

THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

A 2nd-Century Eschatology for the
21st-Century Church

Michael J. Svigel

Go Deeper Excursus 18 A Survey and History of Interpretations of Revelation 20:1–3

A variety of interpretations of the binding of Satan in Revelation 20:1–3 have appeared throughout history, most depending on how the interpreter addresses the question of the millennial period itself (premillennial, amillennial, or postmillennial). In the following pages, I present representative interpretations of the binding of Satan from postmillennial, amillennial, and premillennial perspectives.

I begin with postmillennialism as the most recent iteration of millennialism. Because many forms of postmillennialism were often coupled with a historicist approach to the fulfillment of the book of Revelation, many interpreters saw their own days as the pivotal spiritual/social/religious crisis that would give way to the advent of the millennial golden age. For example, for some, the arrival of a Protestant king in England in 1689 and the displacement of King James II, a Catholic, was thought to have marked the beginning of the binding of Satan, which would continue with the successive victories of the gospel over the antichristian Roman Catholic forces.¹ This introduces the idea of a gradual binding of Satan resulting in a full binding in the future.

Today some postmillennial interpreters understand Revelation 19:11–21 as a symbolic vision of the victory of Christianity over the forces of Satan and view the result of that victory the complete binding of Satan, who is now partially restrained to the degree the gospel has realized the kingdom in the world. In that version of the postmillennial view, during the future millennial golden age but prior to Christ's return at the close of the millennium, Satan will be fully bound. This is expressed clearly in the nineteenth-century postmillennialist William Reid:

With regard to the time when the events shadowed forth are to take place, it may very safely be said, it is yet future. In that great moral conflict, which is called the battle of Armageddon, there are, as we have already seen, three foes of the Lord, who are in

¹ Kenneth G. C. Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium: Studies in Biblical Eisegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 13.

succession to be overthrown: first, Papacy, symbolized by the beast; then Mohammedanism, symbolized by the false prophet; after all this the dragon is to be overthrown. But Papacy and Mohammedanism have not yet filled up the measure of their earthly life. It is therefore evident that the events symbolized by the binding of Satan are yet in the future.²

Other postmillennialists may understand Revelation 19:11–21 as referring to the entire church age as Christ reigns and accomplishes both victory and judgment against unbelievers in this world through the church. The millennium, then, may be a reference to the intermediate state after believers depart and reign with Christ and, regarding the departed saints, Satan is “bound”; but regarding the world of unbelievers, Satan is yet loosed.³

The amillennial interpretation of the binding of Satan usually involves a limit on its scope and scale. The imagery of the angel seizing the dragon, binding him with a chain, and casting him into the abyss for a thousand years is not a future event but a symbol for a restraint or limit on Satan’s ability to carry out specific activities to their fullest in the present age. Warfield presents this classic view:

There is, indeed, no literal “binding of Satan” to be thought of at all: what happens, happens not to Satan but to the saints, and is only represented as happening to Satan for the purposes of the symbolical picture. What actually happens is that the saints described are removed from the sphere of Satan’s assaults. The saints described are free from all access of Satan—he is bound with respect to them: outside of their charmed circle his horrid work goes on. This is indicated, indeed, in the very employment of the two symbols “a thousand years” and “a little time.” A “thousand years” is the symbol of heavenly completeness and blessedness; the “little time” of earthly turmoil and evil. Those in the “thousand years” are safe from Satan’s assaults: those outside the thousand years are still enduring his attacks.⁴

In Warfield’s view, the “thousand years” refers to the departed saints in the intermediate state between Christ’s first and second coming. Thus, they are completely out of reach of Satan, being present in heavenly paradise. In this view, the binding with respect to the saints is, indeed, total.

Spence expressed a similar view that Satan is simultaneously bound and loosed, though he applied it not to the church triumphant in heaven but to the church militant on earth:

The thousand years’ binding, and the loosing for a little time, describe two events which occur contemporaneously. While the godly need have no fear, because even in this world Satan’s power as regards them is completely limited by Christ’s act of redemption, yet in

² William J. Reid, *Lectures on the Revelation* (Pittsburgh PA: Stevenson, Foster & Co., 1878), 460.

³ See detailed discussion in Loraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1957), 388–410.

