Abstract
This article presents an exegesis of Revelation 20:1-10 followed by a critical assessment of Wesley’s interpretation of Revelation 20:1-10. Overall, Wesley’s postmillennial interpretation of Revelation 20:1-10 is not supported by an exegetical reading of Revelation 20:1-10 (Scripture); it is not rooted in the early church (tradition); and it is based largely upon the optimism of the 18th century which was shattered by the 20th century (experience). Historic premillennialism, however, does exegetical justice to Revelation 20:1-10 (Scripture), takes seriously the early church’s view (tradition), and accords with our reason and experience in the 21st century (reason and experience). As such, Wesleyans should abandon postmillennialism and instead embrace historic premillennialism for the sake of having a biblically based theology and approach to missions and evangelism in the 21st century.

Keywords: millennium, Revelation 20, eschatology, historic premillennialism, postmillennialism, Wesleyan theology

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Introduction

Negligence, laxity, and indifference often surround the issue of John Wesley’s eschatology today, especially regarding his view of the millennium. Even worse, a common assumption today is that eschatology and the millennium is not essential to Christian doctrine, especially for Wesleyans.1 Given the abundant controversies and perspectives on eschatology, it is not difficult to understand why so many have either avoided it or relegated it to the sideline, especially since there is no consensus except, for example, the general statement “Christ will come again.”2 However, in recent decades, some theologians have underscored the importance of eschatology for Christian doctrine and practice as Thomas C. Oden writes, “A notoriously difficult and enigmatic subject, it is not only the capstone of systematic theology, but may rightly be regarded as its foundation stone, the final premise that informs all other questions of theological reasoning.”3

In addition, some Wesleyan scholars have recently attempted to revive the study of eschatology within Wesleyan theology, particularly seen in H. Ray Dunning’s 1995 composite work The Second Coming: A Wesleyan Approach to the Doctrine of Last Things. Now while this great work of scholarship discusses the biblical, historical, and theological issues related to Wesleyan eschatology, and even gives a great deal of attention to issues regarding the millennium, it nonetheless provides no biblical discussion of Rev 20:1-10 which is the only explicit reference to the millennium in the Bible. Moreover, in his The Problem with Evangelical Theology, Wesleyan Bible scholar Ben Witherington III critiques the exegetical foundations of Protestant theology including eschatology (Lutheranism, Calvinism, Dispensationalism, Wesleyanism, and Pentecostalism). While he severely scrutinizes the eschatology of each of these traditions, Witherington gives Wesley’s postmillennialism an exegetical pass, even though he deems it as erroneous.4 Thus, even those who have given Wesley’s eschatology the time of day (1) have not sufficiently assessed the biblical foundations of the millennium (Rev 20:1-10) and (2) have failed in offering the appropriate corrective to Wesley’s unbiblical postmillennialism. This paper, therefore, will offer (1) an exegetical reading of Rev 20:1-10 and (2) this said corrective to Wesley’s postmillennialism. Overall, I argue that Wesley’s postmillennial views are rooted neither in an exegetical reading of Rev 20:1-10 (Scripture), nor the early church’s interpretation of the millennium (tradition), but rather are based more upon the optimism of 18th century revivalism (experience). In so doing, I suggest that historic premillennialism is the best eschatological path forward for Wesleyan theology and missions in the 21st century, since it is exegetically (Scripture), historically (tradition), critically (reason), and empirically (experience) sound.
Exegesis of Revelation 20:1-10

In the Wesleyan tradition, Scripture is norma normans, the norming norm, the final authority for Christian belief and practice. John Wesley thus continued the tradition of the Reformers in affirming sola Scriptura. Wesley himself is renowned for his declaration, “Let me be homo unius libri,” a man of one book. This of course did not mean he did not use tradition, reason, or experience to interpret the Bible, but simply that the Bible is the primary and final authority. In the same manner, Scripture will be placed at the center of discussion in this essay regarding the theology of the millennium. In short, what Scripture reveals about the millennium (Rev 20:1-10) will be the view of this writer, and the method employed here will be that of exegesis.

As noted above, the most thorough work on Wesleyan eschatology edited by H. Ray Dunning provides exegetical readings of important eschatological passages in the NT (e.g. the Olivet Discourse – Matt 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21), but not of Rev 20:1-10. This is problematic given the considerable amount of discussion of the millennium in Dunning’s volume. Its survey of the historical development of the theology of the millennium in church history is excellent. Yet they give no attention to the biblical foundations of the millennium – exegesis of Rev 20:1-10 – like they do with other eschatological passages in the NT. As such, the following is an exegesis of Rev 20:1-10, something all but missing in Dunning’s volume.

Determining the Unit: Revelation 20:1-10

The first task in exegesis is establishing the literary unit, particularly where the boundaries of the passage lay. It seems that Rev 20:1-10 is a self-contained unit for several reasons. First, Rev 20:1 begins with the commonly repeated phrase Καὶ εἶδον (“Then I saw…”), which often signals a new unit in Revelation. It occurs 9 other times within the surrounding context (cf. Rev 19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4, 11, 12; 21:1, 2), and except for Rev 19:19; 20:4; and 21:2, this Καὶ εἶδον formula begins the pericopae in each of the neighboring units: (1) Rev 19:11-16, (2) Rev 19:17-21, (3) Rev 20:1-10, (4) Rev 20:11-15, and (5) Rev 21:1-8. Second, Rev 20:1-10 carries an overarching theme: the circumstances of and beyond the millennium. Overall, Rev 20:1-6 describes what will happen during the millennium, while Rev 20:7-10 what will happen after the millennium. Thus, Rev 20:1-3 describes what will happen to Satan during the millennium (imprisoned), Rev 20:4-6 what will happen with Christ and his people during the millennium (reign and resurrection), and Rev 20:7-10 what will happen to Satan after the millennium (release, deceiving of nations, gathering for battle, and final defeat). Third, a recurring theme occurs at the end of the prior
pericope (Rev 19:17-21) in Rev 19:20 and at the end of this proposed pericope (Rev 20:1-10) in Rev 20:10. In both places, John describes his vision of those being thrown alive into the lake of fire. In Rev 19:20, the beast and false prophet are thrown in, then Satan is thrown in, “where the beast and the false prophet were” in Rev 20:10. This repeated theme at the end of these units seems to signal the end of one unit and the subsequent move to the next. Fourth, Rev 20:1-3 and 20:7-10 serve as a sort of thematic inclusio. The focus of Rev 20:1-3 is Satan and his preliminary judgment during the thousand years. But the focus shifts in Rev 20:4-6 to Christ and his people where Satan is not mentioned once. The focus then shifts back to Satan and his final judgment in Rev 20:7-10. This then functions as a sort of thematic inclusio for the passage signaling one cohesive narrative vision. So then, Rev 20:1-10 is clearly a unit and contains a threefold structure: (1) Rev 20:1-3, (2) Rev 20:4-6, and (3) Rev 20:7-10.

**Book Context: The Structure of Revelation**

The next step of exegesis is to situate the unit (Rev 20:1-10) within the whole book context (the book of Revelation). Pertinent to this discussion must be an examination of the structure of Revelation. The following is a summary of the two primary structural features.

First, Rev 1:19 reveals a threefold structure to the book. At the close of John’s vision of the exalted Christ in Rev 1:9-20, Jesus commissions John in Rev 1:19 to write three things: (1) “what you have seen,” (2) “what is,” and (3) “what is going to happen after these things.” The first of these (“what you have seen”) refers to the vision of Christ that John just saw in Rev 1:9-20. The second (“what is”) refers to the seven letters to seven churches of Asia Minor in Rev 2:1-3:22, which correct and commend them for their current spiritual states. The third (“what is going to happen after these things”) refers to the apocalyptic visions in Rev 4:1-22:7. Revelation then addresses respectively the past (Rev 1:9-20 – John’s vision of Christ), present (Rev 2:1-3:22 – seven letters to seven churches), and future (Rev 4:1-22:7 -apocalyptic, eschatological visions).

While this threefold temporal structure should not be taken rigidly, it should nevertheless be taken seriously. Put another way, Rev 1:9-20 refers primarily to the past (“what you have seen”), Rev 2:1-3:22 primarily to the present (“what is”), and Rev 4:1-22:7 primarily to the future (“what is going to happen after these things”). This does not mean that other temporalities cannot appear within these sections, because they certainly do. For example, Rev 12 is clearly an historical (past) recounting of Jesus’ birth and infancy in apocalyptic fashion within a larger future framework of Rev 4:1-22:7. Also, many of the seven letters contain future promises
within a present framework in Rev 2:1-3:22 (e.g. “To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God” [Rev 2:7]). Furthermore, this error of rigidity has often misled scholars to view each of these three sections as so distinct that they do not relate to one another at all.12 Never mind the fact that the vivid descriptions of Jesus in the vision of Rev 1:9-20 often appear in Rev 2:1-3:22.13 Moreover, many of the promises of Rev 2:1-3:22 are realized later in Rev 4:1-22:7.14 So then, this rigid approach, which understands only one temporality within each major section, should be abandoned, even more the approach that sees these distinct sections as unrelated. Instead, each major section has a primary temporality that allows for others to surface occasionally while also seeing the interconnectedness between the three major sections.

The formula ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα in Rev 1:19c provides further evidence that reinforces this threefold structure from Rev 1:19. It occurs in a similar fashion three other places in Revelation:

- ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάγει (Rev 1:1)
- ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα (Rev 1:19c)
- ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα (Rev 4:1)
- ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάγει (Rev 22:6)

While it is not verbatim, the similarities are striking. These formulas are clearly interconnected and function to signal the beginning and end of literary units. First, the formulas in Rev 1:1 and Rev 22:6 are identical.15 Also, the phrases in Rev 1:19c and 4:1 are identical except for the minor difference in verb (μέλλει vs. δεῖ). The connection between these phrases is reinforced even more by the qualification, “And the first voice which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet,” (Rev 4:1) which echoes Rev 1:10 where John says, “and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet.” This is the same voice of Jesus in both passages, except now in Rev 4:1 the content is “what must happen after these things,” rather than “what you have seen” (Rev 1:9-20) or “what is” (Rev 2:1-3:22 which ends immediately before Rev 4:1). So then, whether one interprets Rev 4:1-22:7 futuristically, clearly the content of Rev 1:19c (“what is going to happen after these things”) begins in Rev 4:1 and ends in Rev 22:6-7 signaled by these nearly identical formulas which all relate to the purpose of Revelation: “to show his servants what must happen quickly” (Rev 1:1).

