

The Millennium: AD 26 - AD 66

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“Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand” (Rev. 20:1 NASB).

Revelation 20 opens with **an angel coming down** (*katabainō*) **from heaven** (*Ouranos*). In his commentary on Revelation, David Chilton identifies the angel as Jesus,¹ and rightly so. In John’s Gospel, this same language is used—as Jesus describes Himself as the one “who descended (*katabainō*) from heaven (*Ouranos*)” (John 3:13). The reason Jesus *descended* from heaven and *came down* into this world was to “*destroy the works of the devil*” (1 John 3:8). With **the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand**, He prepares to do just that. Through vivid imagery and apocalyptic symbolism, Revelation 20:1-10 tells the story of how this was accomplished.

“And he took hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years” (Rev 20:2).

The *angel* (Jesus) takes **hold of the dragon**, who is identified as **the serpent of old, the devil and Satan**. John’s clarity here leaves no doubt as to who and what this **dragon** is. He is none other than the original divine rebel from the garden (Gen 3:1, 14-15). The *angel* (Jesus) puts the *key* and *chain* that He is holding to good use, as this ancient dragon is then **bound** (*deō*) by Him. This is the same root word used for Jesus *binding* the strongman in Matthew 12:29 and Mark 3:27.

Luke tells the same story, only he doesn’t use the word *bound*. Instead, he speaks of the strongman being *attacked* and *overpowered* (Luke 21:22). Nonetheless, this comports well with John’s imagery of Jesus *seizing* and *taking hold* of the dragon. John, however, leaves this account out of his Gospel completely. Instead, he saves his version of Satan being *overpowered* and *bound* for the book of Revelation. Specifically, he saves it for chapter 20.

The duration of the dragon’s binding is said to be a **thousand years**. The period of *a thousand years*, therefore, begins with Satan’s binding. And as we will see, it ends with his release to initiate “the war” (Rev 20:8). This would be the same “war” as referenced in Revelation 16:14 and 19:9, which is the Roman-Jewish War (AD 66-73).² The *thousand years*, consequently, is *hyperbole* for the 40-year period between Jesus binding the strongman (AD 26) and the outbreak of the Roman-Jewish War (AD 66).

Using numbers in a hyperbolic fashion like this is nothing unusual for John. After all, he speaks of 200

million horsemen in Revelation 9:16, yet there are only 58 million horses in the world. In Revelation 20 itself, we're told of an army whose "number" is "like the sand of the seashore" (Rev 20:8). Taken literally, that would be 10.8 trillion—the number of grains of sand on a typical beach. There has never been, nor will there ever be, an army this large.

In each of these cases, the numbers are exaggerated for emphasis. In reality, the numbers are necessarily smaller. In this sense, John is merely following a long biblical tradition of employing hyperbolic numbers for rhetorical effect.

The Old Testament is filled with examples of this literary device. In Chronicles 28:6, Pekah kills 120,000 in one day for following Ahaz in forsaking the Lord. To get some perspective on this, it took an atomic bomb to kill 80,000 people in one day in Nagasaki. During the temple's dedication, Solomon sacrificed 142,000 animals in a single day (1 Kgs 8:62-63; 2 Chr 7:5). The space needed to contain these animals would equal over 100 football fields.³ 1 Kings 20:29 mentions a wall long enough to fall on 27,000 enemies of Israel at once. Those who've done the math here point out that we're looking at a structure comparable to The Great Wall of China.⁴ And by doing the math, it's evident that we're looking at hyperbolic numbers.

Clearly, the biblical writers did not intend their audience to understand any of these numbers literally, and literate readers of the time would have understood this. In fact, they would have expected it.⁵ The scriptural authors are simply employing a common rhetorical device of the time, which was widely attested to in the surrounding literature. In these writings, hyperbolic numbers magnify the king, the people, and the deity of the culture in view. Hence, it is "no heresy or leap of logic," writes Brian Godawa, "to conclude that Hebrew scribes would write in a similar genre as those around them when they wanted to glorify their God and their king in comparison."⁶

It is also no heresy or leap of logic to conclude that John is doing the same thing in the book of Revelation. In fact, John seems to make full use of this literary tool as Christ's "thousand years" (Rev 20:4) is contrasted with Satan's "short time" (Rev 20:3). The "thousand years" is simply a hyperbolic number meant to accentuate the magnitude of all that was accomplished during the 40-year period in which Satan was bound (AD 26-66).

"And he threw him into the abyss and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time" (Rev 20:3).

