

The Binding of Satan

In the book of Revelation, a powerful “fiery red dragon” wages war with the people of God. The dragon is none other than “that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world.” He is the “accuser of our brethren,” and his chief agents of destruction are a seven-headed beast from the sea and a two-horned beast from the earth (see Revelation 12–13). These two monstrous entities—also known as “the beast and the false prophet”—are political and religious powers the Devil uses in his war against the saints, “who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 12:17).

Ultimately, the Devil loses the battle. The beast and false prophet and the legions that follow them are defeated by the “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS,” who “strikes the nations” with His “sharp sword” and “treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God” (Revelation 19:16–17).

The Devil, now defeated, is captured, bound, and imprisoned. John puts it this way:

“Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while” (Revelation 20:1–3).

Satan, a spirit being, cannot be bound with a literal chain or confined to a literal pit. So the symbolic nature of this description is not in question. The question is two-fold: 1) *When* does the binding of Satan occur? 2) What is the *nature* of this binding?

Post- and Amillennialist Views

Amillennialist Jack Cottrell says that Revelation 20:1–3 “symbolically represents Christ’s present control over Satan and his works, and the consequent limitation of his power” (*The Faith Once for All*, p. 497).

Has the Devil already been bound “so that he should deceive the nations no more”? Or is the prophesied binding of Satan a future event?

Reformed theologian Douglas F. Kelly states, “As a result of Christ’s finished work in dying on the cross, in rising from the dead, in ascending to the Father, and in being crowned on the throne of glory, Satan lost his power to deceive the untold millions of pagans, whom he formerly kept blinded to God’s saving truth” (<http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/binding-satan/>). Professor Kelly further states, “Although the evil one still has limited power in a fallen world, it is far less than what he had when he was able to bind and blind all nations outside Israel” (*ibid.*).

Postmillennialist Kenneth Gentry, also a Reformed theologian, writes, “The implications of this binding are enormous. Before Christ’s coming all nations beyond Israel are under Satan’s dominion.... Israel alone of all the peoples of the earth knows the true God and enjoys his salvation.... But with Christ’s coming and the spread of ‘the gospel of the kingdom,’ Satan’s dominion over the Gentiles collapses” (<http://postmillennialismtoday.com/2014/02/03/the-binding-of-satan/>).

Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, commenting on Revelation 20:1–3, writes, “The illumination of the nations with the light of the gospel is effected both by the [first] coming of Christ and by the binding of Satan” (*The Book of Revelation*, p. 210). Professor Hughes, after presenting the evidence, concludes “that the thousand years during which Satan is bound and confined had their beginning with the incarnation of the eternal Son, and in particular with the achievement of the purpose of the incarnation, namely, the conquest of Satan and his realm on the cross of Calvary and the redemption of man by the grace that flows from the cross...” (*ibid.*, p. 211).

According to these scholars, the binding of Satan has already occurred, and the “binding” is not the complete removal of Satan’s deceptive influence in the world, but the limitation of his power to deceive.

Augustine on the Binding of Satan

The concept of a past binding of Satan is not new. Augustine (AD 354–430), whose writings strongly

influenced Christian theology, especially in the West, taught that the binding of Satan occurred at the first coming of Christ. He believed the “abyss” (or “bottomless pit”) into which the chain-bound Devil is cast represents “the countless multitude of the wicked whose hearts are unfathomably deep in malignity against the Church of God.” This is not the first time Satan has been in this abyss, Augustine explains, but now that he is “prevented from harming believers, he takes more complete possession of the ungodly” (*The City of God*, Chapter 7).

If the abyss into which Satan is cast is the “countless multitude of the wicked,” how does this “more complete possession” prevent the Devil from deceiving the nations?

Augustine explains, “But by the chain and prison-house of this interdict the devil is prohibited and restrained from seducing those nations which belong to Christ, but which he formerly seduced or held in subjection” (*ibid.*).

Augustine further explains, “The devil, then, is bound and shut up in the abyss that he may not seduce the nations from which the Church is gathered, and which he formerly seduced before the Church existed. For it is not said ‘that he should not seduce any man,’ but ‘that he should not seduce the nations’—meaning, no doubt, those among which the Church exists—‘till the thousand years should be fulfilled,’—*i.e.*, either what remains of the sixth day which consists of a thousand years, or all the years which are to elapse till the end of the world” (*ibid.*).