Revelation 20:1-10, then, is located toward the end of this third and primarily future section of the book (Rev 4:1-22:7) described as “what is going to happen after these things” (Rev 1:19c) and “what must happen after these things” (Rev 4:1).
Second, Revelation can also be structured according to its four major visions. Each of these visions share a common formula “in the Spirit” (ἐν πνεύματι) near the commencement of each new section. They occur at Rev 1:10 (“I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day”), Rev 4:2 (“Immediately I was in the Spirit”), Rev 17:3 (“And he carried me off into the wilderness in the Spirit”), and Rev 21:10 (“And he carried me off in the Spirit to a great and high mountain”). Merrill C. Tenney argues that “Such organization cannot be accidental,” and that these four phrases function to mark “the opening of four major sections of the book.” George E. Ladd adds that each of these four visions “is introduced by an invitation to ‘come and see’ what God purposes to disclose (1:9; 4:1; 17:1; 21:9).” So then, this is the fourfold structure of Revelation with prologue and epilogue:

I. Prologue (Rev 1:1-8)
II. First Vision (Rev 1:9-3:22)
III. Second Vision (Rev 4:1-16:21)
IV. Third Vision (Rev 17:1-21:8)
VI. Epilogue (Rev 22:8-21)

Revelation 20:1-10, then, is located within the third major vision, namely, Rev 17:1-21:8 to which we will now turn.

Immediate Context: Revelation 17:1-21:8

The next step in exegesis is to understand a unit (Rev 20:1-10) within its immediate context. Witherington underscores the importance of doing so with Rev 20:1-10, which he deems certainly “the most controverted portion of the book of Revelation.” He rightly contends, “this material must be viewed in light of its immediate context in Revelation itself. The sequence of preliminary judgment, millennium, final judgment, new heaven and new earth in Rev. 19-22 must be taken seriously.” Below is an attempt to understand and take seriously Rev 20:1-10 within its immediate context of Rev 17:1-21:8.

Regarding the boundaries of the immediate context of Rev 20:1-10, the four phrases “in the Spirit” signal the beginning of each new vision in Revelation and thus its immediate context is Rev 17:1-21:8. Furthermore, the latter two visions are distinguished and connected by having identical opening formulas. In fact, Rev 17:1-3 and Rev 21:9-10 are verbatim, the only differences being the details of each vision. These identical formulas clearly signal the beginning of a new vision, and the chart below demonstrates these identical portions bolded and underlined:
Furthermore, the major structural relationship between the third vision (Rev 17:1-21:8) and the fourth vision (21:9-22:7) is contrast. Thus, John juxtaposes the profanity, judgment, downfall, and destruction of the prostitute city of Babylon (Rev 17:1-21:8) with the holy, pure, beautiful, praised, and exalted bridal city of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:9-22:7) highlighting their differences. So then, the boundary of the immediate context of Rev 20:1-10 is clearly Rev 17:1-21:8 dealing with the judgment of God's enemies.

Concerning its content and movement, Rev 17:1-21:8 moves in a clear sequence and progression of events. Below is a summary of the third vision's movement:

I. Revelations of the Judgment of Babylon (Rev 17:1-19:10)

1. The fall of Babylon (Rev 17:1-18:24)
2. Rejoicing in heaven over Babylon's fall and destruction (19:1-10)

II. The Final Defeat of God's Remaining Foes (Rev 19:11-21:8)

1. Christ's triumphant second coming for judgment and war (Rev 19:11-16)
2. Christ’s triumph and judgment of the beast and false prophet (Rev 19:17-21)
3. The millennium (Rev 20:1-10)
   A. The imprisonment of Satan – preliminary judgment (Rev 20:1-3)
   B. The reign of Christ with his resurrected people (Rev 20:4-6)
   C. The ultimate doom of Satan – final judgment (Rev 20:7-10)
4. The final judgment and general resurrection (Rev 20:11-15)
5. The new heavens, new earth, and new Jerusalem (Rev 21:1-8)

As noted above, the use of the formula Καὶ ἐδόν begins each of the pericopae in the latter portion of this third vision (Rev 19:11, 17; 20:1, 11; 21:1). Many English translators note this progressive sense of καὶ here and translate it as “then” instead of the mere connective sense of “and.” This indicates a progression and development in the apocalyptic narrative.

In addition, this third vision moves in a successive fashion in judgment upon the enemies of God. First comes the judgment and destruction of the prostitute city Babylon (Rev 17:1-18:24), followed by rejoicing in heaven over the prostitute’s judgment and destruction (Rev 19:1-10); then Christ’s triumphant second coming with the armies of heaven realizes the defeat and judgment of the beast, false prophet, and their armies (Rev 19:11-21); next Satan’s preliminary judgment in the bottomless pit for a thousand years ensues juxtaposed with a thousand year exaltation and reign of Christ with those who were martyred by Babylon, the beast, the false prophet, and Satan (Rev 20:1-6); next the climax of this judgment, namely, Satan joins the beast and false prophet in the lake of fire as his final judgment (Rev 20:7-10); next the final judgment of the rest of humanity and the general resurrection (Rev 20:11-15); finally the renewal of all things (Rev 21:1-8). The progression of judgment in Rev 17:1-21:8 finds its climax in Rev 20:1-10 where the source (i.e. Satan) of the evils against God and his people from the prostitute Babylon, the beast, and false prophet finally gets what he deserves for his cruelty, perverseness, and wickedness. Here the people of God finally experience the OT promise, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay says the Lord.” Witherington notes this climactic progression of judgment from Babylon, to the beast and false prophet, to Satan, and argues that “we have to take Rev. 19.1-20.3 as some sort of sequence. Rev. 20.1 simply cannot be seen as a new beginning.” So then, Rev 20:1-
10 occurs within a progressive sequence of judgments within Rev 17:1—21:8 and functions as the climax of these progressive judgments by depicting the preliminary and final judgment of Satan by God.

Exegesis: Revelation 20:1-10

The next step of exegesis is to analyze the unit proper (Rev 20:1-10) in light of its book (Revelation) and immediate contexts (Rev 17:1-21:8). Many scholars underscore how vital the interpretation of Rev 20:1-10 is for interpreting the whole of Revelation. In other words, one’s view of the millennium strongly contributes to the approach one takes to the rest of Revelation: the idealist (spiritualized millennium) and preterist (millennium already fulfilled) approaches relate to amillennialism which asserts that there is no future millennium, but either a present or past one; the historicist approach (future millennium part of church history) relates to postmillennialism; the futurist approach (future millennium and all of Revelation is future oriented) relates to a dispensational premillennialism; and the mixed, eclectic, or preterist-futurist approach (future millennium and some of Revelation is future oriented) relates to historical premillennialism. It is not entirely certain which came first, the approach or the millennial view; yet it is quite clear that the interpretation of Rev 20:1-10 is central to both discussions. While Rev 20:1-10 is certainly important, this passage has been blown out of proportion regarding its overall importance to Revelation as a whole. This overemphasis warrants a brief critique here.

Although Rev 20:1-10 is the climax (at least the climax of judgment) of the third vision in Rev 17:1-21:8, it is not however the climax of the book of Revelation. In other words, within its immediate context of Rev 17:1-21:8, Rev 20:1-10 is critically important as the climax of Satan’s judgment who is the source of the prostitute Babylon (Rev 17:1-18:24), the beast (Rev 19:11-21), and the false prophet (Rev 19:11-21). However, the climax of the book of Revelation is the fourth vision of praise to the bride, the new Jerusalem in Rev 21:9-22:7 which is contrasted to the prostitute Babylon in Rev 17:1-21:8. This praise of the new Jerusalem is the peak of Revelation, not judgment of the prostitute Babylon, beast, false prophet, and dragon where the millennium occurs. Overall, Rev 20:1-10 is the climactic pericope concerning judgment within its larger context of Rev 17:1-21:8, but is not climactic to the book of Revelation. Therefore, the amount of attention it receives as the crux interpretum of the book of Revelation is unwarranted, and thus it should not determine one’s interpretation of the whole book. Nevertheless, it is still an important passage and the most controversial in the entire book of Revelation.
Therefore, we must give careful attention to the details of this passage along with great charity in our interaction with those who share differing perspectives.\textsuperscript{31}

Regarding its structure, Rev 20:1-10 is comprised of three-parts divided into two temporal periods:

I. \textit{During} the millennium (20:1-6)
   1. The thousand-year imprisonment of Satan – preliminary judgment (20:1-3)
   2. The thousand-year reign of Christ with his resurrected people (20:4-6)

II. \textit{After} the millennium (20:7-10)
   3. The ultimate doom of Satan – final judgment (20:7-10)

Most scholars recognize this three-part division and sometimes clump the first two together as 20:1-6 since it deals with the millennium proper.\textsuperscript{32} Overall, Rev 20:1-6 describes the circumstances of the millennium, and Rev 20:7-10 the circumstances after the millennium. Concerning the first part, Rev 20:1-3 is contrasted to Rev 20:4-6. The former describes the fate of Satan during the millennium; the latter the fate of Christ and his people during the millennium. In the former, there is preliminary judgment (via imprisonment) for Satan; in the latter, vindication and exaltation (via resurrection and dominion) for Christ and his people. Thus, Rev 20:1-6 views the millennium from two vantage points; one from the judgment of Satan (Rev 20:1-3) and the other from the vindication of Christ and his people (Rev 20:4-6). Concerning the second part, Rev 20:7-10 describes Satan’s last (failed) attempt to overthrow Christ and his people, the result of which is his ultimate doom in the lake of fire and sulfur.

Below constitutes a detailed, exegetical reading of Rev 20:1-10 which is not exhaustive, but focuses upon the key exegetical issues in the passage.


In Rev 201, Καὶ ἔδοσεν marks a new vision in the sequence of visions from Rev 19:11—21:8. The accusative direct object of ἔδοσεν ἄγγελον, which is then the implied subject of the main verbs of 20:2-3: ἐκράτησεν (v. 2), ἐδῆσεν (v. 2), ἐβάλεν (v. 3), σεν (v. 3), ἐσφράγισεν (v. 3).\textsuperscript{33} Thus, the focus is upon the action of the angel: he seized, bound, threw, locked, and sealed. The phrase κατὰ βάσιν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ (“coming down from heaven”), implies that the millennium will occur on earth, not in heaven.\textsuperscript{33} The singular use of οὐρανός here means “sky” or “atmosphere,” not to be confused with the plural use which connotes the
transcendent abode of God. Nonetheless, its coming down from either the sky or heaven implies that the location of the millennium will be on earth.

