those with the seal of God (7:1-8; 14:1-5). The "reaping" of the redeemed is described in 14:14-16, and their heavenly reward is highlighted in 15:2-4 and 19:1-4. On the other hand, 19:18 makes it clear that "all" (*pas*) who remain on earth at the time of the final battle will be destroyed.¹⁹ Given the immediate context of the defeat of *all* humanity in 19:18, it is hardly likely that John envisions anyone alive on earth during the millennium.

It appears that John's focus here is not primarily on the "nations." It is the incapacitation of Satan that is highlighted. The emphasis is not so much on the status of the nations during Satan's imprisonment, but on what will take place after his release. In other words, he is not bound to prevent him from deceiving the nations,²⁰ but he is released for the purpose of deceiving the nations.²¹ He is forced into a pre-Creation environment of nothingness as he abides in the "deep." Only at the end of the millennium will he be released—but only "for a little while" (20:3).

*The Saints' Judicial Reign
During the Millennium (20:4-6)*

The next section of the vision shifts its focus from the plight of Satan during the millennium to the activities of the redeemed (20:4-6). John reports that he saw "thrones, and *they* sat upon them, and judgment was given to them" (20:4, emphasis supplied). This pericope parallels the judgment scene of Daniel 7 where "judgement was given to the saints of the most high (*to krima edoken hagiosis upsistou* [Dan 7:22])."²² The *kai* consecutive introduces the expegetical clause in which John further specifies the identity of the thrones' occupants. The first group of occupants are described as "the souls of the ones beheaded for the testimony about Jesus and the word of God." It may be

¹⁹Roloff, 227, is right with his straight reading of chap. 20: "The whole of humankind that does not belong to the salvation community is to be considered as already having perished in the messianic final battle."

²⁰*Contra* Morris, 235.

²¹See James A. Hughes, "Revelation 20:4-6 and the Question of the Millennium," *WTJ* 35 (1973), 282.

²²Cf. J. W. Roberts, *The Revelation to John* (Austin, TX: Sweet, 1974), 172; and Krodell, 333.

argued that the accusative *tas psuchas* can be construed as a second object of *eidon* ("I saw . . . the souls"), and therefore the martyrs are a separate group from the occupants of the throne. However, as we will see, the following sentence includes them among those who "rule" (*ebasileusan*) with Christ for the thousand years. These people are in solidarity with John who was exiled on account of his "testimony about Jesus and the word of God" (1:9). This group of martyrs had apparently been resurrected at the beginning of the millennium.²³

John also mentions another subset of "they" who sat on the thrones: "those who did not worship the beast or his image and did not receive the mark on their forehead or on their hand" (20:4). Some are tempted to view this phrase as a continuation of the martyrs' description.²⁴ However, as a number of exegetes recognize, the change of case in the relative pronoun *hoitines* indicates another distinct category (20:4).²⁵ They have heeded the warning of 14:9-12 and resisted the beast.²⁶ They were rescued from the throes of the beast when the "one like a son of man" reaped them from the earth during the *parousia* (14:14-16). They never experienced death.²⁷ They are the ones described by Paul in I Thess 4 who are joined by the dead at the *parousia*. And so together, the martyrs and the overcomers comprise the righteous elect who are entrusted with judgment.²⁸

The text itself does not specify where these events take place, which leads some commentators to argue for an earthly provenance.²⁹ However, of the forty-seven mentions of "throne" in Revelation, forty-four have a

²³See Rev 1:7; 1 Thess 4:13-17.

²⁴See, e.g., Walvoord, who refers to them as "tribulation saints" (296). Also L. van Hartingsveld, *Revelation: A Practical Commentary* (trans. John Vriend [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985]), 82.

²⁵Cf. Lenski, 579; Smith, 224; Swete, 262; and Krodell, 333-334. But Deere opposes the "two group" reading based on his subjective reading of *kai hoitines* in 1:7 and his understanding of *ezesan* as "came to life" rather than "live" (65).

²⁶Corsini, 373, and others read too much into the text when they assume that Rev 13:15 predicts the total annihilation of those who refuse to worship the beast.