For Augustine, then, the “bottomless pit” is not a literal place, but is a metaphorical way of describing wicked men and angels collectively. These are the Devil’s own, and in this “pit” of depravity he is confined. He is chained—restricted, greatly limited—and is therefore powerless to suppress the gospel. The gates of hell cannot prevail against Christ’s Church!

Biblical Support?

Post- and amillennialists claim scriptural support for the view that Satan has already been chained and imprisoned in the bottomless pit. They appeal to the sound principle of interpreting ambiguous texts in the light of unambiguous ones—so Revelation 20:1–3, they claim, should be understood in the light



Augustine of Hippo, one of historic Christianity's most influential theologians.

of unambiguous scriptures on Christ’s victory over Satan. Let’s look at a few of their favorite proof texts.

John 12:31–33: “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.” This He said, signifying by what death He would die.”

Jesus is speaking of the effects of His coming death. Through His death, He brings an end to the power of sin and the reign of the Devil. But this passage refers to the beginning, not the end, of the process that will ultimately rid the world of the power of sin and influence of the Devil.

Indeed, Christ has defeated the Devil in mortal combat and restricted his activities, but is this what Revelation 20:1–3 is describing? We’ll come back to this question later.

Colossians 2:15: “Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it [i.e., in His death].”

Christ, through His death, removed His disciples’ record of sins (see verses 11–13), thus stripping a major weapon from the arsenal of the “accuser of our brethren.” No record of sins means no grounds for accusation. Christ died to “destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Hebrews 2:14–15). The

The Millennium

The word “millennium” does not appear in the Bible, but the term is commonly used in reference to the “thousand years” mentioned six times in Revelation 20:1–7. The “thousand years” is the period of Satan’s confinement (verses 2–3) and of Christ’s reign with the saints (verse 4). All agree that the millennial reign is the intermediate kingdom that precedes the full and final establishment of the New Heaven and New Earth. The disagreement is in regards to the nature of the intermediate kingdom and to the time of Christ’s return in relation to the Millennium.

PREMILLENNIALISTS believe Christ returns *before* the millennial reign—hence, *pre*-millennial. The binding of Satan occurs just before the Millennium begins. The “first resurrection” is the literal resurrection and transformation of the saints (1 Corinthians 15:50–55; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17). The “rest of the dead” are raised to life for the postmillennial Day of Judgment.

POSTMILLENNIALISTS believe Christ returns *after* the millennial reign. The Millennium, or the “thousand years,” represents a period of triumph for Christianity. Some postmillennialists believe in a literal thousand-year period that may or may not have already begun, while others do not interpret the “thousand years” literally. Nevertheless, all postmillennialists believe the church will gradually but certainly march on to victory in this present world. Christ is on His throne and is reigning over His earthly kingdom, the church. Satan has been bound and imprisoned, so he is incapable of using his power of deception to stop the Christian church’s forward progress.

AMILLENNIALISTS believe there is no future Millennium. The period described in Revelation 20 as a “thousand years” represents the period between the first and second advents of Christ. Many amillennialists believe Revelation 20:3 symbolically describes the situation on earth, while 20:4 refers to the situation in heaven. The Devil is restrained (but not completely) during this period.

Post- and amillennialists obviously cannot believe the “first resurrection” refers to the literal resurrection that will occur at Christ’s return. Most believe the “first resurrection” refers to

Christ’s resurrection and the saints’ present participation in it (“God...raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus”—Ephesians 2:4, 6). Some, however, may understand the first resurrection to symbolically refer to a great worldwide Christian revival, while others may think it refers to the departed souls of martyred saints attaining the blessedness of heaven.

If the Millennium is a present reality, as all amillennialists and most postmillennialists agree, then the binding of Satan has already occurred; the Devil is presently restrained. But if the Millennium is in the future—if it begins after Christ returns and raises the saints—then, obviously, the binding of Satan is also in the future.

The idea of the “first resurrection” representing anything other than an actual resurrection is fraught with difficulties. The “souls” of martyred saints “lived,” or “came to life” (ESV, RSV, NIV, NASB). This coming to life of the martyred saints is called a “resurrection,” a term never used in reference to human spirits in the intermediate state. The martyred saints who participate in the first resurrection are contrasted with the “rest of the dead,” who “did not live again until the thousand years were finished.” It is obvious, then, that if 20:5a refers to a literal resurrection, then 20:5b (with 20:4) also refers to a literal resurrection.

