

Why the millennium?

The millennium is a big puzzle. It comes near the end of the Bible completely unexpectedly. There is nothing in Scripture up to this point to prepare the reader for it. Rather, he or she is led to expect Jesus's coming again, the resurrection of the dead, the last judgment, and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. These do come in the last chapters of the book of Revelation, but the millennium is a complete surprise.

The millennium is also very controversial. Will Jesus's coming take place before it ('premillennialism'), after it ('postmillennialism'), or is it unrelated to this ('amillennialism')?¹ This is an issue, alas, that Evangelicals have long fallen out over.

The consequence of all of this is that the millennium is rarely talked about. Many Christians, not wanting to cause an argument, avoid mentioning it. As a result, the significance of the millennium is lost. This is a pity, because the significance is something we need to hold on to in the times in which we live.

Context

To arrive at the significance of the millennium, we need first to consider the context in which it occurs. Verses 1–3 of Revelation 20 describe the capturing of Satan and his imprisonment for a thousand years. Verses 4–6 go on to describe the reign of Christ during this period along with followers who have been raised from the dead. Verses 7–10 then relate what happens when the thousand years have ended: Satan is released from prison and instigates a war against God's people, but is overcome and thrown into a lake of fire. Finally, verses 11–15 describe the resurrection of the men and women who had not been raised earlier, and the last judgment. Those whose name is not in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire.

Who?

The question is, 'Who are the followers who will reign with Christ for a thousand years?' John does not make this completely clear. What he says is (translated literally):

⁴And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them, and the souls* of those who had been axed because of the witness of Jesus and because of the word of God, and who did not worship the beast [of 13:1] nor its image and did not receive its mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. ⁵(The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were finished.) This [is] the first resurrection. ⁶Blessed and holy [is] the one having part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no authority, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and will reign with him [the] thousand years.

*This is in the accusative, hence the usual rendering, 'and [I saw] the souls of those who had been axed'. I discuss this further below.

¹ See, e.g., J. Daniel Hays, J. Scott Duvall, and C. Marvin Pate, *Dictionary of Biblical Prophecy and End Times* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

Many commentators conclude from this and other passages that *all* the followers of Jesus will reign with him for a thousand years.² They base this on three main lines of reasoning.

First, when John says, ‘And I saw thrones’ (v. 4a), the wording, lacking specification of who was on the thrones, parallels Daniel’s account of a dream he had: ‘I kept looking until thrones were set up, and the Ancient of Days sat’ (Dan. 7:9). This dream was later explained to him in the following terms: ‘the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom for ever, for ever and ever’ (v. 18), ‘the kingdom, and the dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under all the heavens, shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High’ (v. 27). This points, commentators say, to the occupants of the thrones in Revelation being Christ and all the saints.

Secondly, Jesus speaks of his twelve disciples ruling the world one day with him (Mat. 19:28, Luke 22:29–30). Paul extended this to all Christians (1 Cor. 6:2–3). In Revelation, Jesus told Laodiceans who overcome temptation that they will sit with him on his throne (Rev. 3:21). In Revelation also, the four living creatures and twenty-four elders praise Jesus for making those he redeemed to ‘reign on the earth’ (Rev. 5:6–10).

Thirdly, commentators read verse 4 as ‘the souls of those who had been axed because of the witness of Jesus and because of the word of God, and [of those] who did not worship the beast’, making the verse to refer to all who confess Jesus.

However, a major problem with the conclusion that John is referring to all Christians is that it means that the second resurrection and last judgment apply only to the wicked. This conflicts with the picture Jesus gave of the last judgment, in which he separates the peoples of the world ‘as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats’ (Mat. 25:31–46).

The alternative answer to the question, ‘Who will reign with Christ for a thousand years?’, is the martyrs (taking ‘axed’ as a general reference to martyrs, like ‘slain’ in 6:9).³ This allows the second resurrection to apply to Christians and non-Christians, only the martyrs being excluded. Jesus’s picture of the last judgment still stands. All Christians reign with Christ after this (Rev. 22:3–5). Verse 4 can accordingly be rendered: ‘And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them, namely [epexegetic *kai*]⁴ the souls of those who had been axed’.⁵ The martyrs include apostles (according to tradition, all the apostles except John were martyred).

Why?

Why Satan should be imprisoned for a thousand years is not difficult to understand. He had conspired to have Christians imprisoned for their faith. John was interned on the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9). Imprisonment made Satan suffer what he had made others suffer.

But why are only the martyrs raised from the dead to reign with Christ while Satan is in prison?

John sees the martyrs earlier in Revelation (6:9–11):

² See <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/revelation/20-4.htm>

³ Ronald H. Preston and Anthony T. Hanson, *The Revelation of Saint John the Divine* (London: SCM Press, 1949), 125.

⁴ W.E. Vine, Notes on the particle *kai*, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (London: Oliphants, 1940), Vol. IV, 251–3.

⁵ Cf. John Swete, *Revelation* (London: SCM press, 1979), 288.

⁹And when he opened the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain on account of the word of God and on account of the witness which they had.

¹⁰And they cried with a loud voice saying: 'Until when, Master, holy and true, do you not judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' ¹¹And a white robe was given to each one of them, and it was said to them that they should rest a little time yet, until also [the number of] their fellow-slaves and their siblings, those about to be killed as also they, should be fulfilled.

In Revelation 20, the martyrs' prayers are amply fulfilled. They have the satisfaction of witnessing the punishment of Satan, and the special privilege of reigning with Christ while this is happening. This is their great reward. All Christians will reign one day, but the millennium is especially for the martyrs.

If this is indeed the significance of the millennium, it is a significance that is particularly relevant today. Our Christian brothers and sisters are being persecuted in many countries, and many are losing their lives. It is good for them and for us to know that, when they die, they will have the special privilege of reigning with Jesus in the millennium.

John does not say whether the millennium is real or symbolic (compare, e.g., Rev. 1:20). What definitely is real is the special reward of those who give their lives for Jesus.