

Introduction

Well there is great confusion and debate over this passage from the Bible.

We must be wary when people want us to interpret it literally. Literally is the only way to interpret any part of the Bible – or indeed any part of literature. Because by literally I mean to understand it in the way the author meant it to be understood. The goal is to understand the author's mind when he or she wrote.

But people use the word "literally" in a literalistic fashion - that is every word and every sentence is to take the full weight of grammatical meaning, without any recognition that this sentence is a piece of poetry and this piece is mathematics and this piece is history and this piece is a cooking recipe and this piece may be proverbial. If you read each of those in the flat, so to speak, will give you a very different reading. But to read literally means I need to understand what the author meant.

In this passage in Revelation 20 there are some parts that we don't have answers as to what it means. But there are other parts where the problem is not that we don't have answers – we have too many possible answers from which to choose.

Nearly everybody, myself included, brings to the interpretation of Revelation 20 what they understand elsewhere in the Scriptures. Hardly anybody can just start with Revelation 20 and work out what it means without reference to the rest of Scripture. Your view of the end of the world and what is going to happen in the future and how it's going to happen will greatly affect how you read this passage.

We've been working through 19 chapters of Revelation and as we worked our way through we've started to see patterns and the way in which John has written this book. There is a consistent repetition taking place – replays of certain events from different angles, like a video replay. There's a great use of symbolism with numbers and colours and strong metaphorical language. There are lots of Old Testament allusions and a few quotations.

There are certain consistent themes that keep coming over and over again. Christ is victorious – it doesn't matter how the world looks at the moment, how chaotic it is, how much the forces of evil seem to rule it – Christ is indeed victorious. And when you see Christ in his victory then you'll see the world and heaven quite differently than when you ignore Christ and his victory.

And so we keep on being shown Christ on his throne, Christ the Lamb taking the scroll and opening up the seals and so on.

We also see throughout the book that the subject of "when" is fairly unimportant and the subject of "what" is very important. We who are readers of prophesy, who are affected by the astrologers and the fortune-tellers of our society want to find out when things are going to happen. The book of Revelation tells you nothing about the "whens" but tells you lots about the "whats". Because what is going to happen is a far more significant things than when it will be.

Now this reading of chapters 1-19 should therefore influence how we come to chapter 20. You've got to expect that it's going to be the same kind of literature – the same kind of themes, the same kind of use of symbolism, colours, numbers and the rest.

The immediate context is also a critical factor in understanding chapter 20. The immediate context of chapters 17-19 we see the fall of Babylon, the great city of evil that is set up against God. And in

chapter 19 there is the wedding of the Lamb – and with the wedding of the Lamb comes the conquest of the Warrior 19:11-21. And in this conquest of the warrior all the nations of the world gather and fight against him but he destroys them completely and they are turned into food for the birds (v 21).

Then comes chapter 20, which gives us the millennium and the judgement. And chapters 21 and 22 the new heavens and the new earth.

Now there three basic schools of thought as to how you understand chapter 20.

There is pre-millennialism and post-millennialism and a-millennialism:
the pre, the post and the a.

The first two – the pre and post – are looking for a specific 1000 year rule on earth. Not necessarily precisely 1000 – if turned out to be 995, I don't think they'd be really worried. But it's basically an idea of a particular time.

Whereas a-millennialism is a belief in a sense of no millennialism. There is no 1000 years, it's symbolic.

Taking them in turn here is what a pre-millennialist believes:

- Christ's return in power and glory will deprive Satan of all his power;
- raise the Christian dead;
- set up the kingdom of the saints on earth;
- and after 1000 years Satan will re-emerge from his imprisonment;
- attempt once more to destroy the saints;
- fail and be destroyed himself;
- then will come the resurrection of the rest of the dead;
- the judgement of the great white throne;
- the final destruction of the wicked;
- and the making of a new heaven and a new earth;

There's your first option. It's a very common view, particularly in North America. In some places it's unbelievable that you would believe the Bible and not be a pre-millennialist.

The next option is post-millennialism. You don't this one very often these days – but it has been common in certain periods of history. This is the belief that envisages a 1000 years that may or may not be a literal 1000 years (usually is) which is a special period distinguished from the rest of history by the good triumphs over evil in the course of that period.

The a-millennialist has a different view altogether. The New Testament knows of only one return of Christ and that is the "Day of the Lord" which will end all things. If this "End" is described in chapter 19 then the 1000 years described in chapter 20, even though they follow on in the book, must precede it in actual history.

In a word, 20:1-6 is a flashback. The binding of Satan and the first resurrection and the millennium are all metaphors for the present situation in this world covering the period between the first and second comings of Christ.

Here are three very common views of the millennium – though within each of the views there are all kinds of variations.

1. (1-3) The Evil One is bound and imprisoned

Does Satan *look* all that bound, as we survey the events of the past centuries? Can we in all honesty call this period a *millennium*?

