

EXPLORING THE TEMPORAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REVELATION 19,20

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Fundamental to a premillennialist reading of Rev 20 is the assumption that the events of Rev 19-20 describe a chronological sequence of events.¹ Amillennialists dispute this reading, and maintain that the events depicted within the two chapters are probably synchronous to some degree (the latter chapter recapitulating events in the former). Several lines of evidence within the biblical text support this criticism:

1. Structural Indications

Rev 20:1 begins with the conjunction “and,” introducing a vision of angelic descent, in which the angel carries an item and executes an activity (20:1-3).

Elsewhere in the book, when ‘and’ is directly followed by an angelic descent. . . or ascent, without exception it introduces a vision either suspending the temporal progress of a preceding section to introduce a synchronous section (see. . . 10:1) or reverting to a time anterior to the preceding section (see. . . 7:2 and 18:1, where in each case, as in 10:1 and 20:1, the angel is described as ‘having’ something).²

Since in all other instances, images of angelic ascent or descent interrupt the temporal progress of preceding verses, and introduce a *distinct* (if complimentary) vision, one should not read Rev 19 and 20 as a single vision. Furthermore, one should also recognize the possibility that the two chapters are not chronologically sequential simply in view of the same feature.

1. Badina, Joel, “The Millennium,” *Symposium on Revelation—Book II*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series 7, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 235.

2. Beale, G. K., *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 975.

2. Parallels between Ezek 38-39; Rev 16;19;20

Further evidence for the complementarity of Rev 19;20 emerges from the similarities in their content. Many attempt to distinguish the events in Rev 19 from those in Rev 20 on the basis of superficial incongruities, such as the fact that the wicked depicted in each suffer variant fates. For instance, whereas the sword in the mouth of Christ strikes “the nations” in 19:15,21, fire consumes “the nations” in 20:9. Rather than refer to two distinct judgments, however, these are more likely complimentary descriptions of the same event.³

Both passages allude to Ezek 38-39, which predicts a single, final eschatological attack on Jerusalem by the armies of Gog (king of Magog) in the “latter days” (38:16). Jerusalem is saved by divine intervention, when catastrophe suddenly overtakes the armies of Gog. The prophet describes their defeat several times, assigning various causes to their destruction, including: (1) an earthquake (Ezek 38:19-20), (2) the sword, with soldiers slaying fellow soldiers (38:21), and (3) raining fire, sulphur, and hail (38:22), which also consumes Magog and other nations (39:6). Ultimately, a call is issued to the birds of prey, inviting them to feast on the flesh and blood of the wicked (39:17-20, 4).

Notably, Revelation also employs the same images in several (parallel) passages. For instance, in Rev 16, the assembled armies of the “whole world” (ruled by Babylon; 16:19) are destroyed by an earthquake (Rev 16:18-19) and the descent of enormous hailstones (16:21). In Rev 17, however, the armies of the earth turn to slay one another and set Babylon on fire (Rev 17:15-17). Celebrating the destruction of Babylon (Rev 19:1-4), Rev 19 depicts Christ striking down the assembled armies of all nations (19:19) with a sword in his mouth (19:15,21). This chapter concludes with an invitation to the birds of prey, calling them to feed on the flesh and blood of the slain (17:17-18). Finally, Rev 20 uses the names “Gog and Magog” for the assembled armies of the nations, whom God at last destroys by raining fire (20:7-9).

The fact that all these images find their inspiration in Ezek 38-39 (and its account of a final defeat of Israel’s enemies) recommends their identification with a single eschatological battle.⁴ (Indeed, the variant features of Rev 19;20 appear especially complimentary in this light). Each

3. This is especially true given the highly metaphorical character of Rev 19:15,21, in which a sword in the mouth of Christ executes judgment.

4. Beale draws an analogy between Ezekiel’s use of recapitulation when describing the defeat of Gog (describing the battle several times in Ezek 38-39), and Revelation’s many parallel images of the destruction of the wicked (Beale, 979).

passage recapitulates the same eschatological defeat of the nations assembled in battle against Christ and His people.⁵

3. Incoherencies

By contrast, interpreting Rev 19 and 20 in chronological sequence creates unnecessary difficulties. For instance, in 19:15,21; cf. v.18, Christ annihilates all the inhabitants of “the nations” at His coming. However, in Rev 20:1-3, Satan is bound so “he would deceive the nations no more” (20:3). Why would the angel need to prevent Satan from deceiving entities that Christ has already destroyed?

Furthermore, if all the inhabitants of the nations have been slain in 19:15,21, whom is Satan deceiving in Rev 20:7-8? From whence did the “nations” reemerge?⁶ The simplest explanation posits that the two passages are parallel, describing the *same* eschatological deception and destruction of “the nations” through complimentary images.

Additionally, Rev 15:1 claims that “the wrath of God is ended” at the final outpouring of the seven “last” plagues. The sixth plague precedes the assembling of the armies of the earth by the beast and false prophet (16:12-16); in turn, the seventh plague consists of the final destruction of “Babylon” and “the cities of the nations” by earthquake, fire, and hail (16:17-21), as well as the dissolution of the natural world (16:20). Rev 19:19-21 picks up the plot of 16:16 (describing the assembling of the armies of the beast and false prophet) and thus, occurs roughly within the time scope of the sixth and seventh plagues.⁷ Reinforcing this conclusion is

5. Additional parallels between the chapters also recommend their identification with a single eschatological event. For instance, Rev 16:20 describes the dissolution of the natural world, as mountains and islands “fled away”; so also Rev 20:11 (however constituting a different vision than Rev 20:1-10) records that heaven and earth “fled away” at the Judgment.

6. Adventists posit that “the nations” destroyed at Christ’s coming (19:15,21) reappear after a general resurrection of the wicked at the close of the millennium. However, Rev 20:1-10 does not refer to this resurrection; furthermore, 20:12-13 never explicitly associates the resurrection of the wicked with the timeline of 20:1-10. Adventists read a general resurrection into 20:1-10 for the sake of convenience, but have no textual basis for doing so.

Rather, the chapter seemingly betrays a complimentary parallelism: 20:9-10 describes the judgment of the living, and 20:11-15 the judgment of the dead. In this case especially, “the nations” destroyed in 20:9-10 should be disassociated from “the dead” of 20:11-15.

the juxtaposition of praises for the fall of Babylon (19:1-4; again, equivalent to the seventh plague) and the description of the destruction of those armies (Rev 19:19-21). Since the seventh plague brings to an “end” the “wrath of God” (15:1),

There can be no divine wrath directed against the nations after the seventh plague. . . . 20:8-9 cannot be another instance of divine wrath executed against the nations *after* the events of the sixth and seventh plagues and the synchronous events of 19:19-21. . . .⁸

Rev 20 may recapitulate the same eschatological resolution described in 16:17-21 and 19, but cannot describe a later instance of divine wrath without contradicting the biblical data. Such incoherencies militate against understanding the events of Rev 19-20 in chronological sequence.⁹

Conclusion

Amillennialists have a firm textual basis for suggesting alternative temporal relationships between the events depicted in Rev 19 and 20. One cannot simply presuppose their asynchronous character, as premillennialists have done. Still, an extended exploration of the elements of each chapter is necessary to determine the precise parameters of that relationship.

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7. Beale 982.

8. Beale 982.

9. A refutation of other attempts to dismiss this incoherence appears in Beale, 981.