

• *The first of three views*

Perhaps now is the time to ask how what we have read relates to different prophetic views. There are three basic schools of thought on this matter.

Premillennialism

• *Assumes visions are in chronological order*

1. **Some believe that Jesus' second coming comes before this 'binding' of Satan.** They are called 'premillennialists' because they believe the second coming will be before ('pre') the event of Revelation 20:1–3. The 'millennium' commences (they believe) at the end of this gospel-age when Jesus comes. These interpreters reckon that the second coming is referred to in Revelation 19 and so (taking the visions as referring to chronological order in history) they take Revelation 20 to refer to a period of history **after** the second coming but before the final glory mentioned in Revelation 22.

Difficulty with premillennialism

• *No gospel-age after the second coming of Jesus*

• *No third coming*

• *This theory can only be deduced from Revelation 20 – not taught elsewhere*

• *No room for an 'after the second coming' millennium*

However, all of this is very uncertain. It is not certain that the second coming is mentioned in Revelation 19:11–21. There is no kind of gospel-age after Jesus' one-and-only second coming. Faith is impossible once Jesus has been seen, and in the one-and-only second coming of Jesus every eye will see him. Nowhere in the Bible is there a second-coming-and-a-third-coming. The idea of some kind of 'second coming' or 'rapture' with a time-gap and then something resembling another 'second coming' is not to be found in the New Testament at all. This view of the millennium can only be maintained if it is deduced from Revelation 20 and then read into other parts of the Bible. It is not taught clearly anywhere else. 2 Peter 3:7, 10–13 does not seem to allow any large time-gap between the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and the end of the world. If the theory is held that the book of Revelation is largely in chronological order, then the new heavens and new earth are after the last judgement^{□1}. But the new heavens and new earth clearly come at the time of the second coming of Jesus^{□2}. They are all one-and-the-same complex of events. There is no room for an 'after the second coming' millennium.

□1 20:11; 21:1
□2 2 Peter 3

• *Revelation not in chronological order!*

But actually Revelation is not in chronological order! The lengthy section from 19:11 to 20:15 seems to contain some backtracking. It seems to picture the same period of history again and again from different angles. Each part seems to run up to the day of judgement and the casting of God's enemies into the lake of fire. But an 'after the second coming millennialism' depends on (i) viewing 19:11–21 as referring to the second coming of Jesus and (ii) taking the fact that 20:1–6 follows it in the book of Revelation as meaning that it follows it in history. But this neglects the way in which Revelation constantly jumps back to say something about a period earlier than (or alongside) something that has just been mentioned.

• *Often a scene goes back to an earlier period*

This last point is very crucial. Revelation has 'scenes' in it. And often a scene goes back to something earlier than what has been mentioned at the end of the last scene or at the end of the last section.

• *'Introduction' – Jesus' final glory*

In 1:1–8 we have an introduction to the book of Revelation. In this 'introduction' Jesus is risen from the dead, is the triumphant King of the universe^{□1} and is 'coming with the clouds' in final glory^{□2}.

□1 1:5
□2 1:7

• *Next – Christ in resurrection-glorification sends letters to 7 (first century) churches*

• *Speaks of things to happen before the second coming*

• *The ‘after the second coming millennialism’ is not what is taught in 20:1–6 at all*

• *The vision in chapter 4 again jumps back to the time before the ascension of Jesus*

• *The visions are not in chronological sequence with reference to their fulfilment in history*

• *Even the seven seals are not in chronological order*

• *Trumpets do not refer to events that take place after the seven seals, but throughout the gospel-age (before the seventh seal)*

Then in 1:9–3:22 John sees ‘in the Spirit’ a vision of Christ in his resurrection-glorification sending letters to seven churches. From the viewpoint of 1:7 (which mentions Jesus’ second coming) the book of Revelation has ‘jumped back’ to the days of John himself to deal with actual churches in the first century AD. Then at one point the end of the world is mentioned, for Jesus promises the over-comers at Smyrna that they will ‘not be hurt at all by the second death’¹. We shall discover that the ‘second death’ is part of final judgement². Revelation 1:9 has ‘jumped back’ in the matter of the time and goes back to the first century AD and speaks of things that will happen **before** the second coming of Jesus mentioned in 1:7. Yet this section also has hints that reach forward even to final judgement. The ‘after the second coming millennialism’ depends on viewing Revelation 20:1–6 as if it followed on in sequence after the second coming which (it is thought) comes in Revelation 19:11–21. But if 20:1–15 actually ‘jumps back’ to say something about a period earlier than that which has just been mentioned (and this is what constantly happens in the book of Revelation), then the ‘after the second coming millennialism’ is not what is taught in 20:1–6 at all.