²⁷J. Massyngbaerde Ford suggests that the phrase in 20:40c is an interpolation and reasons—on the basis of *ezesan*—that this group was also dead (*Revelation* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975], 349). However, the verb *zao* simply means "to live," and does not necessarily carry with it the connotation of *anastasis*. Richard also has an interesting interpretation: "These [proleptic] martyrs who at this moment are still alive will one day die, but they also, because they are martyrs, hope to share in the first resurrection and in the thousand year reign" (151-152).

²⁸*Contra* Richard, who writes: "Those who do justice in 20:4 are the martyrs" (151).

²⁹Cf. Mounce, 360; Deere, 69-73.

heavenly provenance.³⁰ Further, whenever the redeemed are mentioned in Revelation they are in heaven. In 14:1-6 the 144,000 redeemed are before the heavenly throne. Chapter 7 also indicates the presence of the entire host of the redeemed before the throne of God. In fact, in 7:15 we are told that the multitude of the redeemed “worship him day and night within his temple.”³¹ Further, as we look at 19:1, we see the “great crowd” of the redeemed “in heaven.” Indeed, it is not until chapter 21 that the new earth becomes a reality and the redeemed can inhabit the earth.

John informs us that the host of the redeemed “lived and reigned with Christ 1,000 years.”³² A number of commentators understand *ezesan* to be a synonym for “resurrection.”³³ However, *zao* should probably be translated simply as “live,” since those in the second group are already alive and do not need to be resurrected.³⁴ Nonetheless, resurrection is implicit in the context, for it is only natural to assume that the dead must be resurrected before they can live. The idea here is that the entire number of the redeemed—the “great crowd”—are now alive and enjoying their eschatological destiny. Part of that destiny involves the task of judging the world as they participate as corulers with Christ.³⁵ Indeed, the judgment lasts for the thousand years, after which the saints “gain possession of the kingdom” (Dan 7:22).

While the redeemed are involved with judicial and government responsibilities, there is no human life on earth. John declares that “the *rest*

³⁰See Morris, 236. See also similar argument in Krodel, 333-334. For a detailed argument in favor of a celestial reign see Michel Gourgues, “The Thousand-Year Reign (Rev 20:1-6): Terrestrial or Celestial?” *CBQ* 47 (1985), 676-81. See also Shea, 48. J. Hughes parallels chap. 20 with chap. 12 and suggests that the thousand years corresponds to the 1260 days (284ff.).

³¹Cf. 21:22, where we are informed that in the New Jerusalem, after its descent to earth, there is no temple.

³²Harrington notes that the concept of a millennial reign during a messianic golden age was common in Jewish literature. Ford, 353, lists the “millennial” theories of a number of rabbis. Herman L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, vol 4, *Die Briefe des Neuen Testaments und die Offenbarung Johannis*, 5th ed. (München: Beckische, 1926), 823-827.

³³So Richard, who cites Rev 2:8 as evidence for his interpretation (150, n. 6). See also Ladd, 265-267; Walvoord, 297; and Roberts, who sees it figuratively as a resurrection of the martyrs’ “cause” (173-174).

³⁴Morris recognizes that “this is not the usual word for resurrection (though cf. Jn. xi. 25)” (237).

³⁵In his comment on the judicial function of the saints, Stuart notes that “*krima edothe autois* will mean for substance the same thing as *ebasilensan* in the latter part of the verse” (357). See also Robert G. Bratcher and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on the Revelation to John* (New York: UBS, 1993), 287.

of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended" (20:5, emphasis supplied). With this declaration, John makes it clear that some of the dead came to life before the thousand years commenced. In referring to this as the "first" resurrection, he calls our attention to a second resurrection that takes place after the millennium.³⁶ If preconditioned by the notion of a Jewish expectation for a general resurrection, the concept of two resurrections may at first sound somewhat unorthodox.³⁷ However, the notion of an all-inclusive judgment of the wicked and righteous is not apparent in pre-Christian Jewish literature.³⁸