In Rev 20:2, the dragon is identified threefold as the ancient serpent, the Devil, and Satan that is verbatim to Rev 12:9. There he was thrown down to the earth with his angels (ἐβλήθη εἰς τὴν γῆν); in Rev 20:3 an angel throws him into the abyss (ἐβάλεν αὐτὸν εἰς τὴν ἁβυσσον); later in Rev 20:10 he is thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur (ἐβλήθη εἰς τὴν λίμνην τοῦ πυρὸς καὶ θείου). Thus, Satan’s judgment progresses in three stages: from heaven to earth (Rev 12:9), to the abyss (Rev 20:3), to the lake of fire and sulfur (Rev 20:10).

Amillennialists want to interpret ἔδησεν figuratively to mean bound in a spiritual sense so that Satan cannot work his evil during the present age. However, neither the text nor context indicate that the binding should be viewed as figurative. The only figurative element in this verse is the dragon, which is then explained and identified as the ancient serpent, Devil, and Satan. Furthermore, it was common in Second Temple literature for angels to bind demons.

The most important element of Rev 20:2 is the interpretation of χίλια ἔτη. Grammatically, it is an accusative of measure for the extent of time. Thus, the dragon was not bound for some point in time within the thousand years (dative of time), nor was he bound during a certain kind of time (genitive of time), but was bound the extent and length of a thousand years (accusative extent of time). A common misunderstanding is that χίλια is the largest imaginable number in Greek, and thus indicates a figurative reading. However, this is problematic for several reasons. First, there are many numbers in Greek larger than 1,000. Within Revelation, there is the 144,000 in Rev 7:4 and 14:1, the 12,000 in each of the 12 tribes in Rev 7:5-8, and the 1,260 days in Rev 12:6. Herodotus claims that the total Persian army of Xerxes contains 5,283,220 fighting men. One thousand then is clearly not the largest number in Greek. Furthermore, Rev 20:8 describes an innumerable number: ὅν ὁ ἄριθμος αὐτῶν ὡς ἡ ἄμμος τῆς θαλάσσης (“whose number is as the sand of the sea”). If John meant that the period of Christ’s reign with his people would last indefinitely and figuratively, he would have used a phrase like this. One thousand years then is not some undetermined amount of time. However, this does not therefore mean that 1,000 years is a literal 1,000 years consisting of 365,000 24-hour days. Numbers in the ancient world were often highly exaggerated and used for rhetorical hyperbole, even in respected historiographical works such as Herodotus and Thucydides. So then, the ad sensum of the 1,000 years is that it is a very long period during which Satan will be incarcerated. Nevertheless, the focus lies upon the extent of Satan’s imprisonment, not upon the figurativeness or literalness of the 1,000 years.
Revelation 20:3 reveals the negative purpose of Satan’s thousand year incarceration, namely, so that he might not deceive the nations (ἵνα μὴ πλανήσῃ). Also, it reveals what comes after the millennium (μετὰ ταῦτα) which is later resumed in Rev 20:7-10, namely, Satan’s release from prison.42 Once again, the accusative of the extent of time recurs, although here it concerns the extent of Satan’s release, namely, the extent of a short time (μικρὸν χρόνον).

In sum, Rev 20:1-3 describes the circumstances during the millennium from the vantage point of Satan, that is, he is imprisoned for the entire 1,000 years so that he cannot deceive the nations, though he will be released for a short time thereafter followed by his final judgment.

2. The Thousand Year Reign of Christ with His Resurrected People (Rev 20:4-6)

Revelation 20:4-6 is in direct contrast and juxtaposition to Rev 20:1-3. Both deal with the circumstances of the millennium proper, though now in Rev 20:4-6 it is from the vantage point of Christ and his people.

Revelation 20:4 is the most difficult and ambiguous verse in this passage. The grammar is unclear as to whether one or two groups of people are in view here. In other words, do only the martyrs reign and share the first resurrection with Christ during the millennium (one group), or do all the saints reign and share this with the martyrs (two groups)? Grammatically, it is ambiguous because there is no explicitly named nominative subject for the first main verb ἐκάθισαν (“they were seated”), and no antecedent for αὐτοῖς (“judgment was given for them”). The crux interpretum then is the use of the καὶ immediately before τὰς ψυχὰς. If the καὶ is explicative (“namely, the souls of the beheaded”), then only one group is in view: only the Revelation martyrs. If it is additive (“and I also saw the souls of the beheaded...”), then two groups are in view: saints and martyrs.43 If it is ascensive (“even the souls of the beheaded”), then two groups are in view: saints and martyrs. The latter two are preferable for several reasons, especially the ascensive καὶ. First, this occurs within the context of Satan’s judgment. He is judged not only for his rebellion and war against God, but even for his persecution of God’s people seen all throughout Revelation.44 Thus, an ascensive use of καὶ here would have the force of surprise, that even those whom he had brutally persecuted and martyred are now vindicated and exalted over him. Also, the additive καὶ is more likely than the explicative as some scribes added εἶδον for clarification: καὶ εἶδον τὰς ψυχὰς.45 Second, Rev 20:4 echoes Dan 7:21-22 and 7:26-27. Daniel 7 depicts all the people of God sharing in the vindication from persecution and subsequent reign and dominion, regardless of whether they were persecuted and martyred by the horn. Thus, one group is in view in Dan 7, but this includes all of God’s people, not just a select few during the final
persecution. Third, NT eschatology outside of Revelation suggests that all of God's people will be raised at Christ's coming, not just a select few. Paul particularly argues in 1 Thess 4:13-18 that the dead in Christ will have first dibs to the resurrection at Christ's return. Ladd thinks that John has two groups in mind and suggests, “This would accord with the biblical theology as a whole, which gives to the saints a share in the eschatological rule of Christ.” So then, while some of the grammar is ambiguous, the ascensive καὶ is much to be preferred here, though additive might also be possible. Thus, “even the souls of those beheaded” functions as another blow to Satan's failed attempt to destroy God's people and furthers his punishment during his thousand year incarceration.

Another key element of Rev 20:4 is the description of these thousand years for Christ and his people. In other words, this verse reveals the nature and characteristics of the millennium, that it entails resurrection and dominion for God's people. Much debate surrounds the meaning of the verb ἔζησαν (literally “they lived,” or contextually “they came alive again”). Some purport that this connotes spiritual, mystical resurrection with Christ in the present. However, this reading does not account for the immediate context of Rev 17:1-21:8 or even the unit itself of Rev 20:1-10. The context and unit are within an eschatological scenario which suggests future, eschatological resurrection. Furthermore, the following verses (20:5-6) explicate the meaning of ἔζησαν by employing the regular term for future bodily resurrection, namely, ἀνάστασις. Thus, a present, spiritual, mystical resurrection is not in view here, rather a future, bodily resurrection.

The final key feature of Rev 20:4 is the third use of the accusative of the extent of time, here with the thousand years: χίλια ἔτη. This signals not only that Christ and his resurrected people will reign for the entire extent of the one thousand years, but also connects the contrast between Satan's fate and the fate of God's people during the millennium. Thus, whereas Satan is imprisoned for the whole thousand years, Christ and his people reign for the whole thousand years. In addition, this thousand-year reign of God's people in Rev 20:4 runs in direct contrast to the 42-month reign allotted to the beast in Rev 13:5. This adds injury to insult to Satan's punishment and judgment since his beast and false prophet were only “allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months” (Rev 13:5). While the verbiage is not exact, they share the same semantic domain. Also, John uses the accusative for the extent of time in Rev 13:5: μήνας τεσσαράκοντα καὶ δύο (for the extent of forty two months). Regarding the literalness of these numbers, as noted above, numbers in the ancient world were often highly exaggerated for the rhetorical effect of hyperbole. The same is true here in Rev 20:4 and 13:5, and the point is clear: the beast and his dominion will last a measly 42 months (not very
long at all), whereas Christ and his dominion with his people will last for 1,000 years (enormously longer than a mere few months).\(^{50}\) Thus, the point is not literal time (years, months, days, hours, minutes, and seconds), but the disproportioned difference in the contrasted lengths; one being a drop in the temporal ocean, and the other an ocean in its own right. Thus, God rubs salt in Satan’s wound by giving authority to Christ and his people much longer than the beast. This not only serves to punish Satan even more, but also to encourage the churches of Asia Minor undergoing these persecutions. In essence, John has reconfigured Jesus’ words “for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short” (Matt 24:22) for his community in Asia Minor to encourage them that this suffering will soon pass; and as Paul says, “this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure” (2 Cor 4:17). Thus, Rev 20:4 serves to punish Satan further and to encourage these churches to persevere, for their vindication will soon arrive.

Revelation 20:5 is somewhat of an explicative parenthesis providing clarification for the rest of the dead besides God’s people. It also clarifies the nature of the main verb ἔζησαν from Rev 20:4 which appears again here in 20:5. With this same verb used in both locations, this marks a clear distinction between those in 20:4 and those here in 20:5. The former partake of the first resurrection (Αὕτη ἡ ἀνάστασις ἡ πρώτη; the latter the second death (ὁ δεύτερος θάνατος). Thus, the former do not experience the second death (20:6), and the latter do not experience the first resurrection (20:5). In light of this, the phrase ἀχρὶ τελεσθῇ τὰ χίλια ἔτη (“until the thousand years were ended”) implies a second resurrection, but this is a resurrection to eternal torment in the lake of fire (cf. Rev 20:10, 14-15).