⁴ Benjamin B. Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1929), 651.

another sense, as regards the ungodly, Satan is loosed and obtains power over them. The chief difficulty in this interpretation lies in the words, “after this.” But it must be remembered that the “thousand years” do not express a period of time, but the quality of completeness. Therefore the loosing of Satan must not be supposed to take place in a period subsequent to the period of the binding.⁵

On the other hand, many, if not most, modern amillennialists regard the binding of Satan to refer to the present church age but see it as limited in scope and scale—Satan is “bound” at the cross, defeated by his resurrection, and/or restrained by the work of the Spirit in the world through the church. This restraint is limited and usually applies narrowly to freeing the world from Satan’s hold on the nations outside Israel to allow the gospel to go forth. Or Satan is bound with regard to the elect, unable to blind them and prevent them from believing. Or he is bound according to his ability to fully manifest his wickedness on the earth by rousing the evil nations in the final persecution and end-times destruction of the world. A few examples of these will suffice to illustrate the way in which Revelation 20:1–3 is read in the amillennial tradition, which is sometimes also shared by some postmillennialists. Hoekema writes:

What is meant, now, by the binding of Satan? In the Old Testament times...all the nations of the world except Israel were, so to speak, under Satan’s rule. At that time the people of Israel were the recipients of God’s special revelation, so that they knew God’s truth about themselves, about their sinfulness, and about the way they could obtain forgiveness for their sins. During this same time, however, the other nations of the world did not know that truth...except for an occasional person, family or city which came into contact with God’s special revelation. One could say that during this time these nations were deceived by Satan, as our first parents had been deceived by Satan when they fell into sin in the Garden of Eden. We conclude, then, that the binding of Satan during the gospel age means that, first, he cannot prevent the spread of the gospel, and second, he cannot gather all the enemies of Christ together to attack the church.⁶

This has become a standard understanding of the referent to the binding of Satan for the amillennial view of Revelation 20.⁷ In this case the 1000 years symbolizes a long period prior to which Satan had little restraint and after which he will have freedom to deceive and destroy.

⁵ H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., *Revelation*, The Pulpit Commentary (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1909), 471.

⁶ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 228.

⁷ See, e.g., G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 984–87; Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 283; Simon J. Kistemaker, *Revelation*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 534–35; Leon Morris, *Revelation*, rev. ed., Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 223–225; Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 500–502.

Premillennialists, however, see Revelation 20:1–3 as referring primarily to the complete banishment of Satan from the heavenly and earthly realms, confined for the duration of the millennial phase of the kingdom in the prison of the “abyss.”⁸ It should be noted that the premillennial position on the future binding of Satan allows for a partial *restraining* and *restricting* of the devil’s activities in the present age between Christ’s resurrection/ascension and his return as judge and king. As such, the premillennialist can and usually does agree completely with the amillennialist regarding Satan’s restricted power as it relates to the regenerate. Classic premillennialism may also acknowledge limits placed upon Satan and the demonic powers in the world today regarding the advancement of the gospel and the prevention of Satan’s ability to take complete control of the world powers to wage his final war against the saints (2 Thess 2:5–8).

The issue is not really whether Satan and the spirits of wickedness are presently limited in their exercise of power in the world; the question is whether the referent of the symbolic vision of Revelation 20:1–3 is this present partial restraint or a future total banishment from the world. I assert that attempts at explaining the language and imagery of the binding of Satan by appealing to passages elsewhere in the New Testament that speak of limits placed on Satan’s activities in the present age do not advance the amillennial or postmillennial case. Such restraint on Satan and demonic powers in the inter-advent period is not disputed. The issue is not whether Satan is partially restrained in the present; the issue is whether the partial binding in the present age is the referent of the symbols in Revelation 20:1–3.

Classic premillennialism allows for a spiritual, partial realization of a limited binding of Satan as regards believers today or even with reference to the restraining of full deception and wickedness that will characterize the end times. That is, the both/and approach of classic premillennialism allows for the kind of spiritual “partial binding” in the present age as the kingdom is manifested on earth as in heaven, as in amillennialism. It even allows for a progressively more evident binding of Satan’s works and ways as the church’s influence is more fully manifested in the world, as in some postmillennial views. Yet premillennialists assert that the *ultimate* referent of Revelation 20:1–3 is to the complete binding and banishment of Satan in the future millennial period. In this tradition, classic premillennialist Charles Spurgeon notes that during the millennium, Satan will be bound by Christ’s power, even though he is partially bound today:

When temptation is kept away from a Christian it is the Savior’s restraining power which holds back the arch enemy. And if the enemy comes in like a flood it is by permission of Jesus that the trial comes. Every roaming of the lion of the Pit is permitted by our Master, or he could never go forth on his devouring errands. The key that shall bind the old dragon in those blessed days of the millennial rest is in our Lord’s power—and the final triumph, when no sin shall any further be known on earth and evil shall be pent up in the grim caverns of Hell—will be achieved by Christ Jesus, the Man, the Mediator, our Lord and

⁸ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: Verse by Verse* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016), 325.