While John does not use the words *deutera anastasis* to describe the second resurrection, the very mention that the "rest of the dead did not live until the completion of the thousand years" makes another resurrection an explicit reality.³⁹ In fact, the two resurrections are described in the Gospel as the resurrection of life and the resurrection of damnation (John 5:29). Here John specifies that they are separated by a thousand-year period.⁴⁰ Neither is there any reason to spiritualize or allegorize either one of these resurrections. Revelation does not share the view of a person's spiritual transference to heaven after death. The use of *anastasis* (20:5, 6) leaves no doubt that a bodily existence follows the resurrection.⁴¹ Indeed, the same verb used for the saints' existence, *zao*, is used for Christ's existence in 1:18 and 2:8.⁴² And let's not forget that some of the saints had never even died.⁴³

³⁶J. Hughes, 299, acknowledges that "the term 'the first resurrection' implies that there is a second resurrection."

³⁷See discussion in T. Francis Glasson, "The Last Judgment—in Rev. 20 and Related Writings," *NTS* 28 (1981), 528.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 529.

³⁹See Ladd, 268, who responds: "Two resurrections are implied in the twofold use of *ezesan*; and a second 'resurrection' is described if not labeled as such in v. 12." Roloff, 228, suggests that John intentionally avoids the word "resurrection" for "the dead who remain outside the salvation community."

⁴⁰Townsend comments: "These two resurrections are discussed in more detail in Revelation 20 where only blessing is associated with the coming to life in 20:4 and only judgment is associated with the coming to life in 20:5 (which is developed further in 20:11-15)" (220).

⁴¹See Deere, 67. Townsend observes that "in over 40 uses in the New Testament, with only one clear exception (Luke 2:34), *anastasis* always refers to bodily resurrection" (219).

⁴²See Swete, 289.

⁴³Ladd comments: "The New Testament does not elsewhere clearly teach a twofold resurrection, although it is implied in such passages as John 5:29 and 1 Cor. 15:24-25. Paul nowhere in his epistles speaks of the resurrection of unbelievers; he is altogether concerned with the destiny of those who are in Christ" (268). Krodel suggests that the reference in 1 Thess 4:16 to the dead in Christ rising *first* is an indication that Paul had a concept of two resurrections (336).

That the first resurrection is to be preferred over the second is demonstrated by a beatitude: "Blessed and holy is the one having a part in the first resurrection." The reason for the beatification is seen in the sentence that follows: "On these the second death has no authority." Reference to a "second death" necessitates a "first death." The first death is a consequence of mortality,⁴⁴ and is often defined in the Bible as a "sleep" (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13; John 11:11-14).⁴⁵ All who encounter this death will also experience resurrection (1 Thess 4:14-16; John 5:28-29; 11:24). The "second death" refers to the eternal death that is consequential to the lake of fire, from which there is no resurrection.⁴⁶

*The Destruction of Satan and His Allies at the
Close of the Millennium (20:7-10)*

The revelator now focuses his attention on the period immediately following the millennium, when Satan has been released from his prison (20:7). The phrase "when the thousand years ended" serves as an *inclusio* with the same clause in v. 5 where it is stated that the rest of the dead are not resurrected until the completion of the thousand years. While not explicitly stated, it may be assumed that the end of the millennium is synonymous with the resurrection of the wicked. What the revelator does inform his audience is that "Satan is released from his prison."

As already anticipated in v. 3, the sole purpose of Satan's release is that he may "deceive the nations that are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog" (20:8). The reference to Gog and Magog draws our attention to Ezek 38 and 39, which feature an eschatological battle that ends when Yahweh showers fire on the enemy, whose flesh is consumed by scavengers. Rev 19 has already used the imagery of Ezek 39 to describe the punishment of the wicked. Now in Rev 20, the Revelator portrays the final demise of Satan against the backdrop of Ezek 38. In Ezekiel's prophecy Gog of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal, is joined by troops from Persia, Ethiopia, Put, Gomer, and Bethtogarmah (38:3-6). Ezekiel appears to be painting the picture of a universal army comprised of many nations. Indeed, this is probably what the Revelator has in mind when he refers to the deceived nations coming from the "four corners of the earth."