While the term **abyss** (ἄβυσσος <abussos>) is used sparsely in the New Testament, it's used 36 times in 34 verses in the Septuagint (LXX).⁷ Although we might be tempted to assume that the *abyss*⁸ refers to the underworld, the word is never used to translate the Hebrew term "Sheol." According to Beale and McDonough, "The abyss in the LXX is always related to water, whether it be the chaotic waters—the 'primeval deep'—of the creation account (Gen 1:2; Ps 103:6 [104:6 ET]), or the waters of the sea (Isa 63:13), or the waters below the earth (Ezek 31:15)."⁹

With that said, the image of a **dragon** (Rev 20:2) being thrown into the **abyss** (Rev 20:3) is meant to telegraph the Exodus theme (a 40-year period). John introduces the dragon imagery in chapter 12, where Satan is called “the great dragon” (Rev 12:9). This exact same phrase is used by Ezekiel to describe the office of the Egyptian Pharaoh (Ezek 29:2-3). In the Exodus story, Pharaoh and his armies are thrown into the sea, the **abyss** covers them, and they go down like a stone (Exod 15:4-5).

Accordingly, in Isaiah, the Exodus is looked back upon as the time when God “pierced the **dragon**” and made a way for His people “through the waters of the **abyss**” (Isa 51:9-10). Here, we see both terms, **dragon** and **abyss**, used in conjunction with the Exodus. The echoes of the Exodus reverberate in John’s words as the ultimate **dragon** (Satan) is thrown into the **abyss**. This being the case, John is expecting his readers to make the connection to a 40-year period.

Next, the imagery of Satan being bound, with the **abyss** being **shut** and **sealed** over him, echoes *The Prayer of Manasseh*, where the wording matches John’s language so closely that it’s impossible to miss:

“O Lord, Almighty God of our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and of their righteous seed; who hast made heaven and earth, with all the ornament thereof; who hast **bound** (κλείω)¹⁰ the sea by the word of thy commandment; who hast **shut** (κλείω) up the **Abyss** (ἄβυσσος), and **sealed** (σφραγίζω) it by thy terrible and glorious name; whom all men fear” (*Pr. Man.* 1-3).

“And he took hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and **bound** (κλείω) him for a thousand years; and he threw him into the **Abyss** (ἄβυσσος) and **shut** (κλείω) it and **sealed** (σφραγίζω) it over him, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time” (Rev 20:1-3 NASB).

Both passages are related to *abyss*, and both passages employ the same threefold sequence of *binding*, *shutting*, and *sealing*. The parallels are unmistakable, and the connection John expects his readers to make is equally unmistakable.

The context of the prayer stretches all the way back to the original creation account, where God restrains the forces of chaos and speaks order, meaning, and purpose into existence.¹¹ By drawing on this earlier¹² Jewish prayer,¹³ the message John is telegraphing to his readers is that God is restraining the leader of the forces of chaos and giving His servants time to bring order back to the cosmos through the preaching of the gospel to all nations. Satan is not allowed to deceive them into initiating “the war” until this happens.

And initiating the war is precisely the reason for what Satan’s binding entails. He is bound **so that he would not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed**. The Greek lemma translated “deceive” here is *planao*. As the late Dr. Michael Hieser pointed out,

“BDAG, which is the standard Greek lexicon for New Testament literature, has the lemma’s primary meaning as ‘leading astray in a specific way.’ The specifics, in my judgment, are best defined in terms of what Satan does when permitted to do what he does. And the text is clear on this point. Do you know what he does? He leads the nations against Zion. So if that’s what he does when he’s permitted, then that is what he was prevented from doing. Get it? We let one passage interpret the other.”¹⁴

Jon Paul Miles concurs, writing, “Whatever Satan was prevented from doing before he was loosed, he would have been anxious to do as soon as he was released. As soon as he is released, he goes out to deceive the nations and gather them for battle against God’s people.”¹⁵

Satan, therefore, is not bound in every respect, but only bound with respect to deceiving the nations into starting “the war” prematurely. His being **released for a short time**, consequently, would simply be the time between the start of the war (AD 66) and God’s ends being achieved (AD 70). Basically, the war would in fact begin, and the temple would in fact come down, but only in God’s good timing—and not Satan’s.

“Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their foreheads and on their hands; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and will reign with Him for a thousand years” (Rev 20:4-6).

John sees the **souls** of those who’ve been **beheaded** for their **testimony** and for the **word of God**. Clearly, these are deceased individuals who’ve been martyred for their faith. Beheading was a standard form of capital punishment at the time,¹⁶ and the imagery is meant to convey martyrdom. The ones reigning on the **thrones** also include those who had **not worshiped the beast or received the mark**. This extends the group of reigning saints to include not only martyrs per se, but also those who lived lives of general resistance to the beast.

Typically, we think of the sea beast (Rev 13:1-10) in terms of Nero/Rome. While this is indeed the case, it is important to realize that Nero/Rome was merely the latest incarnation of the sea beast. The sea beast represents the tyrannical forces of evil that opposed God and His people throughout time.