Revelation 20:6 begins with a beatitude for those who share in the first resurrection; they are blessed (μακάριος) and holy (ἁγιός). Since the subject here is singular (ὁ ἐχων μέρος), the singular use of ἁγιός here as the predicate adjective might be understood as a substantive “saint.” Given the allusions to Dan 7, this would be appropriate. This might provide further evidence that two groups are in view in Rev 20:4, the saints and even the martyrs. Also, John clarifies that the second death has no authority over those who partake in the first resurrection. This reiterates that this is the final, future, bodily resurrection, not a present, mystical resurrection. Instead of the second death (ἀλλ’), the identity of these will be as priests of God and Christ (ἱερεῖς τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοῦ Χριστοῦ). This is appropriate given their newly declared blessing as holy saints (μακάριος καὶ ἅγιος). Their occupation then will be to rule and reign with Christ (βασιλεύσουσιν μετ’ αὐτοῦ) during this millennium. Also, the fourth and final use of the accusative of the extent of time occurs here (τὰ χίλια ἔτη). Thus, as was the extent of Satan’s imprisonment, so will be the extent of the saints’ reign with Christ for the entire thousand years.\(^{51}\) This further
confirms that one millennial period is in view here in Rev 20:1-6, though from two vantage points: one from Satan’s imprisonment (Rev 20:1-3) and the other from the resurrected saints’ vindication and reign with Christ (Rev 20:4-6).

In sum, Rev 20:4-6 describes the circumstances during the millennium from the vantage point of Christ and his people, that is, Christ reigns with his resurrected and vindicated people for the entire one thousand years, which further serves as Satan’s punishment and judgment.

3. The Ultimate Doom of Satan – Final Judgment (Rev 20:7-10)

Revelation 20:7-10 describes the circumstances after the millennium. The focus in Rev 20:7-10 thus shifts away from the vantage point of Christ and his saints (Rev 20:4-6) and back to the vantage point of Satan as in Rev 20:1-3. Thus, where Rev 20:3 left off with Satan’s preliminary judgment in prison, Rev 20:7 picks up to consummate that judgment later in Rev 20:10.

Revelation 20:7 begins with the temporal phrase Καὶ ὅταν. This indicates that John is now describing the circumstances after the millennium (“Now when the thousand years were ended”). All that is said about this is that Satan is released. Notice what it does not say. It does not say, “When the thousand years were ended, Jesus returned.” Nor does it say, “When the thousand years were ended, the church age also ended.” Moreover, it does not say, “When the nations had been completely evangelized during the millennium, Jesus came back.” The only thing described as being postmillennial (something coming after the millennium) is Satan’s release and ultimate doom, not the return of Christ and not the end of the church age. Moreover, Rev 20:3 specified that this will be only for a short time (μικρὸν χρόνον).

In Rev 20:8, Satan himself goes out to deceive the nations once more. He no longer has his beast or false prophet to do his bidding for him since Christ threw them into the lake of fire (Rev 19:20). Revelation 20:3 notes that this was the explicit purpose for Satan’s imprisonment: “so that he would deceive the nations no more.” Yet upon his release, Satan does what he does: he deceives. This demonstrates that Satan has not changed his ways. In fact, Satan is now worse gathering an even larger, innumerable army for the purpose of war (εἰς τὸν πόλεμον). In Rev 20:9, Satan does the same thing as in Rev 13:7, that is, “to make war on the saints and to conquer them.” However, there the beast performed this for Satan; here Satan must do it himself yet he is not allowed “to conquer them.” His innumerable army surrounds the fortified camp of the saints and their beloved city (perhaps the new Jerusalem), but God zaps them with fire from heaven. Note however that just the army was zapped, not Satan. His final judgment occurs in the following verse.
Revelation 20:10 climaxes this unit (20:1-10) by finally revealing the final judgment of Satan. In fact, this is the last mention of Satan (Devil, ancient serpent, dragon) in the Bible. At last, he receives his full and final judgment and is thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, “where the beast and false prophet were” already thrown in 19:20. This punishment is eternal torment, “day and night forever and ever.” At long last, the great adversary to God and his people is dealt with once and for all. There will no longer be an empire that strikes back, nor a Pharaoh who demands brick without straw, for ding dong the witch is dead. One nearly expects a hallelujah chorus between Rev 20:1-10 and 20:11-15. Yet John presses on to the next vision where the last enemy of humanity (death) is destroyed in 20:11-15. Nevertheless, Jesus’ words are finally realized here: “depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt 25:41).

Conclusions

In sum, Rev 20:1-10 says much less about the millennium than proponents of the various eschatological views would have us think. It is a short passage within a rapid sequence of progressive visions in Rev 19:11-21:8, and it functions there as the climax of Satan’s judgment replete with preliminary judgment via imprisonment (20:1-3), further insult via the vindication and exaltation of the saints and martyrs (20:4-6), and final judgment via eternal torment in the lake of fire and sulfur (20:7-10).

Amillennialism finds little exegetical support here for its claims that there is no future millennium either because the millennium represents the present church age (idealist) or the millennium was already fulfilled in the NT church (preterist). Given the future eschatological context and scenario of Rev 17:1-21:8, amillennialism does not account for this. Furthermore, given the rapid progression and sequence of the visions in 19:11-21:8, again amillennialism does not account for this. Rather, amillennialism lifts Rev 20:1-10 out of its literary and historical contexts and analyzes the passage without considering these vital contextual components. Concerning the literary context, amillennialism views the third vision of Rev 17:1-21:8 with its sequence of visions in 19:11-21:8 as unrelated visions, even though the text suggests a progressive sequence of visions intricately connected by the progressive judgment upon God’s enemies: from Babylon (Rev 17:1-18:24), to the beast and false prophet (Rev 19:11-21), to Satan (Rev 20:1-10), to the rest of the dead and even Death and Hades (Rev 20:11-15). Concerning the historical context, amillennialism provides nothing for the churches in Asia Minor who were experiencing the intense persecution of Rome under Domitian, not a victorious church age where Satan’s minions had already been destroyed and Satan himself
locked and bound. Instead, the churches of Asia Minor were experiencing what Peter describes as Satan prowling around like a roaring lion, “looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8); hence the numerous calls to perseverance and faithfulness amid persecution and martyrdom throughout Revelation. Thus, amillennialism would be (1) totally foreign and (2) entirely unhelpful to the recipients of Revelation. As such, amillennialism does not adequately account for the exegetical details of Rev 20:1-10.

Postmillennialism also finds little exegetical support here. Given that the visions of 17:1-21:8 are a progressive sequence of judgment against God’s enemies and given that the coming of Christ occurs in the vision directly before Rev 20:1-10 in Rev 19:11-21 where he destroys the beast and false prophet, postmillennialism is shattered. The only thing mentioned in Revelation that comes after the millennium is Satan’s release, final deception of the nations, and final judgment in the lake of fire and sulfur (Rev 20:7-10). This is the only thing that can be spoken of as postmillennial in Revelation. Furthermore, the nature and activity of the millennium described in Rev 20:1-10 is not that of world evangelization or Christianization. Rather it consists of Satan’s punishment, the bodily resurrection of God’s people (even the martyrs), and Christ’s reign with his bodily resurrected people. Considering NT eschatology, postmillennialism mistakes the cause of the millennium (the evangelization of the world) for the nature of the millennium. Put another way in Jesus’ words, the good news being preached to the whole world will cause the end to come (Matt 24:14), and the end will consist of the fullness of Christ’s reign and kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Thus, the evangelization of the world is preparatory for the reign of Christ, not the reign of Christ itself. Moreover, Rev 20:4-6 suggests a future, eschatological, bodily resurrection for God’s people during the millennium, not a spiritual, mystical resurrection in the heavenly realms. Thus, postmillennialism does not align with an exegetical reading of Rev 20:1-10.

 Dispensational premillennialism is a theological and biblical disgrace which has no footing whatsoever in exegesis of the Bible. Its one strength is that it affirms the exegetical basis of premillennialism. However, to its shame, it inserts rapture theology into the mix. This has already been thoroughly and sufficiently refuted by Witherington in The Problem with Evangelical Theology and thus it will receive no further attention here.

In contrast to the other three views, historic premillennialism is the only millennial view that bears any exegetical resemblance to Rev 20:1-10. Considering the literary context, it understands the visions of 19:11-21:8 as a progressive sequence suggesting that Christ returns before the millennium thus inaugurating it
(19:11-21 then 20:1-10). It also affirms the future bodily resurrection of the saints from Rev 20:4-6. Considering the historical context, historical premillennialism is intelligible and helpful for the churches of Asia Minor in that it views the millennium as vindication for their suffering under Satan’s beast and false prophet. Also, since it affirms the literal and future thousand years, it provides hope for the churches of Asia Minor that their present and short (42 months) sufferings under the reign of the beast are not worthy of comparison to “the glory about to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18). It encourages the original recipients of Revelation to continue in keeping the words of the prophecy by overcoming, persevering, and being faithful to Christ (Rev 1:3; 22:7). Not only so, but historic premillennialism is the earliest interpretation of Rev 20:1-10 by the early church. Although Origen (A.D. 185-254) and Augustine (A.D. 354-430) later rejected historic premillennialism by developing amillennialism, second century church fathers such as Papias (ca. A.D. 70-155), the Epistle of Barnabas (ca. A.D. 70-150), Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165), Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 130-202), and Tertullian (ca. A.D. 155-220) all shared this premillennial view.59

So then, amillennialism (4th century), postmillennialism (18th century), and dispensational premillennialism (19th century) are all later theological developments that have very little grounding in an exegetical reading of Rev 20:1-10. Historic premillennialism (2nd century), however, is both exegetically grounded in Rev 20:1-10 and also represents the earliest interpretation of Rev 20:1-10 by the early church. For these reasons, historic premillennialism is much to be preferred.