⁴⁴See Norman Shepherd, "The Resurrections of Revelation 20," *WTJ* 37 (1974), 37.

⁴⁵Hughes's spiritualizing leads him to suggest that as the first resurrection is experienced by a participation in the life of Christ, the first death is experienced by participation in the death of Adam (215-16). Of course, even the casual reader would recognize that this conclusion is not evident in the text and finds more credence in Paul's soteriology than John's eschatology.

⁴⁶Cf. Ladd, 268.

Krodel provides an interesting alternative to the understanding of “nations” when he looks at the mythical understanding of Gog and Magog and proposes that this is a reference to angelic forces.⁴⁷ While not a widely accepted theory, this can make sense of the chronological problems often faced by those who see a sequential development in this chapter. It further helps to explain how Satan’s millennial imprisonment helps to delay a celestial attack against the camp of the redeemed. It also helps us to fill a lacuna that exists in the execution of judgment. The text speaks of the punishment of the woman, the beast, the false prophet, Satan, and the wicked dead. However, nothing is said about the punishment of the angels who accompanied Satan to the earth.⁴⁸ This is the only view that allows us to witness the punishment of the demonic host. While this theory is worthy of further investigation, from a strictly exegetical stance it is more likely that the “nations” are comprised of the dead who were resurrected after the millennium.

John indicates that the nations are “assembled for battle, their numbers as the sand of the sea” (20:8). The hyperbole demonstrates the vastness of the army. Again, utilizing imagery from Ezek 38, John describes how the nations “came up upon the flat of the earth and encircled the camp of the saints and the beloved city” (20:9). This scene is paralleled in Ezek 38:10-16, where the eschatological community of peace is depicted as unwallled villages at the center of the earth—an obvious reference to Jerusalem (Ezek 5:5). Having established that the earth was entirely destroyed during the final stages of the *parousia*, it should be assumed that the prophet has the New Jerusalem in view.⁴⁹

Before the nations can launch an attack, “fire came down from heaven and consumed them” (20:9). Here again the terminology of Ezek 38 is used to describe the demise of the wicked (Ezek 38:21-22). As the evil host is being consumed, the devil is “thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and false prophet are” (20:10). The mention of the beast and false prophet proves the chronological development between chapters

⁴⁷Krodel, 337.

⁴⁸Walvoord speaks of the fire prepared for “the devil and his angels” but does not speak of the fate of the “angels” (304-305).

⁴⁹Roberts allows for this reading (176). But see Ladd, who posits, “The saints in the millennium must have some center, and there is no difficulty in supposing that the millennial rule of Christ will have an earthly center in the holy city in the holy land” (270). Ford suggests, “The corrupt earthly Jerusalem is destroyed and replaced by the millennial Jerusalem, ‘the beloved city,’ a term not used of the earthly Jerusalem in Revelation, and then this millennial Jerusalem is transformed into the heavenly Jerusalem” (356). For other proponents of an earthly city see Charles Homer Giblin, *The Book of Revelation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 188-189; and Mulholland, 306-307.

19 and 20.⁵⁰ The metaphorical image is one of the lake continuously burning with the two impersonal entities that have been deprived of power. Now the duo are joined by commissioner, and all three are subject to torment.

The punishment received by the Devil and his cohorts is effective *eis tous aiōnas tōn aiōnon*. This phrase is often translated, “for ever and ever,” but literally means “unto the ages of the ages.” Governed by the former translation, a number of exegetes reason that *eis tous aiōnas tōn aiōnon* refers to indefinite torture.⁵¹ However, this understanding is to be rejected, since it is obvious that the language used in this context is strictly figurative. We already know that the “beast” and “false prophet” are specious entities through whom the dragon operates, yet they perish in the lake of fire (19:20). The same is true for Death and Hades, who are also thrown into the lake of fire (20:14). As in 14:11, where the smoke of the torment rises into oblivion, John aims to show the eternal permanency of the punishment. This fire is the final depository of all evil; hence the Revelator’s insistence that the lake of fire and sulphur is the second death (Rev. 20:14; 21:8).