In addition, Revelation 19 describes the Second Coming of Christ. If 20:4–6 does not refer to the literal resurrection of the saints—the resurrection that will take place when Christ returns—then there is no reference to the resurrection of the saints in this section. This would be curious indeed, especially in view of the fact that this section (chapters 19–20) describes the Second Coming of Christ, the overthrow of Christ’s enemies, the temporary and permanent banishment of Satan, the final rebellion, the resurrection and judgment of the unsaved, and the final destruction of the wicked.

The first resurrection is the resurrection promised to the saints. It happens at the Second Coming of Christ, which occurs at the end of the present age and just before the beginning of the millennial reign. It’s an event reserved for the future—as is the binding of Satan.

Devil can no longer, through the threat of death, intimidate those who, through Christ's death, have "passed from death into life" (John 5:24).

But is this simply a different way of saying the same thing Revelation 20:1–3 says? It's not difficult to see how one could connect this passage with the "binding of Satan" in Revelation 20, but proof that

both passages refer to the same event is lacking.

Matthew 12:28–29: "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house."

Recapitulation or Chronological Progression?

There can be no doubt that the visions making up the book of Revelation represent a chronological order of events leading to the end of the age and dawn of a new age. The seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowl plagues represent a chronological sequence of events that culminate in the Second Coming of Christ. Then comes the millennial reign, followed by the final judgment and the eternal state, or New Heaven and New Earth.

Yet, there can also be no doubt that some measure of recapitulation occurs in the various visions of the Apocalypse. This simply means that the different sections of the book are, to some extent, repetitious. One vision may provide a "snapshot" of a particular future event, while another vision may provide a snapshot of the same event but from a different angle. For instance, Revelation 13 may recapitulate portions of Revelation 11–12. The different visions in these sections seem to refer to the same time frame—"one thousand two hundred and sixty days" (11:3; 12:6), "a time and times and half a time" (12:14), "forty-two months"—but each focuses on particulars not found in the others. Chapter 12 tells us the Devil goes after God's people in an attempt to destroy them; chapter 13 tells us how he does this. Apparently, the "beast" who "ascends out of the bottomless pit" and kills the two witnesses (11:7) is the same "beast" who rises "out of the sea" (13:1) and "make[s] war with the saints" (verse 7).

So the book of Revelation has both chronological progression and recapitulation. Failure to recognize either will lead to errors in interpretation.

Unfortunately, many scholars have adopted some form of recapitulation theory to explain how the various visions relate to one another. They may claim, for instance, that 20:1–3 (the binding of Satan) recapitulates 12:7–9 (the casting of Satan to the earth). Both realities—the restraint of Satan and Satan's war on the saints—are said to exist

simultaneously.

A careful study of each text, however, reveals the absurdity of thinking that one recapitulates the other. In Revelation 12:7–9, Satan is cast *to* the place where nations and peoples dwell. In 20:1–3, Satan is cast *from* the place where nations and peoples dwell. This is a chronological order of events, not one text recapitulating another, or two different ways of describing the same event, or two realities existing at the same time.

During his thousand-year imprisonment, Satan is *prevented* from waging war on the saints. This is seen in the fact that when he is released at the end of the Millennium, he resumes his work of deception and war on the saints.

"Now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle, whose number is as the sand of the sea. They went up on the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them" (Revelation 20:7–9).

In the end, Satan loses the war. His collaborators are judged, his forces overthrown. The millennial reign ends and is quickly followed by the final judgment and complete expunction of evil. With all enemies now defeated, the transitional reign of Christ ends as the victorious King delivers His Kingdom to God the Father Himself.

"And I heard a loud voice in heaven saying, 'Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away'" (Revelation 21:3–4).

This is a simple analogy. The “strong man” is Satan, and Jesus “binds the strong man” before taking charge of the strong man’s house. But is this an action that’s already completed? Even if Satan has been in some sense “bound,” or restricted, does this mean that no greater restriction will be imposed upon him in the future? This text does not establish a past/present fulfillment for Revelation 20:1–3.

In addition to the above texts, post- and amillennialists highlight the New Testament passages that seem to indicate the Kingdom of God was inaugurated in the time of Jesus and the apostles. As noted above, Jesus said His expulsion of demons by the Spirit of God indicates that “the kingdom of God has come upon you.” He sent out His disciples to the cities, instructing them to proclaim, “The kingdom of God has come near to you” (Luke 10:9). Jesus Himself “came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel’” (Mark 1:14–15).

