

## Some comments on the interpretation of Revelation and the 1000 years

Forrest C. Gilmore

Michael Wilcock (*The Message of Revelation*, The Bible Speaks Today series, Ed. John R.W. Stott, IVP, 1975) sees Revelation as organized into 8 Scenes, each composed of 7 sections. These are not chronological, but overlapping descriptions of the same events, portrayed symbolically in different ways. He says, "repetition is one means by which the psalmists 'rhyme' their poetry - what is echoed is not sound, but sense .."

Scene 1: The Church in the World - 7 letters dictated, all with similar patterns (rev 1:9 - 3:22)

Scene 2: Suffering for the Church - seven seals opened (4:1- 8:1)

Scene 3: Warning to the World - 7 Trumpets (8:2 - 11:18)

Scene 4: The Drama of History - 7 visions of cosmic conflict (11:19 - 15:4)

Scene 5: Punishment for the World - 7 bowls of wrath poured out (15:5 - 16:21)

Scene 6: Babylon the Whore - 7 Words of justice (17:1 - 19:10)

Scene 7: The Drama Behind History - 7 Visions of Ultimate Reality (19:11 - 21:8)

Scene 8: Jerusalem the Bride - 7 final Revelations (21:9 - 22:19)

Epilogue: (22:20, 21)

In each of these 8 scenes, section 6 ends with a sense of finality, and section 7 is a look at what lies past the "end."

Scene 1 - The 7th letter, to Laodicea - "Lukewarmness is the worst condition to which a church can sink." *I will spew you out of my mouth*, Christ says. That seems rather final!

Scene 2: - Rest in silence; the end of history was covered in section 6 of this scene.

Scene 3: At the 7th trumpet, the World is no more.

Scene 4: The 7th vision, the song of victory.

Scene 5: At the 7th bowl, the world is no more.

Scene 6: At the 6th Word, Babylon is doomed; the 7th section is the successor of Babylon - the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Scene 7: The 7th vision is the new age, or New Jerusalem

Scene 8: The 7th Revelation is God's final curse - do not add or take away anything from this book. That is, if what has been said is not enough to lead you to salvation, you will not see the tree of life nor the holy city.

Thus, it is plain that Revelation is not literal, sequential history. It is a highly symbolic portrayal of God's ultimate plan - the wrapping up of history in Jesus Christ, as Paul says in **Colossians 1:26-27 (NASB)** <sup>26</sup> *that is*, the mystery which has been hidden from the *past* ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, <sup>27</sup> to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

With regard to the "1000 years," Wilcock says "The thousand years, which in our view, began with Christ's first coming, are thus still in progress, and are equivalent to the 'three and a half years' during which the witnesses of Scene 3 preach in the world and the woman of scene 4 survives in the desert. But at the end of that period there will come a time, according to 20:3b, when 'for a little while' Satan will be freed from the restraints which the church age has placed upon him."

Different authors describe the binding of Satan in various ways. Wilcock cites Mark 3:27, Lk 11:21, and Mt 12:29 as the only other Scriptural references to the binding of Satan. In these passages Jesus is casting out demons, speaks about binding the strong man, and says the Kingdom of God has come upon you. Steve Gregg\* explains this perspective of the binding of Satan very astutely.

Wilcock sees the binding of Satan as his inability to deceive the nations - the Gospel has been made available to the nations in general. "Every time we see a new convert added to the church, Satan's inability to deceive the nations is proclaimed afresh."

Ray Summers, who emphasizes the need for Revelation to have been meaningful to the Christians of John's day, (*Worthy is the Lamb*, Broadman 1951) says this: "The chain [used to bind Satan] is not literal; one could hardly use a literal chain on a spiritual being. The thousand years is no more literal than the chain....The number is to be understood as an idea of completeness. It does not represent a period of years before or after the coming of Christ. It tells John's readers that the devil is going to be completely restrained from deceiving the nations into worshipping the emperor."

I might add that typically when one is bound by a chain, they still can move about, but they can't go beyond the length of the chain. Thus Satan may still have some influence, but it is limited because Christ reigns.

Summers goes on to say, "No basis is found in the symbolism [of Revelation] for a literal thousand-year reign of the saints with Christ on earth either before or after His second coming. No basis is found in the symbolism for multiple resurrections and judgements." He bases his position on the clear language of other portions of the New Testament. In summary, Summers says "Revelation is a series of apocalyptic images given for the assurance of the people of God that Christ is going to be victorious over all opposition."

J. Ramsey Michaels (*Revelation*, IVP NT Commentary Series, 1997)) says that "[we need to] distinguish carefully between what John experienced long ago in his vision on Patmos and what the world will experience some day [in the future.] *Within John's vision*, (italics original) there is little doubt that his perspective was premillennial. It is only when his visions are viewed as a scenario for the actual future of the world that differing interpretations come into play, often because a literal premillennial reading is judged (rightly or wrongly) to conflict with conclusions derived from other parts of the Bible." He quotes Robert Mounce: "John taught a literal millennium, but its essential meaning may be realized in something other than a temporal fulfillment." In my opinion, both men miss the mark here. As Ray Summers says, John is using typical Hebrew figurative language when he speaks about 1000 years. He has no intent at all that his readers would assume it literally. Michaels continues, "In short, a careful reading of [Revelation] from where we sit now, at the threshold of the third millennium, suggests an interpretation that is premillennial because that is what John saw in his visions, but not completely literal because Christ did not literally return and dead martyrs were not literally raised to life when the Roman Empire came to an end." In this, it seems to me, he "straddles the fence" between amillennialism and premillennialism. I too prefer not to place myself in either "box." Premillennialists find some way to move frequently between literal and symbolic interpretation of various things in Revelation, but they come at it from a literal perspective. Revelation is intended to be primarily symbolic, so premillennialists start with the wrong perspective. The writer of Revelation gives some self-interpretations of the language he uses. Clearly, his language is first symbolic, not literal.

To look at this in another way, I have seen other scholars speak about the overlapping and repetition of events in Revelation.\*\* (E.g. see Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, Baker Book House, 1962, and lectures by Steve Gregg.) I feel that J. Ramsey Michaels expresses similar views. I just find Wilcock's to be the most succinct. If you see that the 1000 years are incorporated into Wilcock's Scene 7 above but is not mentioned in any other of the 8 scenes, you can see that this period must be symbolic. I might also add that Revelation 20 is the only place in Scripture where the 1000 years is mentioned. In all OT passages that speak of the end times and Messiah's reign on earth, which is presented in figurative language, there is no 1000-year time period mentioned. Neither Peter, Paul nor Christ Himself said anything about it. (Steve Gregg speaks about this at length\*.) Moreover, Christ made it plain that there may be signs of His coming, but we will not know the time, so it is fruitless to try to devise some fanciful detailed picture of end-time events and to speculate whether His coming is eminent or not. We are told to live as if it were eminent, no matter what color the moon may be or who is exercising power in the world. Satan is defeated and ultimately powerless when Christ reigns in one's life.

\* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3p3QQyYDRQ>

\*\* This approach is referred to as Idealism and is sometimes called iterism or recapitulationism. A good description is in *Triumph of the Lamb*, by Dennis Johnson, (P & R Publishing, August 1, 2001)