*The Executive Judgment of the Wicked at the
End of the Millennium (20:11-15)*

The final phase of this section of the vision details the irreversible elimination of evil and its effects from the earth. As judgment is to be executed, it is not the jury, but the judge, who has center stage. John sees “a great white throne, and one sitting on it” (20:11). The judge is none other than God himself.⁵² Throughout the book of Revelation, it is God’s throne that is preeminent. In 3:21, Jesus is granted the privilege of sitting on the Father’s throne. Chapter 4 concentrates on the Father’s throne. In 5:1-7, God holds the seven-sealed scroll in his hand while sitting on his throne. In 7:15, the great multitude serve God before his throne. This parallels the judgment scene of Dan 7:9-14, where the “Ancient One” sits on his fiery throne in preparation for final judgment. This appears to be the second part of a two-phase judgment. In v. 4, we

⁵⁰But see J. Hughes: “It is unthinkable that Satan would gather the nations if not through the beast and the false prophet” (283).

⁵¹See Lenski, 298-299. Walvoord opines (304), “Thus the Word of God plainly declares that death is not annihilation and that the wicked exist forever, though in torment.” Mounce (374, note 12), supports this reading: “While it may be difficult, it is nevertheless crucial that we take the text as it is rather than as what we might like it to be.”

⁵²Cf. Ladd, 271; Talbert, 97; Roberts, 177; Swete, 271; Ford, 359; and Roloff, 231. Walvoord, 305; Lenski, 601f.; and others identify the occupant of the throne as Christ.

are informed that the martyrs and final generation of faithful were entrusted with the work of judgment. They apparently served as a jury which has accomplished its judicial responsibilities, and now God the judge must execute judgment.

God is introduced in his awesome splendor: As he appears, "the earth and the heaven fled from his face and no place was found for them to hide" (22:11).⁵³ This announcement conjures an image of the dissolution of the original Creation.⁵⁴ "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Gen 1:1). At the end, heaven and earth are dissolved. The dissolution of earth and sky is a part of the transition to the final aeon. Indeed, the old earth and sky must be removed before the "new heaven and new earth" can be established (Rev 21:1).⁵⁵

After the dissolution of heaven and earth, John reports seeing "the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne" (20:12). A rigidly chronological reading of Rev 20 could imply that since the unrighteous were raised at the end of the millennium and were consequently consumed by fire from heaven (7-9), the scene of v. 12 describes a second resurrection of the unrighteous.⁵⁶ However, it seems more reasonable to read vv. 11-15 as a recapitulation revealing further details about the judgment of the wicked, leading to their destruction by fire. The saints, who cannot be hurt by the "second death," were raised at the beginning of the millennium; hence they themselves are not judged before the throne.⁵⁷ On the other hand, the evildoers are raised for the sole purpose of being judged. This court scene is reminiscent of the one in Dan 7:11-14, 22, 25-27, where the evil kingdoms are judged and destroyed to make way for the kingdom of God. Similarly, the object of judgment in Revelation is not the general human populace, but the wicked.

⁵³Mulholland sees the earth as a symbol of rebellion (312). The dissolution of the earth from the presence of God also affirms our position that the millennial kingdom is a celestial one, else what would happen to the saints and the city during this period? But see Krodell, who raises these questions and then declares them irrelevant (338).

⁵⁴See also Roberts (177-178), who reminds us of similar teaching in Isa 40:8; 51:6; 2 Pet 3:6-13; Matt 5:17; Heb 12:27; and Dan 2:35. See also Roloff, 231.

⁵⁵See Walvoord, 305; Hartingsveld, 84.

⁵⁶While most commentators agree that the wicked dead are in view here, some interpreters incorporate both righteous and sinners among the dead who are raised in the second resurrection. See Mulholland, who posits that v. 12 features the righteous dead and vv. 13-14 the wicked dead (312). Also Giblin, 193; and Lenski, 604-605.

