

THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

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

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Go Deeper Excursus 19

A Critique of Beale's Interpretation of Revelation 20:1–3

G. K. Beale draws numerous lines of intertextuality and connections to strengthen his commitment to a recapitulation view of Revelation 20:1–3. His attempt at interpreting the binding of Satan within an eschatological framework in which the symbolic vision of Revelation 20:1–3 is being realized in the present age is commendable. However, in the following pages I offer a brief critique of Beale's framing from my own perspective as a classic Irenaeus premillennialist. Beale writes:

Most commentators agree that the beast ascends from the abyss of 11:7 directly before Christ's second coming. This ascent should probably be identified with Satan's ascent from the abyss in 20:3b, 7, which further confirms that Satan's ascent is prior to the final coming of Christ. Just as the beast represents Satan's authority throughout history in 13:1–2 (cf. 12:3), so the beast's ascent at the end of history can be spoken of in 20:3, 7 as the dragon's ascent because the former again represents the latter.¹

This may sound plausible on the surface, but in the vision of the ascent of the beast in Revelation 13, the beast is able to ascend only because the dragon—Satan—has been active in warfare, destruction, and other exploits throughout Revelation 12, preceding the rising of the beast from the abyss (13:1). Thus the ascent of the beast from the sea/abyss cannot be the same as the release of the dragon from the abyss. As a rule, our interpretation of these texts must align with what the passage affirms in its context—syntactical, literary, and historical. Beale's explanation seems to fall short.

Beale also argues, "It is wrong to picture the devil being 'cast out of the earth' in some spatial sense, so that he is no longer present on earth. This would be to take 'abyss' in an overly literalistic manner. Rather, like 'heaven' throughout the Apocalypse, it represents a spiritual dimension

¹ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 987.

existing alongside and in the midst of the earthly, not above it or below.”² The problem, though, is that “abyss” has a particular meaning and referent in the first century that should not be overlooked. Beale’s treatment redefines the term ἄβυσσος in a way that is inconsistent with its first-century meaning: “The abyss is one of the various metaphors representing the spiritual sphere in which the devil and his accomplices operate.”³ Later, in an exegetical note, Beale acknowledges, “In addition to the implied synonymous meaning of the ‘abyss’ in 9:1–2 and 20:1 with ‘death and Hades’ in 1:18 and 6:8, ἄβυσσος is also synonymous with the realm of the ‘dead’ (νεκρός) in Rom. 10:7 (‘who will descend into the abyss, that is, to bring Christ up from the dead?’). Likewise, in Diogenes Laertius 4.5.27 ἄβυσσος connotes the place of the dead.”⁴ However, this represents a narrow selection of connotations for a term that has a much deeper, richer, and stable meaning in both canonical and extracanonical literature—a fact affirmed repeatedly and extensively in both lexica and wordbooks. Our interpretation of symbols, language, and imagery must fit the definitions of these terms in their original historical-theological contexts. Beale’s narrow redefinition of “abyss” fails to do this. Later, he does acknowledge, “The predominant idea of the abyss in the LXX and Jewish writing is that of a place of punishment where evil spirits are confined under God’s sovereignty. In the LXX this realm is also a symbol for the forces of evil (see further on 9:1).”⁵ This recasting of the first-century imagery is misleading and further reflects a selection of lexical evidence based on an amillennial theological presupposition. Rather, one would expect that the “predominant idea” should govern our understanding of the language and imagery of Revelation 20:1–3. In that case, ἄβυσσος should be properly understood as a place of confinement for wicked spirits in the spiritual realm—that is, the premillennial view.

Beale then engages the 1 Enoch background of the language and imagery. It is essential to read his engagement carefully to understand his reasons for rejecting it as exegetically determinative:

1 En. 10:4–16 portrays an angel “binding and casting” evil angels into a pit “until the day of their judgment,” when “they will be led off to the abyss of fire and to the torment and the prison, in which they will be confined forever.” The same picture is found in *1 En.* 18:11–19:3 except that the place of confinement before the final judgment is also called the “deep abyss” and “prison” (so also *Jub.* 5:6–14; *1 En.* 88:1–3; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6; Tob. 8:3). It is true that in all of these Jewish texts the evil spirits appear to be bound in a complete way without any exception, but that does not necessitate that the same reality in [sic] depicted in Revelation 20. Indeed, in all these texts it is never Satan but only evil spirits who are imprisoned before or at the time of the Noahic deluge or subsequently in the OT epoch. Even the NT sees demonic spirits as absolutely imprisoned but Satan and other spirits as on the loose (so 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6 in contrast to texts such as 1 Pet. 5:8). *1 En.* 54 speaks of

² Beale, *Revelation*, 987.

³ Beale, *Revelation*, 987.

⁴ Beale, *Revelation*, 989.

⁵ Beale, *Revelation*, 989.

the end of the age, when good angels will “cast into the abyss of complete condemnation” forever (53:2) human, and possibly demonic, subjects of Satan who were “leading astray those who dwell on the earth.”⁶

I find puzzling Beale’s reasons for rejecting the language and imagery of 1 Enoch as the governing background for the language and imagery of the binding of Satan in 20:1–3. Pointing out that the demonic objects of binding and casting are not Satan does nothing to advance a counterargument. Considering the vast number of demonic spirits, it does not advance Beale’s case to point out that Satan or demons were still active after the binding of some demonic powers. It simply means that some were bound while some were still on the loose. After all, 1 Enoch is the fictional account of antediluvian wicked spirits, and Jude and 2 Peter both tell us that only a portion of wicked angels were consigned to the spiritual prison, not all. This background should actually strengthen the interpretation that Revelation 20:1–3 refers to a complete banishing of Satan from influence in the earthly realm; he will receive in the future what that portion of fallen angels prior to the flood received in the past—consignment to the abyss.

Having dispensed with the wildly popular 1 Enoch as the background of Revelation 20:1–3, Beale then appeals to the post-New Testament *Gospel of Nicodemus* 22:2, in which Satan is bound after Christ’s death. But note that this is a fourth- or fifth-century apocryphal work intended to advance the amillennial interpretation of Revelation 20 that was gaining popularity at that time (see Go Deeper Excursus 18). Thus, the *Gospel of Nicodemus* is not a background to Revelation 20 useful for establishing its meaning in the original context. Beale also appeals to the apocryphal *Prayer of Manasseh* 3, which credits God with binding the sea and shutting up the deep; these are poetic references to the creation account in Genesis 1, not references to restraining or binding Satan or demons in the abyss.

Beale wrongly assumes that the demons bound during the deluge (2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6) “were subsequently allowed to be active on earth (including presumably Satan), so the binding in Revelation 20 might be so qualified.”⁷ But this overlooks the fact that in both 2 Peter and Jude, and in the general understanding of these matters at the time, only a portion of the demonic spirits were (and still are) confined in the abyss and utterly incapable of interacting with this world. These will be released for a while in the future, which is probably what we see in the release of demonic hoards from the abyss in Revelation 9:1–3. And the subsequent activity of these beings does not occur during their binding in the abyss but after their release from it. This parallel comfortably fits the futurist reading of Revelation 20:1–3. Beale finally appeals to Isaiah 24:21–22 and 27:1 as backgrounds for the imagery of Revelation 20:2–3.⁸ However, the chronology set forth in that passage actually fits the premillennial futurist view quite well, as the dragon is defeated after the time of tribulation and resurrection (see Isa 26).

⁶ Beale, *Revelation*, 989.

⁷ Beale, *Revelation*, 990.

⁸ Beale, *Revelation*, 990–91.