I believe we can. Think of the teaching that we find elsewhere in the New Testament. Here are three examples:

“... Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel...” (2 Tim. 1:10)

“... he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” (Heb. 2: 14)

“And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” (Col. 2:15)

Notice the force of these terms – *destroyed ... disarmed ... a public spectacle*. That's what the death of Christ did to the opposition!

So if there is a problem about the language of Revelation 20:1-3 in its description of the binding of the dragon, let's at least recognize that the problem extends to the rest of the New Testament!

2. (4-6) The reign of Christ

There's some debate as to who it is that reigns with Christ. I take it that it is not some special group of Christians – but rather all Christians. And particularly including those who have been martyred for Christ. They may lose their head in this life but in the next they will have a head and it will wear a crown!

There is debate as to what it means to participate in the “first resurrection”. Those who take a pre-millennial view see this as a bodily resurrection, occurring at the start of the 1000 years.

The post-millennial and a-millennial views see this as a spiritual participation in the first resurrection – that is, the resurrection of Jesus.

And so the Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 2:6 “God raised us up in Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms”. It doesn't say God will raise us up – but that God has already raised us up.

3. (7-10) The doom

We have the gathering of the nations for war against God's people. They have been gathered through the deception and deceit of Satan who has been released for this very purpose.

But please note we've had this battle already.

- Back in 16:14-16 we have the kings of the whole earth gathered for battle at Armageddon.
- Back in 19:19ff we have the kings of the earth and their armies gathered for battle and the Lord Jesus destroys them completely
- And now again we have nations from the four corners of the earth gathered for war and fire comes from heaven and destroys them.

It's the same battle – seen from three different perspectives.
It's video replay.

4. (11-15) The Judgement

We come in verse 11 to the judgement. We've seen it before in chapter 14 with a harvest and chapter 16 with the seventh bowl of wrath, in chapter 11 with the seventh trumpet – now you see the same thing again.

The throne is there, white because of victory. And we know who sits upon it – the Lamb and he who sits upon the throne. And the earth and the sky vanish – only the heavenly reality is now left – and the dead stand up for judgement.

That is, they haven't been raised through the millennium; they're raised now at the end of the millennium.

And the books are opened – and all our deeds – that's what we're judged by. Whatever we've done, whatever we've said – every idle word, said Jesus, will be held against us.

Though there is another book you'll notice, in the last verse. There is another book called the book of life – which is quite different. All who are judged by what they have done, go to the second death, the lake of fire, where there is continual, perpetual, agony. Death and Hades itself will be destroyed in this lake of fire; all will be destroyed except those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

They are not judged by the book of deeds, they are judged by the book of life. Everyone is going to be judged by one of these two books – either by what you have done or by what Christ has done for you. If you are judged by what you have done then judgement is inevitable, destruction is inevitable, death is inevitable.

If you are judged by what Christ has done for you then life is inevitable, salvation is inevitable, resurrection is inevitable.

Conclusion

And so, what's it all about? What's the point of this millennium passage?

Is it the account of a future golden age? I think not. There is little or nothing said of such a thing. It's really about Satan being bound and the saints reigning with Christ.

Is it about the future? I don't think so particularly. I think it's about the "now"; I think now Satan is bound; now the saints are reigning.

It's not a sequence of events it's all taken place in the death and resurrection of Jesus. For since that time we have been reigning with Christ – the millennium has been happening since the time of Christ – world evangelisation is under way. No longer are the nations being deceived.

For Christ's kings and priests are out preaching the gospel everywhere. Prior to the time of Christ the nations were deceived – only the Jesus acknowledged God. But once Christ came and died and rose again he sent his apostles to the nations, to the end of the world.

And so sitting here today are very few Jewish Christians – most of us come from elsewhere, from all kinds of nations who prior to Christ's death and resurrection would never have acknowledged that the God of Israel was the God of all the world. There were the odd exceptions but prior to Christ none of the nations acknowledged that God of Israel as the one true God. But because Jesus Christ has died and risen again and the Evil One, whose power lies in deception has been bound so that he can no longer deceive us. And so world evangelisation is what I take the millennium to be about.

But the chapter is not about evangelisation, the chapter is really about restraining judgement.

God is holding back his day of judgement for 1000 years, for a millennium, for a long period of time, for 2003 years so far – God is holding back his day of judgement for his purposes.

But the time will come when he must have done with Satan – and when that time comes, Christ will return. Until that time comes forgiveness, mercy is available to the nations because Satan is bound. But when that time comes Christ will return, the judgement will take place, Satan will be destroyed – but so will all people who are being judged by what they have done.

God is restraining his hand of judgement so as to give people time to repent. But the day will come, finally it will arrive and righteousness will win because evil will be destroyed. The judgement will take place. And when that does take place, friends, are you going to be judged by the book of your deeds? Or are you going to be judged by the book of life where every name is written in the blood of the Lamb, the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Make sure you are judged by the book of life – not by the book of your deeds.