⁵⁷Glasson comments: "It is difficult to believe that those who had lived and reigned with Christ for 1,000 years should be regarded as on trial at the close" (529).

As the “dead” stand before the throne, John notices that “books (*biblia*) were open, and another book was open, which is [the book] of life” (Rev 20:12). In using the descriptive genitive to refer to the *biblion* as the book “of life,” John expects his auditors to deduce that the *biblia* are books “of death.” These are the *biblia* seen by Daniel and featured in Jewish apocalyptic literature.⁵⁸ The *biblion* is the book of life, from which all the names of those who have done evil have been deleted (cf. Exod 32:32-33 and Rev 3:5).⁵⁹ The “book of life” has been featured in both testaments⁶⁰ and contains the names of all the “saints.” Having already received a positive judgment, the saints during the millennium probably audit the judgment against the wicked and verify the dead’s exclusion from the book of life.

John indicates that “the dead were judged from that which was written in the books according to their works” (Rev 12:12). Throughout the apocalypse, John has demonstrated the importance of obedience for the “saints.”⁶¹ Indeed, the stated purpose of the *parousia* and consequent judgment is “to pay each person for his work” (22:12). One also remembers John 5:29, when, in speaking of the two resurrections, Jesus states that “those who are *doing good* (*agatha poiēsantes*)” will come forth to the resurrection of life, and “those who are *practicing evil* (*phaula praxantes*)” to the resurrection of judgment (emphasis supplied).⁶²

⁵⁸Cf. Dan 7:10; 1 *Enoch* 47:3; 90:20; 104:7; 2 *Enoch* 19:5; 4 Ezra 6:20; 2 *Apoc Bar* 24:1; *Apoc of Zeph* 3:6-9; 7:1-8. For a survey of the judgment theme in apocalyptic literature see Glasson, 530-536.

⁵⁹Walvoord explains that “the book of life was originally the book of all living from which have been expunged the names of those who departed from life on earth without salvation” (309). Richard notes that “The book of life is not a registry of works but is more personal in nature, and in Revelation it appears as a book that belongs to the Lamb” (159).

⁶⁰Exod 32:32-33; Ps 69:28; Mal 3:16; Dan 12:1; Luke 10:20; Phil 4:3; Heb 12:23. This appears to be the book with the seven seals whose opening triggers the beginning of the end in chap. five. The fact that the book is sealed before the end suggests the completion of judgment.

⁶¹Cf. 2:2, 19, 26; 3:2, 8, 15; 9:20, 21; 12:17; 14:12; 16:11; 19:9; 21:8; 22:11, 12, 14 (alternate reading). See comments in Krodel, 339-340, and Mulholland, 313-314.

⁶²Richard states, “At judgment it is not people’s good deeds or intentions that count but what they can do; it is orthopraxis that saves us, not orthodoxy” (158). This does not compromise the NT teaching of salvation by grace through faith. Talbert calls this “a paradox that can be resolved only when one goes back to one’s own experience with God and finds divine grace and human responsibility bound together in an indissoluble union” (98). Boring states: “We are judged on the basis of who we are and what we have done, and we are utterly and inescapably responsible. We are judged on the basis of who God is and what God has done; God is utterly and inescapably sovereign” (71). Mulholland agrees: “Unless one’s name is written in the Book of Life, it appears that all the righteous deeds in the world will not suffice” (313). Harrington calls it the “mystery of salvation” (204). See also Walvoord, 306-307; and Hartingsveld, 84. Page locates a similar paradox

As we move to v. 13, we see the Revelator stressing the universality of the final judgment. This verse would seem to have been chronologically more appropriate before the one that precedes it, but is somewhat exegetical. John aims to show the totality of the resurrection.⁶³ The sea, Death, and Hades will release all of their dead. Death and Hades are here personified. Paul taunts the personified “death” in 1 Cor 15:55. Hades is understood as the Hebrew “*sheol*.” This is the place of nothingness, where the dead remained in an unconscious state.⁶⁴ There is no activity in Hades. It should not be interpreted with the theological presuppositions that accompany the term “hell.”⁶⁵ As the dead are released from their various holding places, each is judged according to works (Rev 20:13).