The Problem with Wesley’s Postmillennialism

But what exactly was John Wesley’s view of the millennium? This is an extremely challenging task since (1) Wesley’s view on the millennium developed throughout his lifetime, (2) Wesley did not often mention or focus upon the millennium, and (3) there has been a long and heated debate among Wesleyans as to whether he was postmillennial or premillennial (dispensational). It is beyond the scope of this essay to survey this debate. Others have done so, and thus I will simply accept the current consensus among Wesleyan scholars that Wesley was ultimately a postmillennialist.60

In his The Problem with Evangelical Theology, Ben Witherington III uniquely and rightly critiques the exegetical foundations of the five primary Evangelical traditions: Lutheranism, Calvinism, Dispensationalism, Wesleyanism, and Pentecostalism. However, as already noted, Witherington grants Wesley exegetical immunity on his postmillennial views, letting it slide even though he admits that postmillennialism is not based upon an exegetical reading of Scripture. This is due to the fact that he does not want to sass his own mother since the first words out
of his mouth were “John Wesley.” Although he does indeed critique the Wesleyan tradition at points, by and large he argues that there are “fewer weaknesses in the Arminian approach to biblical texts than in various other systems of approach.” While I largely agree with this assessment, Witherington does not take his critique of Wesley’s postmillennialism far enough. In fact, he admits that “The critique I am about to offer has more to do with modern Arminianism than with John Wesley’s own theology.” The problem with this is that John Wesley had exegetical and theological problems of his own. As we shall see, Wesley’s postmillennial view has a plethora of exegetical and theological problems. So if we are going to scrutinize other traditions, we must scrutinize our own all the more in keeping the words of Jesus: “first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye” (Matt 7:5). Thus, the following will be an attempt to take the postmillennial speck out of our Wesleyan eye by offering a corrective to Wesley’s postmillennialism based upon the above exegesis of Rev 20:1-10. If we truly desire to be *homo unius libri* like Wesley and uphold *sola Scriptura* with the other Reformers, then we should hold dear our exegesis of Scripture more than our beloved tradition, and allow Scripture to sanctify entirely our beloved tradition. Let us now take a closer look at Wesley’s postmillennialism found in his *Explanatory Notes* on Revelation, and see why it is so problematic.

*Wesley’s Explanatory Notes on Revelation 20:1-10*

For much of his life, Wesley found the book of Revelation puzzling, particularly the middle portions of Rev 4—20. It was not until he read Johann Bengel’s work that he discovered some insight for himself. He says, the intermediate parts I did not study at all for many years: as utterly despairing of understanding them, after the fruitless attempts of so many wise and good men; and perhaps I should have lived and died in this sentiment, had I not seen the works of the great Bengelius. But these revived my hopes of understanding even the prophecies of this book: at least many of them in some good degree.

Wesley admits that he largely follows Bengel verbatim in his notes, although he still offers his own insights from a practical and theological standpoint at times:

All I can do is, partly to translate, partly abridge the most necessary of his observations, allowing myself the liberty to alter some of them, and to add a few notes where he is not full. His text, it may be observed, I have taken almost throughout, which I apprehend he has abundantly defended.
It is here in his notes on Rev 20:1-10 where Wesley most explicitly expounds his view of the millennium. While the following examination will not be exhaustive, it will touch upon each of Wesley’s major exegetical points.

Concerning the immediate context of Rev 17:1-21:8, Wesley notes that Rev 17:1 has the same introduction as Rev 21:9 and thinks that this signals a contrast between “the great whore” and “the wife of the Lamb.” He says that this same introduction signals the relationship “in token of the exact opposition between them.” Concerning Rev 21:9, he comments, “The same angel had before showed him Babylon, chap. xvii, 1, which is directly opposed to the New Jerusalem.” Thus, Wesley rightly understands that Rev 17:1-21:8 is a clearly defined major unit (third vision) contrasted to the next major unit beginning in Rev 21:9.

Concerning Rev 20:2, Wesley rightly notes that the millennium will come after the times of the beast. As such, he strongly argues for an eschatological sequence of events, namely, that the whole book represents “one continued chain of events.” Furthermore, he rightly observes the progressive sequence of Satan’s downfall: “Now Satan’s accusing the saints in heaven, his rage on earth, his imprisonment in the abyss, his seducing Gog and Magog, and being cast into the lake of fire, evidently succeed each other.” Concerning the character of Satan’s imprisonment, he states,

These thousand years bring a new, full, and lasting immunity from all outward and inward evils, (the authors of which are now removed,) and an affluence of all blessings. But such a time the church has never yet seen. Therefore it is still to come.

Thus, he correctly identifies this as future, not a present millennium contra amillennialism.

Concerning Rev 20:3, Wesley here expresses humility in his interpretation: “How far these expressions are to be taken literally, how far figuratively only, who can tell?” Oddly, however, Wesley does not carefully apply the sequence of events stratum which he strongly supported in the previous verse. He says, “Quickly [Satan] will be bound: when he is loosed again, the martyrs will live and reign with Christ. Then follows his coming in glory, the new heaven, new earth, and new Jerusalem.” Wesley’s sequencing however does not follow the order of Rev 19:11-21:8. The sequence in Revelation places the coming of Christ before the millennium and the loosing of Satan after the millennial reign of the saints: the return of Christ defeats the beast and false prophet (Rev 19:11-21); 1,000 year imprisonment of Satan and resurrection reign of saints with Christ (Rev 20:1-6); release and final judgment of
Satan (Rev 20:7-10); final judgment and defeat of Death and Hades (Rev 20:11-15); the new heaven, new earth, and new Jerusalem (Rev 21:1-8). If the sequence of events should be followed, then Wesley himself does not do so here. Thus, Wesley rightly acknowledges the importance of the sequencing of Rev 19:11-21:8, but fails to apply it properly for several reasons. First, he says that the martyrs will live and reign when Satan is loosed. However, according to Rev 20:4-6, this happens concurrently with Satan’s imprisonment in Rev 20:1-3. The real problem is that Wesley sees two millennia here: a first thousand year imprisonment of Satan, and a second thousand year reign of the saints with Christ following the imprisonment of Satan. This seems to be a hyper-literalism: 1,000 years in Rev 20:1-3 and another 1,000 years in Rev 20:4-6. However, Rev 20:1-6 encompasses one millennium with two vantage points: from Satan’s perspective (Rev 20:1-3) and from the saints’ perspective (Rev 20:4-6). These are juxtaposed for contrast, not for indicating two separate millennia. Furthermore, the phrase “when Satan is loosed” occurs in Rev 20:7 which is after Rev 20:4-6 dealing with the resurrection and reign of the saints. Thus, Rev 20:7-10 deals with those circumstances after the one millennium of Rev 20:1-6. Second, Wesley specifically claims that Christ returns after Satan is bound and later loosed, and after the reign with the saints. However, there is no mention or allusion to the return of Christ in Rev 20:1-21:8. The only place that Christ’s return is specifically mentioned is in Rev 19:11-21, and Wesley himself identifies the warrior there as Christ. Then follows the millennium (Rev 20:1-6), the release and final defeat of Satan (Rev 20:7-10), the final judgment and defeat of Death and Hades (Rev 20:11-15), and the new creation (Rev 21:1-8). The return of Christ thus inaugurates all these other consummative eschatological events which follow. Thus, if we take seriously the sequencing, then the return of Christ is before the millennium (premillennial), and the release and final judgment of Satan is after the millennium (the only thing postmillennial in Revelation).

Concerning Rev 20:4, Wesley rightly notes the two groups mentioned here. He says, “Who, and how many, these are, is not said. But they are distinguished from the souls or persons mentioned immediately after; and from the saints already raised.” He also rightly notes that this is the future bodily resurrection when he comments on ἔζησαν saying, “Their souls and bodies being re-united.” However, Wesley oddly locates this resurrection and reign with Christ in heaven, not on earth. The problem with this lies not with explicit details but implicit ones. As noted above, contextual factors locate this reign upon the earth, not in heaven.

Indeed, the most alarming nuance of Wesley’s postmillennialism is that he proposes two separate millennia: “It must be observed, that two distinct thousand
years are mentioned throughout this whole passage.” This is quite an anomaly in
the history of interpretation on this passage. It is clear from an exegetical reading
of Rev 20:1-10 that in fact only one millennium is in view here, though from two
vantage points, Satan’s in Rev 20:1-3 and the saints’ in Rev 20:4-6. However, these
two distinct millennia allow Wesley to interpret this passage from a postmillennial
perspective. He suggests that the first millennium (Satan’s imprisonment – Rev
20:1-3) occurs before the second millennium (resurrection and reign of saints with
Christ – Rev 20:4-6). Chronologically, the first millennium thus ends before the
end of human history, whereas the second millennium begins sometime before
the end of history and ends after it with the general resurrection. Moreover, he
says that the church will flourish during the first millennium in fulfillment of Rev
10:7 when the gospel will spread all throughout the world and be Christianized. In
contrast, he says that “men on earth will be careless and secure” during the second
millennium when the saints reign with Christ in heaven. Christ, then, returns after
all of this. This is problematic for several reasons. First and foremost, there is only
one millennium in Rev 20:1-6, not two. If the context was not clear enough, Rev
20:7 clarifies even more with the anaphoric use of the definite τὰ χίλια article ἔτη.
Second, these visions in Rev 19:11-21:8 are future eschatological events and assume
the end of history. For Wesley to suggest that the first millennium includes time
prior to the end of history flies in the face of the consummative, eschatological
nature of this passage. If Rev 19:11-21:8 is not dealing with the actual end of history
(eschatological), then I do not know what is. Third, Rev 20:1-3 does not mention the
church or its flourishing at all. While it does make explicit that deception will cease
during the millennium, that therefore does not mean that it is the church growing
as they preach the gospel to the whole world prior to the end of all things. Wesley
is reading quite a bit extra into these verses in this regard. Fourth, Rev 20:4-6 says
nothing about the negative condition of people during the “second” millennium.
Rather, the implication is positive, since the nations will be subdued under Christ’s
leadership and law with the saints. Fifth, as noted above, the context suggests that
the millennium will occur on the earth, not in heaven as Wesley purports. Even
if one were to grant Wesley the benefit of the doubt concerning the two distinct
millennia, his explanation of these two passages (20:1-3; 4-6) is far from the details
of the text and in fact brings many additions which are not present in the text.

Concerning Rev 20:5, Wesley asserts here that, “both the imprisonment of Satan and his
loosing are transacted in the invisible world,” and thus, “neither the beginning of the first, nor of the second thousand, will be known to the men upon earth.” This is quite a strange notion that goes far beyond the text of Rev
20:5. Moreover, other NT eschatological passages would indicate that the return of
Christ (Rev 19:11-21) and other eschatological events would be visible and known to all, not some secret hidden from humanity (Matt 24:27-31). Wesley claims, “By observing these two distinct thousand years, many difficulties are avoided.” However, from an exegetical standpoint, they actually create more difficulties than solve.

Concerning Rev 20:7, Wesley asserts that the first resurrection will begin when Satan is loosed: “at the loosing of Satan, the saints begin to reign with Christ.” No such thing is in the text of Rev 20:1-10 however. Satan’s imprisonment and the saints’ reign occur during the same millennium. Wesley goes so far as to translate Rev 20:7 as, “And when the former thousand years are fulfilled.” There is no “former” in the text. In fact, the use of the definite article here is anaphoric, pointing back to the thousand years discussed in Rev 20:1-6.

