

Department of
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THE IMPORTANCE AND EXEGESIS
OF REVELATION 20:1-8

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For almost a century and a quarter Eschatology has been prominent in the thinking of the evangelical church in America. Beginning with the Millerite movement which predicted the coming of the Lord in 1833, and continuing to the present program of the World Council of Churches, which has named for its theme of the coming general assembly at Evanston "Christ—the Hope of the World," the expectation of the return of Christ has occupied a place in its active theology. In general one can say that the more evangelical a church is, the more attention it has paid to this topic. The non-evangelical church has also been compelled to consider it; and even if its reaction has been denial or ridicule, Eschatology has played some part in its thinking.

ESCHATOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

Three views have been successively dominant in the Eschatology of the church. First came postmillennialism, originating from Augustine's teaching in "The City of God," and developed largely within the Roman Church of the Middle Ages. The churches of the Reformation were too much engaged in fighting the battles of salvation by faith and of liberty in polity to pay very much attention to eschatological questions. Consequently, they simply followed in the tradition of the Roman Church by accepting the view that church and kingdom were one; that the gospel of Christ would ultimately conquer the world; and that when heathenism had been largely eclipsed by the growth of the church Christ would come to judge the living and the dead, and to bring about "the end of the world." The millennium or the reign of peace

under the gospel, would be the product of the church's activity, and would precede the second coming; hence the coming would be postmillennial.

The optimism of this view, which was generally connected with a concept of inevitable progress in righteousness, was quite prevalent during the Victorian period and down to 1914. The colonizing advances of the so-called Christian nations, the growth of Christian missions, the increase of revival movements, and the success of some social reforms seemed to support it. With the first World War, however, the dreams of those who expected the automatic growth of a social and political millennium were rudely shattered. Humanity was not getting better. All the jealousies and brutalities came out from behind their masks. War, greed, and starvation stalked through the world again; and the hope for Utopia vanished.

Once again the evangelical church turned to the Scriptures, and came up with a different answer. Fifty years before some voices, like those of Joseph Seiss, had called attention to the fact that the Bible had predicted "wars and rumors of wars" until the end. It indicated that Christ's advent would come at an hour when men were not looking for Him. If that were so, how could a thousand years of peace intervene before His appearance? Logically enough, new teachers like Blackstone, Scofield, Gordon, Simpson, Ottman, Gaebelein, and others advocated the premillennial view that Christ would come at an unspecified hour to remove His church; that He would bring judgment upon the world; and that He would then establish His kingdom on earth for a thousand years, giving humanity a period of unexampled peace, righteousness, and prosperity.

Within the last two decades another change has taken place in the trend of eschatological teaching. With one or two exceptions, practically all books published on this subject have espoused a third view, amillennialism. The amillenarian view has sought to steer a middle course between the unwarranted optimism of the postmillenarian view and what it regards as the fantasies of the premillenarian view.

Espoused by such men as Mauro¹, Hamilton², Masselink³, Murray⁴, and others⁵, it holds that Christ will come in person to judge men, raise the dead, and establish the everlasting kingdom which will be purely spiritual and heavenly. The millennium is either interpreted figuratively as the present influence and reign of Christ through His saints on earth, or as the intermediate state of the saved, or else is treated as an incidental verbal gesture which has no particular meaning at all.

Obviously all three schools cannot be equally correct in their positions. There may be some insights or emphases in which each is right, but they are diametrically opposed to each other in their main contention on the subject of the millennium. It would not be fair to say that because an individual espouses one of them that he is a malicious heretic and should be branded as an unbeliever. Evangelical and evangelistic Christians have been found in all three camps, and probably will continue to be found in them. Nevertheless, a definite effort should be made to establish on Scriptural grounds which of these schools of eschatological thought is correct.

THE CRUCIAL SCRIPTURE

The crux of the interpretation lies in Revelation 20:1-8. This is the only passage in the New Testament that mentions specifically a period of one thousand years, and that seems to have a chronological sequence that can be related to the events of the consummation. If a fair and rational interpretation of it can be attained, it will go far toward

¹Mauro, Philip, *Of Things Which Soon Must Come to Pass: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1933, 623 pp. For millennial view, see pages 577-623.

²Hamilton, Floyd, *The Basis of Millennial Faith*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1942, 160 pp.

³Masselink, William, *Why Thousand Years?* Fourth Edition, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1950, 222 pp.

⁴Murray, George Lewis, *Millennial Studies: A Search for Truth*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1948, 207 pp.

⁵Pieters, Albertus, *The Seed of Abraham*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1950, 161 pp.

settling the issue in the general interpretation of Scripture. To do so, however, certain assumptions must be allowed.