Having released their prisoners, Death and Hades no longer have a purpose. Hence, they too must be annihilated (20:14). Like the beast, the dragon, and the false prophet, they have no place in the new aeon.⁶⁶ The Revelator records that “Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire,” where they join the Devil and their impersonal allies. Here the words of Paul join the Revelator in assent: “the last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor 15:26). The result of the lake of fire is demonstrated by its identification with the second death.⁶⁷ Inasmuch as the first resurrection results in *eternal life*, the second death results in *eternal extinction*.⁶⁸ After the beast and the false prophet are thrown into it, they are no longer mentioned as being alive (Rev 19:20). The same is true for Satan (20:10). Everything that encounters the lake of fire ceases

in the writings of Paul (42).

⁶³See Ladd, 273.

⁶⁴On the Hebrew understanding of the state of the dead see Pss 6:5; 115:17; 146:3, 4; Job 14:10; Eccl 9:5-6; 12:7.

⁶⁵See Walvoord, 307-308, and Lenski, 608. Interestingly enough, Lenski also perceives a difficulty with this logic: “When hades means hell, and the lake of fire also means hell, we may wonder how one can ‘be thrown’ into the other” (610).

⁶⁶Cf. Krodell, 341; Ladd, 274.

⁶⁷Roloff recognizes: “At issue here is not punishment but, as John observes in a clarifying postscript, eternal destruction—the lake of fire is the ‘second’ (i.e. eternal and final death)” (232). See also Harrington, 205, and our above discussion on v. 10. Some who opt for a literal reading of an eternally burning hell are forced to personalize such impersonal entities as the beast, false prophet, death, and hades (see, e.g., Walvoord, 309). Stuart impersonalizes the duo, but holds that the second death is “a state of *continued agony*. . . . The sufferings of those who undergo the second death, cannot be alleviated by expiring; for there is no expiring” (373-374, emphasis supplied).

⁶⁸Harrington reasons that “surely, the negation of eternal life is eternal death” (205).

to exist, and so Death and Hades are now eliminated from the sphere of reality.⁶⁹

With the defeat of the demonic powers, the transition to the final aeon is almost complete. After the death of death, the only remnants of evil are the wicked dead, who await their sentencing. As we have seen, their doom has already been sealed by their works.⁷⁰ With the use of *hekastos*, "each" in v. 13, the Revelator gives the impression of a prolonged hearing in which each one of the accused is individually sentenced. Only those whose names are missing from the book of life qualify for eternal extinction (20:15). Before the sentence can be announced, the absence of the name from the "book of life" must be verified.⁷¹ And so, although the fate of the unrighteous is already sealed, the meticulous formality of verification is conducted. Once judgment is passed, the "dead" experience the second death as they are thrown into the lake of fire.

Conclusion

The millennium is a transition period between the initial *parousia* and the establishment of the terrestrial kingdom of God. Four major events occupy the millennial period. First, Satan is confined to the abyss. Second, while Satan is immobilized, the resurrected and raptured saints are given judicial assignments while they "live and reign with Christ." Third, immediately following the millennium, Satan attempts to launch an attack with the resurrected wicked against the New Jerusalem and is annihilated. Finally, the wicked dead are judged and obliterated along with Death and Hades. Thus the millennium serves as a transition period for the purging of evil as the old aeon makes way for the new. Only when this is accomplished can "the kingdom of the world become the kingdoms of our Lord and his Messiah" (Rev 11:15).

⁶⁹See Stuart, 372. It is not clear on what basis Krodell declares that "their fate is left unspecified" (341).

⁷⁰Ladd comments, "Apparently no one was saved by his works—i.e., on the basis of the good things which he had done which had been recorded in the books (v. 12)" (274). However, the very fact that the books condemn them means that their elimination from salvation resulted from their works.

⁷¹Walvoord suggests that the process involves "the careful search of the records to be sure that no mistake is made" (309).