In chapters 4–7 we have a new section of the book of Revelation. At one point (before 5:5) Jesus is viewed as not yet having ascended his throne. The ascension takes place only at 5:5. This means that the time-reference is not continuing on chronologically after what we had in 1:9 to 3:22. Rather 4:1 introduces a vision which again jumps back to the time before the ascension of Jesus. It is vital to observe this ‘jumping back in time’ as the visions of the book of Revelation proceed. They take up one aspect of salvation-history after another, but the visions are **not** proceeding in chronological sequence with reference to their fulfilment in history. After 5:5 Jesus has ascended. The rest of the section consists of what happens when Jesus is acting as the enthroned King of the universe. But even here there is no need to think that the seven seals are in any kind of chronological sequence. If the first seal speaks of the preaching of the gospel, it is something that is taking place throughout the gospel-age. The visions of strife and scarcity and death which we have in the next ‘seals’ are not successive periods. The sufferings of God’s people mentioned in the fifth seal certainly were present in the first century (note for example 2:10 and 2:13). So the fifth seal is not necessarily fulfilled in something chronologically after the seals already mentioned. Only in the sixth and seventh seals do we have events that seem to be referring to something near to the end of the gospel-age. It would certainly be a mistake to say that the seven seals are all in chronological sequence. This point is important when we come to interpreting Revelation 20. There is no reason to think 20:1–6 refers to a period of history after 19:11–21. The book of Revelation is not structured in this way.

We find much the same thing in chapters 8–11. The trumpets of warning are being sounded, but they do not refer to events that take place after the seven seals chronologically.^a The trumpet-warnings of God are continuing throughout the gospel-age. The scenes refer to a time before the second coming of Jesus, and this means that in 8:2–11:18 John begins by jumping back from the viewpoint of the seventh seal in 8:1.

1 2:11
2 note 21:8

• *Back to before Jesus is born*

• *Jesus' ascension*

• *Judgements of God – disease, pollution of seas, rivers and heavens – happen concurrently*

In 12:1–15:4 we again are taken back to a time before the coming of the child-Messiah. The woman is yet to give birth to the child. Jesus is not yet born. Then the ascension takes place in 12:5. Although we have had mention of the end of the world in 8:1 (as I understand it) and in 11:15–18, yet the scenery has jumped back to take up something mentioned earlier.

The next section is 15:5–16:21. Jesus is the one who expresses the anger of God against the unrepentant. The 'bowls of wrath' represent things that take place in human history which express God's anger against sin. Ugly diseases^{☐1} and the ruination of the environment in the sea^{☐2}, in the rivers^{☐3}, in the heavens^{☐4} are aspects of the judgement of God. Yet there is nothing specially chronological about this. It is not that an age of judgement in rivers is followed by an age of judgement in the heavens. The different judgements are going on at the same time – not in sequence. Also the seals and the trumpets go over the same ground. This ought to show us again that the various sections of Revelation are not often in historical sequence. The judgements of 8:2–11:18 and the judgements of 15:5–16:21 are the same judgements. Similarly 19:11–21 and 20:1–3 could be the same events being viewed from different angles. To build a prophetic interpretation on the idea that 19:11–21 and 20:1–3 are in historical sequence is building too much on a dubious theory.

The next section is 17:1–19:10. The first two verses link 17:3– 19:10 with 15:5–16:21 and show that this section is to deal with the same kind of things that were happening in the previous section. The section is not subsequent to the previous section; it is largely parallel to it.



We have to remember all of this as we come to 19:11–21:8. After the description of 19:11–21, we have the millennium of 20:1–6, but it is not necessary to think that 20:1–6 continues on in historical fulfilment after the events of 19:11–21. For all of these reasons I consider that a millennium **after** the second coming is not what John is teaching here. We must look for another possibility.

Note

a. This point is argued in M. Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation or I Saw Heaven Opened*, The Bible Speaks Today, rev. edn (IVP, 1991).

- ☐1 16:2
- ☐2 16:3
- ☐3 16:4
- ☐4 16:8-9

Conclusion - a millennium after the second coming is not what John is teaching

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