First of all, Revelation must be regarded as an authoritative member of the canon of Scripture. If Revelation is only an erratic bit of apocalyptic dreaming, nothing that it contains can be taken seriously.

Secondly, the unity of Revelation will have to be granted. R. H. Charles in his *Studies in the Apocalypse*⁶ contends that the original document of the Apocalypse suffered numerous alterations and interpolations at the hands of editors, so that the present form does not represent what was composed by the original author. There is no documentary evidence of such interpolation, however; for all manuscripts of Revelation, no matter how they vary in individual words or word-order, include this section. It is an integral part of the existing document.

Third, the interpretation of the passage in question should be in keeping with the interpretation of its context. If the context as a whole is figurative, then this passage may also be figurative. If the passage as a whole is literal, the included part may also be literal. The interrelation of this passage to the book of Revelation as a whole should not be ignored.

With these primary considerations in view, the interpretation of Revelation 20:1-8 may be approached from four different angles: (1) the sequence of the passage in the general body of text to which it belongs, (2) the identification of the characters mentioned in it, (3) the possible parallels to it in other portions of Scripture, (4) and the purpose of the millennium as stated in the passage.

THE SEQUENCE OF THE PASSAGE

The first word of Revelation 20:1-10 is "and." *And* is always a connection, implying that the words following it belong in some measure with the words preceding it. The ten verses of this controversial section cannot be divorced from the preceding text which deals with the phenomena of con-

⁶R. H. Charles, *Studies in the Apocalypse*, Second Edition, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1915. See pp. 142-184.

summation surrounding the return of Christ to the earth. The general unit of Revelation to which it belongs opens at 17:1 with the appearance of one of the angels who had the vials containing the final plagues to be poured out upon the earth. (Cf. 17:1; 15:1) He exhibited to John the fall of the great harlot, Babylon (Rev. 17-18), after which the seer described the heavenly action following the collapse of the evil world-system. He saw "heaven opened," out from which came He that "was called Faithful and True" (19:11), followed by the celestial armies equipped for war. They were prepared to "smite the nations" (19:15). In the battle following the beast and the false prophet were vanquished, captured, and flung to their eternal doom in the lake of fire, and the organized rebellion of earth against heaven was utterly crushed. At this point 20:1-6 states that the devil whose deceit was responsible for the rebellion was seized, chained, and confined for a period of one thousand years in the bottomless pit, while the saints reigned with Christ during the same period. Following that reign, Satan shall be loosed from his prison and shall deceive the nations of earth again, after which he shall suffer final doom and the last judgment of the white throne shall take place, followed by the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth.

Although there are in the book of Revelation some passages which leave room for argument as to whether they speak of simultaneous or consecutive events, this passage leaves no doubt that the events of which it speaks are consecutive. Irrespective of whether they are figurative or literal, the book presents them as following one another in the order given above: first, the destruction of Babylon; second, the appearing of Christ in conquest; third, His reign for thousand years; fourth, a final rebellion and judgment; and fifth, the introduction of the eternal state. Each of these stages is as figurative or literal as any or all of the others. Each is as necessary to the given scheme of procedure as any of the others. The only fair conclusion is that the "thousand years" must be a definite period or episode which belongs in the given order, and which is as real as the return

of Christ and the judgment. It cannot be dismissed as unreal simply because its interpretation is attended with difficulties. It must be recognized as a distinct item in the program of God.

Another fact to be observed is the repetition of the phrase "a thousand years." From verse 2 through verse 7 it is used six times in as many verses; and it is connected with a number of concurrent events or conditions: the imprisonment of Satan (v. 2), the reign of martyrs (v. 4), the reign of the living (v. 6), and the duration of a period of peace (v. 7).

Whether the thousand years are to be understood as literally one thousand years of 365 calendar days, or whether they are only a round number, or whether they represent a period of indefinite length, one thing seems reasonably certain: they do mark a particular stage in God's economy. The reiteration of the thousand years conveys the impression that the phrase is not a random guess at a period of time, but that it speaks of a well-defined epoch in which certain events will occur as predicted.

IDENTIFICATION OF CHARACTERS

The connection of this period with preceding and succeeding events may be established by reference to the characters that appear in connection with it. They may be catalogued as follows: (1) The angel with the key to the bottomless pit (v. 1), (2) The "old serpent," Satan (vv. 2, 7, 10), (3) The beast and the false prophet (vv. 4, 10), (4) "They" (v. 4), (5) Souls of the beheaded (v. 4), (6) Jesus Christ (vv. 4, 6), (7) The dead (v. 5), (8) Gog and Magog (v. 8). All of these characters interact in the events of the period, and if their appearance and action can be integrated with other eschatological events, the identity of the millennium may be established.