There is a sense in which the Kingdom of God was present then and is present now. During the ministry of Jesus, the Kingdom was present in the Person of the King of the Kingdom. The Church of God is the *embryonic* Kingdom, but not the Kingdom in its full and final form. So yes, there is a sense in which the Kingdom of God was and is present. But if there is no *future* establishment of the Kingdom of God on this earth, then *there is no sense in which the Kingdom is now present!* The *presence* of the Kingdom depends entirely upon the Kingdom of God as a *future* reality. To put it another way, aspects of the future Kingdom may, according to God’s purposes, be brought into the present. This principle, widely recognized by Bible scholars, has been described as the “presence of the future.”

And this leads us to an important, but often overlooked, principle—one that’s found throughout Scripture and is a vital key to understanding the above scriptures and many similar ones.

Proleptic Statements

“Prolepsis” is defined as “the representation or assumption of a future act or development as if presently existing or accomplished” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). Proleptic statements are not uncommon. For example, someone may say, “You’re in,” when in fact you’re not *yet* in, or “You’re a dead

man,” when in fact you’re still alive. These statements anticipate a future reality, but they’re stated as if the anticipated reality presently exists. The term “prolepsis” literally means *anticipation*.

Proleptic statements appear throughout Scripture.

God warned Adam, “[I]n the day that you eat of it [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17). This may be considered proleptic, for Adam did not die in the day he ate of the forbidden fruit. In effect, God was saying, “Eat it, and you’re as good as dead.”

God was speaking proleptically when He said to Abraham, “I have made you a father of many nations” (Genesis 17:5). Isaac, heir of the promise, had not yet been born when this statement was made.

In Genesis 17:16, God promises to give Abraham a son by his wife Sarah. English translations usually render the verbs in the passage in the future sense. The NKJV, for instance, states, “And I will bless her and also give you a son by her.” However, the Hebrew uses the past tense, stating that God *gave* a son to Abraham by Sarah, though Isaac had not yet been born at the time this statement was made. Young’s Literal Translation renders the verse this way: “and I have blessed her, and have also given to thee a son from her; and I have blessed her, and she hath become nations—kings of peoples are from her.” This is another example of a proleptic statement.

Paul, after speaking of Abraham’s faith and quoting Genesis 17:5 (“I have made you a father of many nations”), states that God “gives life to the dead and calls those things that do not exist as though they did” (Romans 4:17). Paul, then, recognized the use of prolepsis in Scripture.

The “presence of the Kingdom” passages should be understood as proleptic statements, for apart from the certainty of the future Kingdom of God, the Kingdom cannot in any sense be present. Unless there is a future resurrection of the dead, God’s people have not in any sense been “made alive” or “raised” with Christ. And unless there is a future resurrection and transformation of the saints, there is no such thing as eternal life as a present possession.

God, says Paul, “made us alive together with Christ ... and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6–7). This statement is not true if there is no *future* Kingdom of God. Our having been “made alive” *anticipates* and *depends upon*

the future reality of the resurrection of the dead. Our position “in heavenly places” *anticipates and depends upon* our future inheritance in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus assures us that “he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life” (John 5:24). Believers have eternal life as a present possession only in the sense that, as long as they’re faithful, eternal life is *guaranteed* to them. Jesus, then, is speaking proleptically.

The writer of the book of Hebrews understood Psalm 8:6 (“You have put all things in subjection under his [man’s] feet”) proleptically. He writes, “For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. *But now we do NOT YET see all things put under him*” (Hebrews 2:6, emphasis added).

The prophetic visions that make up the book of Revelation are interspersed with proleptic pictures of the triumphant church (7:4–17; 14:1–5; 15:2–4; 20:4–6). These “snapshots” of the glorified church of the future are designed to encourage the persecuted saints and motivate them to faithfully persevere in keeping the commandments of God and holding the faith of Jesus.

A good understanding of the use of prolepsis in the Bible should help us better understand the biblical statements assuring us that Christ has vanquished the enemy, having taken him and his legions captive and made a public spectacle of them. While it is true that Christ defeated the Devil in mortal combat and restricted his power, the proleptic element within these passages should not be ignored. And it may be true that the *future* binding of Satan has, in a limited sense, been brought into the present, but it is clear that the full confinement described in Revelation 20:1–3 *has not yet happened!*

The Devil Is “Alive and Well”—and ACTIVE— on Planet Earth!