God! To open, then, and to shut out. To shut in and to shut out—these are the works of the keys.⁹

Reaching back to the earlier centuries of the church, the binding of Satan is associated with the end-times destruction of the antichrist. Irenaeus of Lyons viewed the proper, complete fulfillment of Revelation 20:1–3 as a future reality concurrent with the future millennium. Yet, as to be expected, Irenaeus still observed his both/and approach, as he also drew spiritual application for those who are set free from sin and death today:

Of Him the prophet said, *You will tread upon the asp and the basilisk; the young lion and the serpent You will trample under foot.* By this he pointed out that sin (which had made humanity cold), which rose and spread itself out against the human race, would, together with death that held sway, be deprived of its power; and it would be trampled on (*conculcaretur*) by Him in the last times (*novissimus temporibus*), namely, when the lion, that is, the Antichrist, would rush upon (*insiliens*) the human race; and He would put in chains (*adligans*) the dragon, that ancient serpent, and make it subject (*subiciens*) to the power of the human race, which had been conquered, so that humanity could trample down all his [the dragon's] power. (*Haer.* 3.23.7)¹⁰

Though acknowledging that “the three participles (*insiliens*, *adligans*, *subiciens*) explain Christ's action in the last times, and so they depend on *conculcaretur* as temporal clauses,” Unger makes the claims that “the ‘last times’ [*novissimus temporibus*] are not the period after the second coming of Christ, as some have held” but that “in Irenaeus they are the entire period after Christ's ascension until His second coming, though the final confrontation at the eschaton is of special importance.”¹¹ The problem with this assertion is that the advent of the antichrist (*Antichristus*) in Irenaeus is always associated with the end times—the period just prior to the return of Christ and the millennial kingdom—not with the entire span of time since Christ's coming. Thus, if the time of the Antichrist is yet future, so is the time of the binding of Satan. This does not, however, prevent Irenaeus from applying these truths spiritually to the church today, which he appears to do in the remainder of the chapter. This is consistent with the both/and approach in Irenaeus premillennialism—the prophecy will be fulfilled literally and fully in the future; it is also being fulfilled spiritually and partially in the present.

Similarly, Tertullian outlines the events of the end times this way according to Revelation. Satan will be bound in the future during the millennial kingdom, then cast into the fire:

⁹ Charles H. Spurgeon, “Christ with the Keys of Death and Hell” (Sermon 894, 3 October 1869) in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 15 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1869), 556.

¹⁰ Translation from Dominic J. Unger, trans., *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies, Book 3*, Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation, vol. 64 (New York: Newman, 2012), 109.

¹¹ Unger, *Irenaeus, Book 3*, 208n34, 35.

In the Revelation of John, again, the order of these times is spread out to view, which ‘the souls of the martyrs’ are taught to wait for beneath the altar, whilst they earnestly pray to be avenged and judged: (taught, I say, to wait), in order that the world may first drink to the dregs the plagues that await it out of the vials of the angels, and that the city of fornication may receive from the ten kings its deserved doom, and that the beast Antichrist with his false prophet may wage war on the Church of God; and that, after the casting of the devil into the bottomless pit for a while, the blessed prerogative of the first resurrection may be ordained from the thrones; and then again, after the consignment of him to the fire, that the judgment of the final and universal resurrection may be determined out of the books” (*Res.* 25).

Though Irenaeus and Tertullian represent the earliest understandings of the fulfillment of the binding of Satan in the early church, the interpretation soon changes to a spiritual and partial binding in the present age, denying a future, literal fulfillment. In Tyconius’s fourth-century interpretation of Revelation 20:1–3, he sees the angel descending from heaven to bind Satan as none other than Jesus himself—“*And I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He speaks of the Lord Jesus Christ in his first coming. Holding the key of the abyss, that is, [restraining] the power of evil people, and a large chain in his hand. God gave this power to his people*” (*Tyc. Exp. Apoc.* 7 [20:1]).¹² Then the period of the dragon’s binding is the present age: “*And he took hold of the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and he bound him for a thousand years, surely in his first coming, as he himself says: ‘Who is able to enter into the house of a strong man and steal his vessels, unless he first binds the strong man?’ He said a thousand years as a part for the whole, that is, the remainder of the thousand years of the sixth day, in which the Lord was born and suffered*” (*Tyc. Exp. Apoc.* 7 [20:2]).¹³

It should be noted, though, that Tyconius understands this binding as occurring for the remainder of the six-thousand-year period—an extremely common reckoning of redemptive history at the time. In the normal reckoning, those six thousand years of human history would then be followed by a sabbath rest. The binding of Satan in the abyss, Tyconius understands as the casting of Satan into the hearts of evil people (7 [20:3]). However, he is unable to deceive those who are destined to life. Tyconius then understands the loosing of Satan as referring to “the time of Antichrist, when the ‘man of sin’ will have been revealed and will have received all power for persecuting, power such as he never had from the beginning” (7 [20:3]).¹⁴

In the fifth century, Augustine of Hippo follows Tyconius’s lead and presents another classic amillennial interpretation of the binding of Satan. Relying on Christ’s teaching that “no one can

¹² Tyconius of Carthage, *Exposition of the Apocalypse*, trans. Francis X. Gumerlock, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 134 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 173.