Conclusions

In sum, while Wesley certainly had several things right about the exegesis of Rev 20:1-10, he nevertheless got many important matters wrong. The largest mistake he makes is following Bengel’s dual millennium which is a gross misinterpretation of the text of Rev 20:1-10 and an anomaly in the history of interpretation. In all fairness, he does depend upon one of the leading Bible scholars of his time, yet Bengel’s interpretation of Revelation has many red flags, namely, his prognostications and anomalous interpretation of the millennium. Now given the interpretive difficulties and controversies surrounding Revelation and the millennium particularly, it is shocking that Wesley did not defer to the early church’s interpretation of historic premillennialism. This was the view of the early Greek fathers whom Wesley greatly cherished, highly revered, and was intimately acquainted with. Yet he all but ignores them here. Thus, this exegetical mistake and abandonment of the early church allows for Wesley to insert his own 18th century experience of optimism about the spread of Christianity and the flourishing of the church into this passage. This postmillennial notion however would have been entirely foreign to the original recipients of Revelation. Their experience was one of the prostitute Babylon covering the earth with her fornications and being drunk with the blood of the saints (Rev 17:1-6), not of Christianity flourishing and spreading like wild fire. This book was written to an oppressed Christianity when Rome (Domitian) was suppressing their witness by martyrdom and persecution. Furthermore, Revelation does not depict the world being Christianized, rather the whole world joins forces with God’s enemies against God and his people. Optimism then for the churches of Asia Minor lies not in some eschatological period when the
world will be Christianized prior to the return of Christ, rather its hope is the second coming of Jesus who will come soon (Rev 22:7, 12) to defeat the oppressive beast and false prophet (Rev 19:11-21), and to judge Satan for his harsh treatment of God’s people (Rev 20:1-10). The church will flourish when Christ returns bringing his bride her resurrection and vindication. In other words, the church’s hope is, “See, I am coming soon!” (Rev 22:7, 12), not “You are going to Christianize the entire world.” The coming of Christ inaugurates the overthrow of the beast (Rev 19:11-21) and the judgment of Satan (Rev 20:1-10), thus vindicating his oppressed and persecuted people. If Wesley had consistently applied the progressive sequence which he so contends for, he would have seen that Christ’s return (Rev 19:11-21) occurs before the millennium (Rev 20:1-10) in the sequence of Rev 19:11-21:8, and thus that postmillennialism is not based upon Scripture.

Overall, a misreading of Scripture, an abandonment of the early church’s position, and Wesley’s experience of 18th century optimism and revivalism contributed to his postmillennial view. In his defense, Wesley was a product of his environment as all are, and his desire was certainly not to twist or misinterpret Scripture. Furthermore, he should be commended for even attempting to interpret Revelation, since (1) he admits that he did not understand it all that clearly, and (2) not even John Calvin wrote a commentary on Revelation. Also, he should be commended for viewing the grace of God as so immense that it could actually transform the entire world for a millennium prior to Christ’s return. This demonstrates a great amount of faith in God and his own passion to see God’s salvation in Christ come to the whole world. Such would truly be a miracle and we welcome such a move of God. However, we recognize that such an outpouring of grace and growth of the church would not be a fulfillment of Rev 20:1-10.

Historic Premillennialism for 21st Century Wesleyanism

So where do we go from here? If Wesley’s postmillennial interpretation of Rev 20:1-10 was mistaken, what does this mean for Wesleyans today, and how should we move forward both in theology and missions?

Implications for Wesleyan Theology

First, regarding theology, massive changes, both positive and negative, have occurred in the world since the optimism of the 18th century. On the one hand, there have been great advances in medicine, engineering, architecture, technology, and so forth. On the other hand, there have been severe digressions in morality and worldview. Overall, the paradigm has shifted from optimism (18th century) to pessimism (20th century onward) primarily because of the wreckage from
the world wars of the 20th century. In other words, the optimism which spurred postmillennialism (not exegesis or tradition) was utterly shattered by the 19th and especially 20th centuries. Tenney comments,

Apart from lack of Scriptural support for this interpretation, its optimism suffered a severe blow with the opening of the first world war in 1914…the even bloodier second world war of 1939-1945 destroyed the illusion of inevitable progress and of the gradual conquest of the world by the gospel.

Postmillennialism’s optimism did not, cannot, and should not survive in the 21st century and onward. Our experience today as 21st century people tells us that things in the world have gotten and are getting worse. The trend of morality has been in strong decline for decades. The evening news is filled with accounts of murder, rape, abuse, fraud, embezzlement, theft, and political division and upheaval. Also, the rise of postmodernism has instilled a deep mistrust of authority, mass skepticism and cynicism, unchecked pluralism, narcissism, and extreme individualism today. The world is not becoming a better place, and it most certainly is not being Christianized. If anything, it is moving in the opposite direction of Christianization. Ironically, postmillennialism does not comport with our post-world war, postmodern, or post-Christian era of the 21st century. In that vein, Tenney states,

The old optimism has been eclipsed by a hopelessness that is quite its opposite, and the postmillennial concept of a world rapidly on its way to realizing the kingdom of God as the latter is defined in the New Testament has proved illusory. One does not have to be an incurable pessimist to admit that the world is not becoming progressively better, nor must he renounce all optimism if he believes that the only remedy lies in the intervention of God according to the program which He has provided.

Rightly so. Now this does not therefore mean that all hope and optimism are abandoned, rather that the center of our optimism must shift from ourselves building the millennial kingdom here and now (postmillennialism) to Jesus bringing the millennial kingdom at his second coming (historic premillennialism). While the 21st century may be filled with uncertainty, skepticism, and narcissism (pessimism), the church (Wesleyans included) must continually hold out its hope to the world (optimism) that Jesus will come again to establish his millennial kingdom on earth as it is in heaven and vindicate his people from the wiles of the devil. This is the hope that the 21st century needs, and the reminder that the church needs, Wesleyans included. It is too farfetched for 21st century Christians to put that much trust
in humanity to sustain something so good (Christ’s reign) on earth for an entire millennium. Yet the almighty God through Christ can bring about such a good thing, which is in fact what Scripture (Rev 17:1-21:8) and tradition (early church) attests to anyways. Thus, Wesleyans (and the church universal) should abandon postmillennialism altogether, because it is not rooted in Scripture, tradition, reason, or our experience as 21st century people.

The alternative then is historic premillennialism since it is rooted in exegesis of Scripture (Rev 20:1-10), the earliest church tradition on the millennium (2nd century), reason, and our experience in the 21st century. Its pessimism bears a much closer resemblance to the world of the 21st century, although it is not merely pessimistic. While it admits the reality that the world is not right and getting worse (pessimism), it nevertheless holds the hope that Jesus’ coming which inaugurates the millennium and beyond will right all wrongs and renew all things (optimism). Historic premillennialism thus accounts for the “already, not yet” nature of the kingdom of God, and views the pessimism-optimism issue as both-and instead of either-or. For these reasons, Wesleyan theology therefore must abandon postmillennialism and embrace historic premillennialism in the 21st century and onward.

**Implications for Wesleyan Missions**

Second, regarding missions, postmillennialism is not a viable theology to base our mission work on. On the surface, it might be disappointing and even difficult for Wesleyan missionaries to give up postmillennialism since its emphasis upon evangelism was so intricate to the missionary movements of the past few centuries. But solid theology must undergird the church’s mission and ministry to the world. What then does historic premillennialism mean for Wesleyan missions today? First, historic premillennialism takes the weight of the world off missionaries which postmillennialism has set upon them. In other words, it is not up to missionaries to accomplish the insurmountable task of building the kingdom of God upon earth, rather Christ will do that at his second coming. Second, historic premillennialism offers hope and understanding to 21st century missionaries who do not see the optimistic plethora of revivals which the 18th and 19th centuries saw. Postmillennialism in a post-world war, postmodern, post-Christian age would certainly create deep discouragement to missionaries of the 21st century. Historic premillennialism however has a realist approach which understands that the world will not be Christianized, though it will be evangelized (Matt 24:14). Third, historic premillennialism does not mean that missions and evangelism should be abandoned. After all, it was faithfulness to proclaim the testimony of Jesus and word of God
which landed John on the island of Patmos in the first place (Rev 1:2, 9). Missions led him to encounter the visions of Revelation, including the millennium of Rev 20:1-10. The work of the gospel is still to be done, although opposition to it may increase, even the kind experienced by the recipients of Revelation. Furthermore, historic premillennialism affirms Jesus’ saying in Matt 24:14 that the gospel of the kingdom must be preached in the whole world, and then the end will come. Evangelism and missions, then, are the precursor to the coming of Christ and his millennial kingdom, not the millennium itself as postmillennialism purports. Thus, historic premillennialism should fuel missions and evangelism.

To say the least, historic premillennialism and even eschatology in general is vitally important to missions. It is as C. S. Lewis once famously said,

If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next…It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.

So then, I contend that historic premillennialism is the only viable path forward for Wesleyan theology and missions in the 21st century.

Conclusion

So what is the problem with Wesley’s postmillennialism? It is not supported by an exegetical reading of Rev 20:1-10 (Scripture); it is not rooted in the early church (tradition); and it is largely based upon the optimism and revivalism of the 18th century which was all but shattered by the 20th century (experience). For Wesleyans who strive to uphold Scripture as the norming norm along with tradition, reason, and experience, it is vital that we abandon Wesley’s postmillennialism since it aligns with none of these. Rather, Wesleyans should embrace historic premillennialism since it is the only viable option that does exegetical justice to Rev 20:1-10, takes seriously the early church’s view, and accords with our experience in the 21st century. This was the faith of the first and second century churches (NT and apostolic fathers), and it should also be ours today.