In Revelation 13:1, John is using Leviathan imagery – and that imagery has a long and deep history.¹⁷ As John is told later, “The beast which you saw *was, and is not, and is about to rise* out of the abyss” (Rev 17:8). So, the beast wasn’t currently on scene when John had his vision, but it was about to make a *reappearance—not a first appearance*. In other words, the beast that John sees rising from the abyss had a

past, and that past is recorded on the pages of the past.

For example, in the Septuagint version of Jeremiah 51:34, the same word for “beast” (*thērion*) that John uses for Nero/Rome is used for Nebuchadnezzar/Babylon: “*He has devoured me, he has torn me asunder, airy darkness has come upon me; Nabuchodonosor king of Babylon has swallowed me up, as a dragon (*thērion*) has he filled his belly with my delicacies.*”¹⁸ As A.Y. Collins says, the imagery in Revelation “would carry associations with a long line of national enemies, foreign powers often personified in a particular ruler whose deeds were perceived as especially infamous or threatening.”¹⁹ Nero/Rome was just the *latest* in this long line of enemies—*the latest “beast” on the scene.*

Those who resisted the beast **came to life and reigned with Christ** for a thousand years, and this is called **the first resurrection**. Specifically, those who come to life and reign with Christ have **a part** in this resurrection. Many commentators recognize that *the first resurrection* can only be the resurrection of Christ, and those on the thrones in Revelation 20:6 have “a part” in His resurrection. This is certainly the case.

Typically, however, the commentators equate this idea of taking *part* in Christ’s resurrection (Rev 20:3) with each believer’s own spiritual resurrection. In other words, they identify it as the new birth, or regeneration—something which all believers experience (e.g., Eph 2:1-6). While this is a theologically sound doctrine in and of itself, this is a classic case of the right doctrine but the wrong text. These verses here in Revelation 20 are clearly describing the souls of deceased believers who’ve been martyred and/or have suffered greatly for their faith. And this is just not true of all believers.

With that said, there is a group of saints who indeed had “a part” in Christ’s resurrection (*the first resurrection*) and Scripture records it for us: “*Also the tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection, they entered the holy city and appeared to many*” (Matt 27:52-53). The Old Testament had telegraphed that Jesus would not be the only one coming out of His tomb that morning: “*He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day, that we may live before Him*” (Hosea 6:2).

Putting the pieces together, those who took *part* in *the first resurrection* would be the Old Testament saints who resisted the beast in its past manifestations and came out of their tombs with Jesus on that first Easter morning.

“When the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison, and will come out to deceive the nations which are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together for the war; the number of them is like the sand of the seashore. And they came up on the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, and fire came down from heaven and devoured them” (Rev 20:7-9).

As stated above, the hyperbolic **thousand years** is completed when Satan is **released from his prison** and permitted **to gather** the nations **together for the war**. Again, this is the Roman-Jewish War, and the **number** of the armies being **like the sand of the seashore** is of course hyperbolic, like the *thousand years* themselves.

John's reference to **Gog and Magog** comes from the book of Ezekiel (Ezek 38-39). Like his references to Jezebel (Rev 2:20), Sodom and Egypt (Rev 11:8), and Babylon (Rev 18:2), this refers to something in the past that is meant to give shape and meaning to the present. Ezekiel's Gog prophecy is an oracle against Haman in the book of Esther,²⁰ and the comparison to the events of the first century is apropos.²¹

In Esther, the enemy of God's people (Haman and his cohorts) is in league with the political power of the day (Persia). Haman conspires with the Persian king to exterminate the Jews. In the end, it backfires, and Persia turns on Haman. The deceiver is deceived. The executioner is executed. And God's people are victorious.

In Revelation, the enemy of God's people (apostate Judaism) is in league with the political power of the day (Rome). The Jews and the Romans conspire together to exterminate the Christians. But what happens in the end? The beast (Rome) turns on the harlot (Jerusalem), and the true Israel of God (Jews and Gentiles alike) is victorious. As it was in Esther, so it is in Revelation.

“And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev 20:10).

As stated in the opening, Jesus came “*to destroy the works of the devil*” (1 John 3:8), and this is accomplished here—as **the devil who deceived them is thrown into the lake of fire**, along with **the beast and the false prophet** to be **tormented day and night forever and ever**.²²

Recap

Revelation 20 casts the 40-year period between AD 26 and AD 66 in hyperbolic terms as “a thousand years.” The Exodus motif in Revelation 20 reinforces the idea of a 40-year period. By binding Satan, God restrained the forces of chaos so that the gospel seed could be planted before Satan was released to start the war. The “short time” of Satan’s release would be the period of the war from AD 66 to AD 70. The martyred saints of the past lived and reigned with Christ in heaven as His servants accomplished their task on earth during the hyperbolic “thousand years.” John recycles Ezekiel’s Gog & Magog imagery to convey the idea that the tables would soon be turned after the war starts. God’s people would be victorious in his day, just as they were in Esther’s day. 