¹³ Gumerlock, *Tyconius*, 176–177.

¹⁴ Gumerlock, *Tyconius*, 177.

enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up (δήση) the strong man" (Mark 3:27), Augustine argued that John saw the angel descending from heaven and binding the devil—the strong man—and thus “checked and repressed his power to seduce and possess those destined to be set free” (*Civ.* 20.7).¹⁵ Augustine then describes two views on how to take the 1000-year period in his amillennial sense. First, that millennium could “take place in the sixth and last millennium (the sixth ‘day’), the latter span of which is now passing, and that when St. John spoke of the last part of this millennium as ‘a thousand years’ he was using, figuratively, the whole to indicate the part” (*Civ.* 20.7). In this case, when Christ returns, he will usher in the eschatological “sabbath”—“the endless repose of the blessed”—that is, the eternal state. In that view one can understand the number 1000 more or less literally as indicating the last thousand years of human history prior to its end. Second, it could refer to “the Christian era” between the first and second advent, the number 1000 used purely symbolically to indicate the “fulness of time” (*Civ.* 20.7).

During this present long period of time between the first and second advent, the devil is bound—“cast into the ‘abyss,’ taken in the sense of the countless number of godless men whose bitter hatred of God’s Church comes from the abysmal depths of their hearts” (*Civ.* 20.7). As far as the purpose of the binding and sealing over, Augustine writes:

The nations or men freed from the Devil’s seductions, in virtue of this restraining and disabling chaining and imprisonment, are those who he used to lead astray and hold captive, but who now belong to Christ.... With respect to other men not predestined to eternal life, the Devil continues to this very day to lead these men astray and to drag them down into eternal damnation.... The reason, therefore, why the Devil is bound and cast into the abyss is to prevent his deceiving the nations that now make up the Church as he used to deceive and possess them before they became the Church. (*Civ.* 20.7).

Satan will be set free at the end of the age, for a short period prior to the final judgment and the end of the world: “At that time the Devil will have a single objective in his deception, namely, to bring on this battle.... His secret hatred will blaze out into open persecution. For this is to be the very last of all persecutions immediately preceding the very last of all judgments” (*Civ.* 20.11).

In the sixth century, Cassiodorus, with other later fathers, understood the binding of Satan to take place during the present age as well: “Then an angel descends from heaven who, having taken hold of the dragon who is Satan, sent him into the abyss bound with a chain. And he ‘bound him for a thousand year,’ by which, through a figure of synecdoche, ‘a whole’ is indicated ‘from a part.’ When its end is, is held as altogether unknown. Nevertheless, by the consensus of the fathers they are computed from the nativity of the Lord. [Satan was bound] so that he might not, by having unchecked authority, deceive the nations who were going to believe. But he says that at the end of

¹⁵ Translation from Saint Augustine, *The City of God Books XVII–XXII*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh and Daniel J. Honan. The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1954).

the world, Satan will be loosed; and when Antichrist comes, many martyrs and confessors will be brought forth” (Cass. *Exp. Apoc.* 20.1–3).¹⁶ The “consensus of the fathers” to which Cassiodorus refers can only mean those in the preceding centuries. We have seen that the earliest interpretation of the second century, in fact, understood the binding of Satan as occurring yet future at the start of the millennium.

Finally, Gregory the Great (died c. 604), writes concerning the binding of Satan:

The ancient serpent is bound with a chain and cast into the bottomless pit, because kept away from the hearts of the good and trapped within the minds of the reprobate, he exercises dominion over them with greater savagery. And a little afterwards he is described as being brought out of the depths of the bottomless pit, because from the hearts of the wicked, which now rage secretly, once he has gained power against the Church at that time, he will openly sally forth in the violence of persecution. (Gregory I, *Moralia* 18.42 [67] 9–22)¹⁷

¹⁶ Translation from Francis X. Gumerlock, “Cassiodorus: *Brief Explanations on the Apocalypse*,” in *Cassiodorus, St. Gregory the Great, and Anonymous Greek Scholia: Writings on the Apocalypse*, trans. Francis X. Gumerlock, Mark Delcogliano, and T. C. Schmidt, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, ed. David H. Hunter et al. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2022). All quotations from Cassiodorus’s work rely on Gumerlock’s translation and will be abbreviated as *Cass. Exp. Apoc.* 6.12, where the reference indicates the chapter and verse upon which Cassiodorus is commenting.

¹⁷ Gumerlock, et al, *Writings on the Apocalypse*, 76.