End Notes

1 H. Ray Dunning states, “Wesleyan scholars have been noticeably silent for several decades on the subject of last things, known as eschatology” (7, emphasis original). H. Ray Dunning, ed., The Second Coming: A Wesleyan Approach to the Doctrine of Last Things (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1995). Also, see how little space


4 Ben Witherington III, The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism, Wesleyanism, and Pentecostalism (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2016), 197. Witherington says, “Wesley was not in error in what he affirmed about the present dominion, and except for a brief flirtation with postmillennialism in the sermon ‘On the General Spread of the Gospel,’ he was by and large right in his analysis of the future eschatology of the NT” (197). Furthermore, where he previously discusses this sermon, Witherington does not offer a corrective (188-89). There he only describes his view, but does not critically assess it or test its exegetical foundations. This essay will serve to offer the corrective that Witherington refrained from giving. This is a general trend of the book, that he does not scrutinize Wesleyanism nearly as much as he does the other traditions. This is primarily because he views Wesley’s theology as better grounded exegetically than the other traditions. Yet Wesley’s postmillennialism is not exegetically grounded as demonstrated below. In all fairness, it is likely that Witherington did not offer a full-scale critique of this here because many view the millennium as non-essential anyway. It certainly was not a large emphasis of Wesley’s own theology. Nevertheless, this essay will further Witherington’s testing of the exegetical foundations of Evangelical theology particularly Wesley’s postmillennial theology.


6 Dunning, Second Coming, 81-185. Part II entitled Historical Studies is saturated with the historical development of the doctrine of the millennium.

7 David E. Aune identifies Καὶ εἶδον in Rev 19:11, 17; 20:1, 4, 12; 21:1 as functioning to introduce “a new vision narrative;” David E. Aune, Revelation 1-5 (WBC 52A; Dallas: Word Books, 1997), 338. Also, he identifies Καὶ εἶδον in Rev 19:19 and 21:2 as functioning to introduce “a major scene within a continuing vision narrative;” Aune, Revelation 1-5, 338. Contra Aune, it does not seem that the use of Καὶ εἶδον in Rev 20:4 marks a completely new vision, but rather a new visionary development within the larger unit of Rev 20:1-10. While Aune identifies the pericope as Rev 20:1-10 with three subunits (20:1-3, 4-6, 7-10), he inconsistently argues then that Καὶ εἶδον in Rev 20:4 introduces one of these new visions. Again, it seems more appropriate to identify Καὶ εἶδον in Rev 20:4 as functioning to introduce “a major scene within a continuing vision narrative,” that is, introducing
a major scene (the reigning Christ and his resurrected people) within the continuing vision narrative (the judgment of Satan – Rev 20:1-3, 7-10). In other words, the theme of Satan’s demise that began in Rev 20:1-3 resumes in Rev 20:7-10. So then, Καὶ εἶδον in Rev 20:4 does not introduce an entirely new vision narrative, but adds a major scene within the continuing narrative framework of Rev 20:1-10. In a way, this new major scene in Rev 20:4-6 possibly interrupts or adds to the larger narrative (Rev 20:1-10). But it does not introduce an entirely new vision narrative. Also, Aune did not account for Καὶ εἶδον in Rev 20:11, which introduces a new vision narrative.

8 Again, even though Καὶ εἶδον occurs amid this passage in Rev 20:4, the millennium remains the sustained theme throughout Rev 20:1-10.

9 George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 34; Craig S. Keener, *Revelation: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 98; Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 37–39; Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament: The General Epistles and The Revelation of John* (Vol. VI; Nashville: Broadman, 1933), 294; and Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 56. Contra Aune, G. K. Beale, and Robert Mounce; Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 81-82; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 152-70, 216; and Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 105. Mounce notes the three phrases, but argues that the latter two expand the first. Aune ignores this because many commentators who support this view do so in an overly simplistic and rigid way. They argue that each section only speaks of either the past, present, or future. Thus, they fail to account for the past within the future section (e.g. Rev 12) and for the future within the present section (e.g. Rev 2-3). To make this issue either-or is detrimental. Rather than being rigid on either side of this debate, it seems more likely that “what you have seen” refers primarily to the past, “what is” primarily to the present, and “what is going to happen” primarily to the future. This allows for mixing of the temporal tenses at times while also acknowledging the clear threefold structure that the author has laid within the text itself.

10 Many futurists (primarily dispensationalists) take this rigidly. In response, most scholars reject this threefold structure because they do not wish to be associated with dispensationalism. Both approaches are misguided. The structure is observable in the text; what it means is another thing entirely. Dispensationalists have misconstrued the meaning of this structure with their overly literalistic hermeneutic. Thus, I contend that this threefold structure related to chronology should not be seen with such rigidity and given more flexibility.


12 Particularly those who hold a futurist view of Revelation.

13 For example, in Rev 1:16, John says, “In his right hand he held seven stars.” Also, in Rev 1:13, he says, “in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man.” These two features connect to the letter to the Ephesians in Rev 2:1, which says, “These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.” The connections between
the vision of Christ in Rev 1:9-20 and the descriptions of Christ in Rev 2—3 are
numerous.

14 For example, in Rev 2:11, Jesus says, “Whoever conquers will not be
harmed by the second death.” Later in Rev 20:6, it says, “Over these the second
death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will
reign with him a thousand years.” Again, the connections between these sections are
numerous. Moreover, this is further evidence that the ambiguous “they” of Rev 20:4a is not
simply the beheaded martyrs, but all who overcome (i.e. those in the seven churches
who obey Jesus’ exhortations from Rev 2—3), even those who were and will not be
beheaded.

15 The major purpose of Revelation is stated in Rev 1:1, that is, “to show
[purpose infinitive] his servants what must happen quickly” (δεῖξαι τοῖς δούλοις
 αὐτοῦ ὃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάξει). This is arguably the thesis statement of Revelation,
since the book opens with this phrase and the final, fourth vision (Rev 21:9—22:7)
ends with this verbatim phrase in 22:6 as it transitions to the epilogue (22:8-21).
Mounce, Revelation, 64; Robertson, Word Pictures, 283. Unfortunately, commentators
focus far too much upon the temporal phrase ἐν τάξει instead of δεῖξαι that
indicates the book’s entire purpose. Ladd, Revelation, 21-23; Morris, Revelation, 45;
Keener, Revelation, 54.

16 Tenney, Revelation, 33.

17 Ladd, Revelation, 14.

18 This is adapted from Ladd and Tenney; Ladd, Revelation, 15-17; Tenney,
Revelation, 33. The only emendation of these here is where the fourth vision ends. I
argue that it ends at Rev 22:7 that is a recapitulation of the opening blessing in Rev
1:3. They, however, see Rev 22:6 opening a new section. However, Rev 1:1-3 and
22:6-7 form an inclusio with the phrase ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάξει (1:1; 22:6) and the
repeated blessing for the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book
(1:3; 22:7). Thus, Rev 22:6 does not open a new section, but closes one that already
began in a similar fashion in Rev 1:1-3. Furthermore, Rev 22:8 is much more of
an official opening because it (1) identifies the author John again, and (2) ceases
from major apocalyptic visions via angelic mediators. Revelation 22:8 is clearly the
beginning of the epilogue.

19 Ben Witherington III, Revelation (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 2003), 245.

20 Witherington, Revelation, 245. In fact, the rise of amillennialism,
postmillennialism, and dispensational premillennialism came about by extracting
the millennium in Rev 20:1-10 from its immediate context. Only historic
premillennialism takes seriously Rev 20:1-10 within its own immediate literary
context.

21 Tenney, Revelation, 91.

22 In comparison to the two previous visions, Tenney says, “The third
vision of Revelation...is more definite in its sequence of events, with fewer
digressions from the main line of thought.” Tenney, Revelation, 82.

24 See RSV, NRSV, ESV, NLT, NET, NKJV, CEB. Some however will translate it as “and” or leave it untranslated: NIV, ASV, NASB, KJV.

25 Tenney notes, “The remainder of the vision from 19:11 through 21:8 describes a rapid succession of events…There is a close unity in the sequence of these events, irrespective of whether or not they must be regarded as a series of occurrences rather than as differing or overlapping pictures of the same thing. Beginning with the appearing of Christ at the end of the age to take His throne and to vindicate the saints, they follow through to the final judgment of the dead and to the establishment of God’s Paradise, which is described in detail in the closing vision of the book.” Tenney, *Revelation*, 88-89.

26 Witherington says, “In a sense 20.1-3 is the climax of the material in Rev. 19, for here the third member of the unholy trinity, the Devil, is finally dealt with, as the false prophet and the Beast were in Rev. 19.1-20.3.” Witherington, *Revelation*, 274.

27 Deut 32:35; Rom 12:19; Heb 10:30.


29 Concerning the contrast, Ladd says, “John intends a deliberate contrast between the harlot city of the beast and the heavenly city of God’s dwelling.” Ladd, *Revelation*, 280. Concerning the climax, Tenney says, “The vision of the Eternal City which consummates the prophecy of Revelation is the counterpart and opposite of the third vision. Between the two are a number of clear contrasts…This last vision of Revelation is intended to portray the eternal city as fully as human language can do it.” Tenney, *Revelation*, 91.

30 Keener says, “There is little doubt that Revelation 20 is the most debated chapter in this book.” Keener, *Revelation*, 463. Witherington says, “Certainly Rev. 20 is the most controverted portion of the book of Revelation.” Witherington, *Revelation*, 245. Ladd says, “The interpretation of this chapter has been a source of great debate and even conflict in the church. Systems of eschatology have often been identified in terms of the way they treat the question of the millennium.” Ladd, *Revelation*, 259.

31 Keener rightly suggests, “God does not dispense his blessing based on our views about the end time, and that we ought to learn from his example a lesson about charity toward those who hold other views on this matter.” Keener, *Revelation*, 473. Later, he writes, “But we can point out the reasons why Bible-believing Christians have come to different convictions on the matter and invite us to greater charity toward others who differ.” Keener, *Revelation*, 477.


33 A similar construction occurs in Rev 20:4 regarding “the souls of the beheaded” (τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν πεπελεκισμένων), which is possibly the implied subject
of the main verbs there. However, as argued below, most likely two groups are in view in Rev 20:4-6.

34 Tenney, Revelation, 82.


36 Further evidence of this comes from Rev 17:3, which locates vision three (17:1—21:8) “in the wilderness.” Tenney, *Revelation*, 82. Also, the nations are still intact during and after the millennium (20:3, 8). The location is not explicit, but can be deduced through implication.

37 Witherington also notes that the rest of the NT depicts Satan as alive and well during this present evil age. Witherington, *Revelation*, 247.