The angel with the key cannot be identified certainly with any figure previously mentioned in Revelation. He is called only "an angel," which leaves his identity indefinite. Reference to angels as messengers or executors of the divine will is frequent in the Apocalypse (Cf. 16:1 ff; 14:6, 8, 9, 15).

The angel of Chapter 20 is wholly in keeping with the technique used elsewhere in the book.

"The old serpent . . . the devil, and Satan" accords exactly with the great red dragon of 12:9 who is the deceiver of the world and the persecutor of God's people. The phraseology of Chapter 20 is so similar to that of Chapter 12 that one can only conclude that the former is a conscious allusion to the latter by the same author, and that he is carrying to a conclusion the thread of his narrative. The thousand years represent the end of the devil's career in imprisonment and judgment.

The beast and false prophet are connected with the last politico-socio-economic scheme of affairs on earth (Rev. 13). To them was given the authority to rule all the earth, to wage war on the saints, and to command universal worship (13:7-8). Their destruction is fixed at the beginning of the thousand year period, and their torment in the lake of fire continues through it (19:20; 20:10). It must, then, be a positive span of time following the termination of the present era, and commencing with the return of Christ.

"They" of verse 4 is harder to identify. No immediate antecedent is given. "They" are evidently to reign with Christ, seated upon thrones. Perhaps "they" are identical with the saints of Revelation 19:8-9 or with the "armies of heaven" (Rev. 19:14). Their reign must belong to a period when suffering and persecution have ceased, and when their place has been established in the kingdom of Christ.

The "souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus . . ." have been a point of considerable controversy. Amillennial interpreters have agreed that the word "lived" as applied to them speaks only of a spiritual survival or a spiritual resurrection.⁷ The text draws a clear distinction between these and "the rest of the dead" in verse 5. The former "lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years";

⁷For instance, Hamilton says (*The Basis of Millennial Faith*, p. 117): "The amillennialist, however, believes that the first resurrection is the new birth of the believer which is crowned by his being taken to heaven to be with Christ in the interadventual period."

the rest "lived not again until the thousand years were finished" (v. 5). If the second of these resurrections refers to an actual physical resurrection to judgment, the former must logically mean the same thing, or else the language has no meaning at all. In both instances "lived" refers to persons normally rated as dead. The verb "lived" in verse 4 can be an ingressive aorist⁸, and so may be translated "came to life." Such a rendering implies not continuity of existence, nor even a timeless statement of existence, but entering upon a new phase of existence. If the first resurrection concerns the martyred righteous dead, it must connote the same kind of restoration to life that the second resurrection connotes for the unrighteous dead in verse 12. If one is physical resurrection the other is. But if the first resurrection involves physical reconstitution of the righteous, then their reign must be physical. They are to share with Christ in His reign of a thousand years.

No explanation is necessary for the person of Christ, since His reality is assumed throughout the Apocalypse. In Rev. 20:1-10 His personal rule is predicted. If it be objected that the text does not specify that the reign is to be upon the earth, a comparison with the rest of the Apocalypse will show that the actions and decrees in heaven have all had their fulfillment on the earth, and that there would be no object in predicating a thousand-year reign in heaven. The sovereignty of Christ there is timeless; the last test (20:8-9) belongs to earth.

Gog and Magog refer to the tribes of the outer rim of civilization mentioned in Ezekiel 38 and 39. There is no hint that all the earthly enemies of Christ are exterminated at His return; in fact, only the doom of the leaders is stated. Even under the universal reign of righteousness there could still be a smoldering discontent of evil which would burst into flame if opportunity were provided.

The integration of these factors indicates that the thou-

⁸Cf. A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, pp. 833-34; note also the translation given in R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, II, 183-84.

sand years are an era in which the righteous dead will be resurrected; in which the former martyrs shall reign with Christ; in which the powers of evil shall be repressed and dormant; and during which the earth shall be governed by righteousness.

PARALLEL SCRIPTURES

Strenuous objection to the premillenarian position has been raised on the ground that the thousand years are mentioned only in this one passage in a book of highly symbolic character.⁹ Their importance has consequently been called in question, even if the validity of the concept of a millennium is acknowledged. In reply one may say that even if the thousand years are symbolic they stand for *something*, and that the integration of this passage with the rest of Revelation shows that the era which they represent cannot be dismissed as meaningless or non-existent. Furthermore, even if they are mentioned only once, does God have to speak more than once on a subject to make his utterance convincing?

It may be conceded that the phrase occurs only in Revelation 20:1-10, but the concept of a period between the return of Christ to earth and the ultimate consummation of all things does occur elsewhere. In 1 Corinthians 15:22-25 Paul outlined a broad sketch of the course of the present age by the doctrine of the resurrection: "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming. Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet."