Peter cautioned, “Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world” (1 Peter 5:8–9).

How does Satan cause the “brotherhood in the world” to experience “sufferings”? He uses *human agents* in his war against God’s people. Sometimes

these human agents are government officials and religious leaders. In other words, according to Peter, the Devil *still* has power to *deceive the nations*. Surely Peter did not think the Devil had been chained and confined in such a way “that he should deceive the nations no more.”

Paul affirms this when he writes, “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:11–12).

Paul is saying that the *real* enemy is Satan the Devil, not the human principalities, powers, and rulers the Devil deceives and uses in his war against the people of God. Paul obviously did not believe Satan had been so restricted that he could no longer deceive the nations.

To the Ephesian believers, Paul writes, “And you ... were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:1–2).

The “prince of the power of the air” is Satan. Here Paul connects Satan with “the course of this world,” indicating the powerful influence Satan exerts in the world, and tells the Ephesian believers they were once under the Devil’s powerful influence. He affirms that Satan is still very active in the world when he describes him as “the spirit who *now* works in the sons of disobedience.”

As noted earlier, the two beasts of Revelation—“the beast and the false prophet”—are political and religious powers Satan influences and uses in his war against the people of God. In their original form, they were the Roman Empire and the propagandizing imperial cult, but embodiments of these two powers have appeared several times over the centuries and will appear again as a major force in the end of the age. This shows that Satan *still* “deceives the whole world” (Revelation 12:9).

Some interpreters claim that Revelation 20:1–3 (the binding of Satan) and Revelation 12:7–9 (Satan’s expulsion from heaven) are two very different ways of saying the same thing. Philip E. Hughes, for instance, writes, “The casting of the dragon into the abyss, therefore, we understand as coinciding with his being cast down from heaven as previously recorded

in 12:7–9” (*The Book of Revelation*, p. 210).

In agreement with this view, the booklet, *Revelation: A Divine Message of Hope*, published by the Knights of Columbus, states, “Thus the thousand year reign is not something confined to the end of the world. It is now going on. The chaining of Satan is one way of saying what was put quite another way in 12:7–9. There Satan was pictured cast out of heaven to lead the world astray. Here he is cast out and submitted to control. Both facts are true” (p. 42).

But this view obscures the story flow that emerges from the successive visions that make up the book. In Revelation 12 and 13, the expelled dragon makes war with the saints, empowers the beast and false prophet, and leads the world astray. In chapters 19 and 20, the beast and false prophet are destroyed, and the dragon is chained and sealed in the abyss. This is not one vision recapitulating another, but visions that reveal a chronologically ordered flow of events.

The Binding and Imprisonment of Satan

Revelation 19:11–21 describes the Second Coming of Christ. If, as some claim, this is not the Second Coming, then the book of Revelation, which describes “a new heaven and a new earth” and “the holy city, New Jerusalem” (chapters 21–22), apparently does not speak of the Second Coming of Christ. Given the central place of the Second Advent in the ending of the old age and beginning of the new one, it would seem odd indeed if the book of Revelation did not include a description of this crucial event.

In Revelation 19:11–21, Christ, depicted as a Warrior-King riding a white horse, comes with His heavenly army and meets His enemies on the battlefield. The beast and false prophet are “cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone” (verse 20), and their armies are “killed with the sword which proceeded from the mouth of Him who sat on the horse” (verse 21). Then, an angel descends from heaven, captures the dragon, binds him, casts him into the bottomless pit, and secures the entry so the dragon cannot escape (20:1–3). As long as he’s confined to the pit, the dragon can “deceive the nations no more.”

The description here does not harmonize with the picture of the Devil as a “roaring lion” who “walks about ... seeking whom he may devour” or as the “prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience.” Nor does it complement the notion of a crime boss who, though incarcerated, has limited but significant influence though contacts outside the prison walls. No, what is described here, in highly symbolic terms, is the complete (though temporary) removal of the Devil’s influence. The Devil is out of sight, out of mind—until he shows up again at the end of the Millennium.

Between now and the day Satan is chained and confined, God’s people will have to contend with him. Paul’s advice to the saints of Ephesus is the best advice for saints today...

“Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Ephesians 6:11).



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