

When are the Thousand Years (Revelation 20:1-6)?

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In Rev 20:1-6, two things occur during the thousand years. One, an angel binds Satan with a chain, and closes him in the abyss for a thousand years. This prevents the dragon's ability to "deceive the nations," mentioned three times (20:3, 8, 10). This binding does not necessarily limit Satan's other activities, such as his war on the woman's children (12:17). Two, those who were beheaded because of their witness, with other faithful followers of Christ, will come to life and rule on thrones with Christ for a thousand years. Rev 20:1-6 does not tell us if this takes place on earth or in heaven, although elsewhere in Revelation thrones are in heaven. The combined message of these two developments is a great shift of authority and influence on earth: instead of the dragon's lies, the souls of the faithful reign with Christ. That much is clear.

Here are the reasons that have persuaded me that the thousand years represent the time that began with Christ's first coming.

1, At his First Coming, Christ defeated Satan.

Other New Testament texts also describe Christ's defeat of Satan: Christ bound Satan and plunders his house. Satan has fallen from heaven and Jesus gives his disciples authority. The prince of this world has been driven out so Jesus can draw all people to himself. Satan has been disarmed and publicly conquered. The devil's power has been broken. These all describe what Jesus accomplished when he came 2,000 years ago. That is the consistent NT position. (See Mark 3:27; Luke 10:17-19; John 12:31-32; Col 2:15; Heb 2:14, Rev 12:7-9.) The defeat of Satan in 12:7-9 parallels his binding in 20:1-3 in several ways, and they both describe this same reality.

2, Revelation repeatedly covers age between Christ's 2 comings, and Rev 20 does this again.

The first seal in Rev 6 begins soon after Christ's ascension, and the sixth seal takes us to the End by describing God's final day of wrath on earth. Rev 7 takes us to the End again by describing the praise of the immense crowd that has come out of the great trouble. The seventh seal in Rev 11 takes us to the End again by describing the praise God receives after he judged all evil and began to reign. Holy War, the sequence in Rev 12:1 – 15:4, also takes us from before the birth of Christ to the final day of judgment at the winepress of God's wrath, ending with those who have been faithful to Christ singing their final victory song before God's throne. The seventh bowl in Rev 16 describes the same final day of God's wrath as we found in the sixth seal and the winepress of God's wrath.

All of these sequences were written to help seven persecuted first century churches make sense of their difficulties. All of these sequences showed these first century believers the spiritual realities behind their situation, and yet each sequence takes us to the time of Christ's second coming. So these sequences all reflect the whole time between the two comings of Christ. Given this pattern of recapitulation in Revelation, it would be a surprise if Rev 20 deviated from this.

3, The words “and I saw ...” in Revelation often introduce symbols.

John regularly “sees” what is not the material or physical reality. He sees lampstands, a lamb, a woman, a dragon, a beast from the sea, a beast from the land. That’s called the *visionary* meaning, what John sees. The *referent* is what the vision *refers* to in our material world. The lampstands *refer* to local churches, the lamb *refers* to Christ, etc. Probably the most important meaning in Revelation is the *symbolic* meaning. For example, what does it mean about churches that Revelation *symbolizes* them as lampstands, or what does it mean about Christ that his *symbol* is a lamb, or that a *symbol* for the church is a beautiful bride?

Revelation often communicates in this *symbolic* way. Let us not assume that it is best to take Revelation’s *visions* as literally or concretely true. That is, we should not assume that the dragon is a dragon, or was bound with an actual chain, or key, or door with a lock. Since Revelation so often uses *visions* of meaningful *symbols*, let us not take the literal meaning as somehow more truthful, or as the ideal way to read Revelation. Let us take Revelation 20 as a *vision* of meaningful *symbols*.

4, Numbers in Revelation are often Symbolic.

The Holy Spirit is not actually seven Spirits, nor will we see Jesus with seven eyes or seven horns (1:4; 4:5,6). Six means human, because people were created on the sixth day. Twelve means the people of God, patterned after the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles, hence Revelation’s frequent use of two twelves together. Three and a half years means a time of trouble, thanks to Daniel 7 and 12, but the three and a half years began right after Christ’s ascension (Rev 12:5-6), and explained the troubles of John’s seven churches several decades later, and have not yet ceased. So it seems unwise to insist on 1000 earthly solar years.

5, The Battle after the 1,000 Years parallels earlier Battles (Rev 16:14; 19:19; 20:7-9).

Revelation 16:14 describes the whole world gathering for “*the battle* of the great day of God Almighty.” Rev 19:19 describes the kings of the earth and their armies gathering together for “*the battle* against the rider on the horse and his army.” In Rev 20:7-8, the released dragon will go out to deceive the nations of the four corners of the earth “to gather them for *the battle*.” In Greek it reads “the battle” in each of these encounters, and each of these visions implies the whole world gathering for the final battle between God and humanity. These are three different visions of the same final Day of the Lord. That is, the thousand years describe the same era that has already been described in Revelation several times. (This aligns nicely with the Day of the Lord that Paul describes in 2 Thess 2:1-12. “Hinder” in 2Th2 portrays the binding of Satan.)

For these reasons, it is best to take the thousand years as the church age that began with Christ’s first coming, and lasts until just before his second coming.

I am indebted in particular to Gregory Beale’s longer (1999) and shorter (2015) commentaries on Revelation.