38 Tobit 8:3; T. Levi 18:12.


41 See below my further comments on Rev 20:4 regarding this discussion.

42 As noted below, the only thing revealed about what happens after the millennium is Satan’s release and final judgment (20:3, 7-10). Thus, the only thing postmillennial in Revelation is Satan’s release and final judgment; there is no talk of Christ’s return after the millennium nor of the world being evangelized during the millennium.

43 This assumes either an implied εἶδον or that τὰς ψυχὰς is the second accusative direct object of the main verb εἶδον.


45 See MSS 1006, 1841, 2050 with a minor difference, a few miniscule MSS other than the Majority text (p6), the IX century OL ar, and the VIII century father Beatus of Liebana. E. Nestle and K. Aland et al., eds, *Novum Testamentum Graecum* (27th ed. 1993; Repr., Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006).

46 “For the Lord himself with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, *and the dead in Christ will rise first*” (1 Thess 4:16; emphasis added). Also, he says in 1 Cor 15:23-26, “But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”
Ladd, Revelation, 263.

Whether it is spiritual or bodily resurrection. Here are those who argue that it is spiritual: Mulholland, Revelation, 309-10; Morris, Revelation, 247; Beale, Revelation, 1000-1021. Here are those who argue it is bodily, physical resurrection: Mounce, Revelation, 356; Ladd, Revelation, 265-66; Robertson, Word Pictures, 459; Keener, Revelation, 464; Aune, Revelation 17-22, 1089; Witherington, Revelation, 249; Ben Witherington III, Revelation and the End Times (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 92-95. Evidence is much stronger for the latter.

Note also the monadic absence of the article. Thus, the thousand years is the unique, one of a kind millennium. It is not an indefinite, undefined thousand years, it is “the one and only” thousand years (millennium). Wallace, Greek Grammar, 248-49.

There are 12,000 months in 1,000 years. Mathematically, that means that the beast’s reign would last less than 1% of Christ’s reign (exactly 0.35%). Of course, the point is not mathematical, but the math helps one see the immense disproportion John is painting with this contrast.

Note that nothing is said regarding the extent of their resurrection, but only regarding the length of their reign. Their resurrection lasts forever, though their reign is temporary until as Paul says, “Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power” (1 Cor 15:24).

Keener, Revelation, 467; Mounce, Revelation, 361.

This is the purpose use of εἰς. BDAG, 290.

Some scholars think this refers to the new Jerusalem, whereas others do not. Witherington rightly notes that it is ambiguous since John does not make this explicit. Witherington, Revelation, 251.

Tenney says this of Augustine’s amillennialism and Whitby’s postmillennialism: “Neither of these views did justice to the command of the New Testament to ‘watch’ for the return of Christ. If according to their theology His advent is to be preceded by at least a thousand years of peace and righteousness, which in turn are the result of a long process of spiritual or social evolution, it could scarcely be of imminent concern to the Christians of New Testament times or of today.” Tenney, Revelation, 150.

Rev 1:9; 2:2, 10, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12.

Even Paul thinks that Jesus’ coming will destroy an end-time Antichrist figure (2 Thess 2). Notice that he does not destroy Satan at his coming, but Satan’s man of lawlessness equivalent to the beast in Revelation. In Revelation, this is before the millennium (19:11-21), not after (20:7-10).

Witherington, Problem, 109-77. I will make one minor comment. There is no pretribulation rapture theology in the book of Revelation or in the NT. In fact, John is crystal clear that God’s people (Jew and Gentile in Christ) will endure the persecution of the beast and false prophet. If that were not the case, then what would be the point of John’s repeated exhortations and encouragements to persevere under these great trials and persecutions from the beast? Dispensational
premillennialism finds no exegetical grounding in Rev 20:1-10 and its focus on pretribulation rapture would be meaningless to the churches in Asia Minor. Thus, this position does not align with an exegesis of Rev 20:1-10.

59 Both Papias and Irenaeus even had close connections with the seven churches of Revelation.


Nevertheless, a few words of clarification are necessary concerning this debate. First, much of the terminology in the literature from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries do not distinguish between the “historic” premillennialism of the early church and the “new/modern/dispensational” premillennialism from John Nelson Darby in the 19th century. Many during this period argued that Wesley was of the latter designation, purporting that Wesley’s father Samuel, his brother Charles, the Moravians, John Fletcher, Thomas Coke, and Francis Asbury were all strong “new premillennialist.” West, “Premillenarian,” 98. Newport, in fact, has rightly identified premillennial (though not dispensational) tendencies in Charles Wesley’s writings and hymns, but admits that Charles was an anomaly in this regard in early Methodism. Kenneth G. C. Newport, “Premillennialism in the Early Writings of Charles Wesley,” Wesleyan Theological Journal 32 (1997): 85-106.

The major problem with the notion that Wesley was dispensational premillennialism is that dispensationalism did not develop until after the American Civil War (1861-1865), nearly seventy-five years after Wesley’s death in 1791. Moreover, a difficulty lies in distinguishing between fact and fiction within these often heated and contentious arguments. Frequently claims were made, yet hard evidence was not always presented, which muddies the waters all the more.
One of the most noteworthy resisters to those claiming Wesley was a new premillennialist was Daniel Steele. In his *A Substitute for Holiness*, Steele argued vehemently against this dispensational premillennialism not the least of which because (1) it was not the view of Wesley, and (2) it was promoting antinomianism, something entirely antithetical to the holiness movement. Daniel Steele, *A Substitute for Holiness* (New York: Garland, 1984), 271-326. Unfortunately, Steele’s efforts along with others to resist the view that Wesley was a dispensational premillennialist failed. The holiness movement’s eschatology soon shifted to dispensationalism and as Harold Raser notes, “One can hardly find an open defense of postmillennialism in Holiness circles after 1931.” Harold Raser, “Views on Last Things in the American Holiness Movement,” in The Second Coming: A Wesleyan Approach to the Doctrine of Last Things (ed. H. Ray Dunning; Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1995), 184. Only in recent decades have Wesleyan scholars recaptured Wesley’s postmillennialism (see Collins, Mercer, Snyder, and Grider).

61 Witherington, *Problem*, 181.


63 Witherington, *Problem*, 182.

64 I will not examine his sermon *The General Spread of the Gospel* in this essay. It is quite an oddity from my reading of this sermon that scholars have so quickly identified it as further evidence of Wesley’s postmillennialism. Contra Witherington, Wesley makes no mention of the millennium at all within this sermon (*Witherington, Problem*, 188-89). The only possible reasoning that scholars suggest this, from my understanding, is that he cites a paraphrased, conflated version of Rev 21:23 and Rev 22:5. The problem with identifying this as Wesley connecting this to the millennium is twofold. First, these two passages do not speak of the millennium, which only occurs in Rev 20:1-10, and Wesley himself does not think that Rev 21:23 and Rev 22:5 are speaking of the millennium, but rather eternity. He interprets the new Jerusalem to be part of the eternity of the new heavens and new earth, not the millennium. In his note on Rev 21:2, Wesley states, “This city is wholly new, belonging not to this world, not to the millennium, but to eternity.” Secondly, this brief conflated Scripture citation occurs at the very end of his sermon (point 26) and within a long catena of Scripture citations primarily from Isaiah. So then, his paraphrased Revelation citation is just one among many in a long continuous list of other Scripture citations which do not relate to the millennium, and he was not attempting to expound upon the millennium.

Now of course, the content of this sermon is another matter entirely. What Wesley says about the spread of Christianity throughout the whole world is neither contrary to Scripture nor does it promote a certain type of millennialism. Wesley’s main point is that the gospel will keep spreading throughout the earth, particularly the holiness movement. He is optimistic that the world will be converted because the people throughout the earth will see the holiness of God’s people, which will convince them of the truth of the Gospel. What is hindering this move of God is primarily nominal Christianity that claims Christ as Lord yet sins like a sailor. Wesley dreamed of the day when the heathen will no longer say of Christians, “Christian man take my wife; Christian man much drunk; Christian man kill man! Devil-Christian! Me no Christian.” Instead, Wesley desired to see, “how far the Christians exceed their own countrymen in whatsoever things are lovely and of good report, they will adopt a very different language, and say, Angel-Christian! The holy lives of the Christians will be an argument they will not know how to resist: Seeing the Christians steadily
and uniformly practice what is agreeable to the law written in their own hearts, their prejudices will quickly die away, and they will gladly receive “the truth as it is in Jesus” (22). This sermon then is less about a certain view of eschatology, and even less about a certain view of the millennium, but rather is much more about exhorting Christians to live holy lives as a means of evangelization. So then, this sermon only displays Wesley’s optimism for the spread of Christianity via Christian holiness, but does not expound Wesley’s postmillennial view.


66 Wesley, *Notes*, Preface to Revelation. Although Wesley was following one of the best biblical scholars of his time, Bengel’s approach to Revelation was flawed in many respects. Though grammatically and textually sound, he was essentially a historicist in his approach to Revelation, that is, he viewed Rev 4-20 as a prophecy foretelling the entire history of the church up until the return of Christ at the end of history. Thus, every detail in Revelation corresponds to events and people in church history. This approach has many problems not the least of which is that it would be meaningless to the original recipients of Revelation. Another problem with Bengel’s eschatology is that he was a prognosticator, who predicted that the millennium would begin in 1836. While Wesley rejected his prognostications and admitted that he himself knew nothing of the timing of eschatological events, he nonetheless followed the exegesis of a man given to predicting the end of the world. This should give cause for concern for any person desiring to be *homo unius libri*.

78 It is odd because resurrected bodies are not for mere heavenly existence, but new earthly living in the new creation.
Bengel notes opposition to his view: “Lange wrote, ‘that he finds no foundation for two periods of a thousand years, either in the text, or in fact, or in the connection of the parts of the Apocalypse.’” Bengel, _Word Studies_, 921. Lange was right.

In this regard, he follows Bengel verbatim again.

It could possibly also be the monadic use of the definite article. The anarthrous uses are probably the monadic absence of the article. Whether monadic or anaphoric, it still infers one millennium, not multiple millennia. Bengel wrongly identifies this as a generic demonstrative use pointing out “the former of the two subjects or periods of a thousand years.” Bengel, _Word Studies_, 922.

Wesley, _Notes_, Rev 20:5.

The return of Christ will be visible to all; the unknown factor is the timing (Matt 24:36).

Wesley, _Notes_, Rev 20:7.

Emphasis added.


Tenney, _Revelation_, 150.

Tenney, _Revelation_, 151.


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