¹ David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Tyler, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 499.

² See: Micheal Sullivan, *Armageddon Deception – The Eschatology of Islam & Zionism: A Biblical Response* (Ramona, CA: Vision Publishing, 2021), 208 – 222.

³ Ed Walsh, Some Facts in the Bible Bother Me - Example: 2 Chronicles 7:5 (The Puritan Board).
<https://bit.ly/3lqKpc3>

⁴ David M. Fouts, “A Defense of the Hyperbolic Interpretation of Large Numbers in the Old Testament” (*The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 [1997]), 379.

⁵ Naked Bible 271: Exodus 12 Part 1. <https://bit.ly/4n48BzT>

⁶ Godawa, Brian. *When Watchers Ruled the Nations: Pagan Gods at War with Israel's God and the Spiritual World of the Bible*, p. 89

⁷ G12 - abyssos - Strong's Greek Lexicon (lxx) <https://bit.ly/4pixo53>

⁸ Abyss - Bible Meaning & Definition - Baker's Dictionary | Bible Study Tools. <https://bit.ly/3JZZdPq>

⁹ G. K. Beale and Sean M. McDonough, “Revelation,” in G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson, ed., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), Kindle Edition: Kindle Locations 42368-42370, 69%.

¹⁰ On the usage of the term “abyss” in the Prayer, see: Justin Bass, *The Battle for the Keys: Revelation 1:18 and Christ's Descent into the Underworld* (Paternoster Biblical Monographs), Kindle Edition – 27% Location 1448

¹¹ See: Van der Horst, Pieter W., and Judith H. Newman, *Early Jewish Prayers in Greek* (Berlin, Germany: de Gruyter, 2008), 168-169. See also: Andrew R. Angel, *Chaos and the Son of Man* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2006), 82; as well as Andy Angel, *Playing with Dragons: Living with Suffering and God* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 15.

¹² According to Michael D. Matlock, The Prayer of Manasseh was “composed sometime between 200 BCE and 50 CE” (“The Prayer of Manasseh: A Pithy Penitential Text Recasting Scripture Through a Vast Intertextual Repertoire,” in Miller, Geoffrey David, and Jeremy Corley. *Intertextual Explorations in Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature: Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies* (Berlin; Boston: de Gruyter [2019]), p. 100.

¹³ According to James R. Davila, “Commentators generally argue a Jewish origin to be likely or certain” due, in large part, to the “discovery of a Hebrew version of the Prayer of Manasseh from the Cairo Geniza” (“Is the Prayer of Manasseh a Jewish work?” in Lynn LiDonnici and Andrea Lieber ed., *Heavenly Tablets: Interpretation, Identity and Tradition in Ancient Judaism* [Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007]), p. 76. While Davila himself attempts to provide evidence in the opposite direction, i.e., a Christian origin for the prayer originally written in Greek, the Jewish origin is the consensus view.

¹⁴ Naked Bible Podcast 393 - Transcript (PDF), 10. <https://bit.ly/46k5HjE>

¹⁵ Jon Paul Miles, *Revelations in Grace - How Satan was destroyed* <https://bit.ly/47JVGyA>

¹⁶ <https://bit.ly/3741-3742>.

¹⁷ Robert E. Cruickshank, Jr., *Revelation and the Mark of the Beast*. <https://bit.ly/42o8zus>

¹⁸ Jeremiah 51 Brenton's Septuagint Translation. <https://bit.ly/4nQbapB>

¹⁹ Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976), 119.

²⁰ Robert E. Cruickshank, Jr., *Gog & Magog Series*. <https://bit.ly/4laaREw>

²¹ Robert E. Cruickshank, Jr., *Gog & Magog* (Part 10): John's Usage of the Phrase in Revelation 20.

<https://bit.ly/47JpN9k>

²² In the narrative, the beast and the false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire in Revelation 19:20, but chapter 20 is not meant to be understood as sequential to chapter 19. Rather, it is recapitulatory as John is essentially dealing with the defeat of God's cosmic enemies in layers. He is following a hierachal structure from the least to the greatest. Thus, he deals with the beast and the false prophet (Leviathan and Behemoth) first in chapter 19. He then moves up the ladder, so to speak, and targets their leader – Satan (the dragon). For more on this, see: Joseph Poon, *The Identities of the Beast from the Sea and the Beast from the Land in Revelation 13* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017).