"Christ the firstfruits" alludes to the resurrection of Christ, an historical event of nineteen hundred years ago which can be located definitely in space and time. "They that are Christ's at His coming" must refer to the future resurrection and translation of believers when Christ returns per-

⁹E.g., see R. H. Preston and A. T. Hanson, *The Revelation of St. John The Divine*, pp. 123-25.

sonally. "The end" is obviously the completion of redemptive work, when Christ shall have brought the whole world under His control, and when He can deliver it to His Father as a realm once again wholly subject to righteousness.

The particle *epeita* (15:23), translated "afterwards," and its parallel *eita* (15:24), translated "then," mean substantially the same thing. They imply that the thing which they introduce is next in order to that which preceded, although a marked interval may occur between them. If nineteen hundred years have already passed, and more may come before the resurrection of the saints, there is certainly room for an interval of comparable if not of equal length between the resurrection of the saints and the final consummation. This conclusion is strengthened by the statement "For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet" (15:25). This passage requires a period after Christ's return during which He will reign until He can complete the subjugation of evil and bring his enemies completely under his sovereignty. Such a period coincides quite exactly with the thousand years of Revelation.

Another passage of Scripture which might fit well into this period is the judgment of the nations in Matthew 25: 31-46. It has long been a puzzle to conscientious expositors of Scripture because it places them in a difficult dilemma. If it be interpreted as the last judgment of all mankind, it seemingly makes good works the criterion of salvation: "Inasmuch as ye have done . . ." (25:40). If it be interpreted as a judgment of Gentile nations as national units for their treatment of the Jew ("my brethren") it implies that judgment will be on a wholesale and not on an individual basis, and that men will be relegated to eternal fire or admitted to the eternal kingdom *en masse*. Neither of these interpretations seems defensible in the light of the Scriptural revelation in general. If, however, the passage represents the rule of Christ during a period of time, in which He deals with the nations as groups, but judges the individuals in them by their conduct toward each other during the period in which He is personally present, the judgment on the basis of be-

havior becomes explicable. In the light of His presence they cannot plead ignorance of His salvation or of His ethical standards, and their misconduct is utterly without excuse. As a description of Christ's administration during the millennium it would fit the existing requirements.

THE PURPOSE OF THE MILLENNIUM

The premillenarian position has also been criticized adversely because the current concept of the millennium was devoid of purpose. If the saints of God are to reign ultimately in the eternal heavenly city of spiritual light, if the devil and his hosts are to be remanded to the lake of fire, and if there is a general resurrection and judgment at the end of the age, why bother with a reign of a thousand years on earth? If the millennium is simply a protracted spiritual vacation for the saints, does it serve any useful end?

One or two suggestions are proffered here for further consideration by Bible students. They are not to be regarded as dogmatic pronouncements, but rather as exploratory ventures of thought.

The millennium, closely associated as it is with the return of Christ in judgment, is really the long Day of the Lord, or a period in which Christ and His servants will be occupied with judging evil, in disentangling the complicated results of sin in human relationships, and in straightening out the moral affairs of humanity. If men since the fall have spent several millennia in involving themselves in a hopeless snarl of social, economic, and moral evils it will take at least one millennium to right the wrongs, to judge the causes, and to put a redeemed humanity to work in a cleansed world. Such is the implied meaning of the phrase "till he hath put all enemies under His feet" (1 Cor. 15:25).

The millennium will fulfill the divine promise of Israel contained in Zechariah 14 and in Isaiah 11. In the former passage the personal coming of Jehovah is predicted: "His feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east . . . and the Lord my God shall come, and all the saints with thee . . . and the Lord

shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall there be one Lord, and his name one" (Zech. 14:4, 5, 9).

The reign of Jehovah shall be personal and visible. Israel shall possess its land as a sanctuary to which the nations shall come up in pilgrimage to worship.

Isaiah 11 predicts the renewal of the Davidic kingdom by the "branch" or shoot out of the stump of Jesse's house. In that kingdom peace and righteousness shall prevail, equity shall be administered to all, and wickedness shall not be tolerated. The promise was given by Isaiah to Israel; but the entire earth shall benefit by the reign, for the passage says that "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:9).

The millennium, then, is not a useless excrescence on Scriptural Eschatology. It is a part of God's plan to vindicate His wisdom and to make redemption effective. It is intended to be a proving ground for the righteous administration of the government of Christ, who will be purging the world of evil, and preparing it for the ultimate establishment of the city of God. It is the last stage of human history prior to the completion of the divine purpose and the manifestation of eternal life in its personal and social fulness. Perhaps no more is known about it now than was known about this age prior to the first coming of Christ. Perhaps the prophecies concerning it are scanty and are ignorantly interpreted. Its place in the purpose of God is assured, however, and with that reign in mind we all can unite in the prayer, "Thy kingdom come!"

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