

## When Was the Millennium?

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The book of Revelation was written to inform people living in the first century regarding events to take place “soon” because the time was “near” (Rev. 1:1, 3, ESV throughout). Therefore, the so-called *millennium* (Rev. 20:2-7) must have, at least, *begun* at some point “near” to the time of writing. Otherwise, the vision must be deemed a false prophecy. Any theory placing the start of the millennium in *our* future is inconsistent with references to nearness, not only at the beginning of Revelation, but at the end of the book *after* the millennial prediction (Rev. 22:10).

### *Millennium a mystery for everyone*

The 1,000-year period is a mystery for all Bible students, not just preterists. We can read through the gospels, Acts and all the epistles without finding the slightest hint of any 1,000-year period being a part of God’s plan for humankind. Then suddenly, near the end of Revelation, a surprise millennium is introduced seemingly as an afterthought. Imagine, Jesus never said a word about it, the gospel writers never mentioned it, nor did Paul, Peter, James, Jude or the author of Hebrews. Jesus said, “all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15), but never said *anything* about a millennium. Is it believable that a millennium was supposed to be a component of the gospel, but Jesus didn’t know about it? If he did, why didn’t he tell anyone? It is a rather large item to omit! If Jesus knew about the millennium, but didn’t tell his disciples, why did he claim to have told them everything he knew? Since there is no evidence he ever taught anything about a special 1,000-year component of the gospel, those who expound Scripture must question whether *we* should be promoting it.

For centuries, Christendom placed little emphasis on the millennium. That’s because nowhere except in six short verses in Revelation — a book written in an ancient genre laced with highly *symbolic* language — do we find a 1,000-year period. Perhaps this indicates modern teachings attach far too much significance to the millennium. We would further suggest that it is unwise to formulate doctrines based on such figurative and symbolic writing.

### **Don’t base your convictions on an obscure passage of Scripture.**

An obscure passage is one in which the meaning is not easily understood. Because these passages are difficult to understand even when proper principles of interpretation are used, they should not be used as a basis for doctrine.<sup>1</sup>

—Kay Arthur

### *Numbers in Revelation*

Not all numbers in the book of Revelation can be considered reliable, i.e., taken literally. This may sound like “watering down” Scripture or saying Scripture is unreliable; however, what we are saying is that some numbers used in the vision were simply *not intended* to be considered accurate. The following example illustrates this point: Rev. 9:16 mentions a war involving an army of 200 million men on horseback. Should we expect this to take place as described? The book of Revelation belongs to a genre of prophetic writing extant in the first century commonly referred to as *apocalyptic*. The book of Enoch referenced in Jude 14 is also written in this style.<sup>2</sup> The genre is characterized by extreme hyperbole and employment of numbers as symbols.<sup>3</sup> It is often argued that only today does there exist a nation large enough to raise an army of 200 million (China). However, there are at least two problems with this line of reasoning:

1. The events of Revelation were predicted to take place “soon” after the book was written (Rev. 1:1, 3; 22:10);
2. If we feel compelled to interpret this enormous number with wooden literalism, we must be consistent and take *all* of Revelation literally. This approach will quickly get us into trouble. For instance, consider this passage:

<sup>18</sup>And another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.precept.org/site/DocServer/InductiveStudyOverview\\_1-Sheet.pdf?docID=701](http://www.precept.org/site/DocServer/InductiveStudyOverview_1-Sheet.pdf?docID=701)

<sup>2</sup> Jude quotes Enoch 1:9.

<sup>3</sup> The book of Enoch refers to 12 winds blowing through the 12 portals of the earth (ch. 76:1). Obviously, this should not be regarded as a scientific explanation.

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sharp sickle, “Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.”<sup>19</sup> So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God.<sup>20</sup> And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse’s bridle, for 1,600 stadia [about 184 miles]. (Rev. 14:18-20)

Should this be taken literally? Will angels be harvesting grapes with sickles? When the grapes are crushed in a winepress, will blood pour out? Would a modern-day battle be fought with horses? Possibly; however, there is not enough blood in the world to come up “as high as a horse’s bridle” for a distance of 184 miles. Moreover, it’s doubtful anywhere near 200 million horses could be available for a war at anytime in the foreseeable future. If this passage is about to be fulfilled as some claim, the Chinese had better get serious about breeding horses!

The task of moving 200 million soldiers on horses all the way from China to the Middle-East would be a logistical nightmare. How do you feed 200 million men and their horses and *millions* of support personnel? Such a mass would be vulnerable to attack all along the way before finally gathering at Armageddon (Rev. 16:16). If any soldiers or horses survived the trek, once in position on the open Plain of Megiddo, the force could be wiped out in an instant with a single nuclear weapon. It’s doubtful Chinese military commanders would maneuver their entire army into such a vulnerable position. An immovable-force strategy may have worked in the past, but today it would be suicidal.

But beyond these practical considerations, it’s doubtful the army of 200 million even refers to humans. MacArthur says it is “better understood as referring to a demon force.”<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, all this imagery was intended to *figuratively* portray God’s judgment upon people. The graphic images and numbers are used for dramatic effect. Two hundred million is simply an exaggerated number intended to make an impact. The author, God (Rev. 1:1), is assuming the reader will be intelligent and mature enough to understand how and

why the style is being used. We cannot read Revelation the way we do other books. Since numbers are grossly inflated, and armies may actually refer to the demonic realm, we would strongly suggest once again that apocalyptic literature is not suitable for establishing doctrine, especially when support for an item in question is *completely absent* from the rest of the New Testament, and no one seemed to know anything about it.

### When was the Millennium?

The millennial prediction (Rev. 20:2-7) seems to be referring to the relatively brief interval between the church’s first persecution, which Paul took part in, and the Neronian persecution beginning in A.D. 64. Christians were allowed to preach freely under Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54) who even expelled from Rome the Jews who were persecuting them. We are suggesting that “the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan” was “bound” in “the pit” through Claudius so the work of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles could proceed, “so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while” (the Neronian persecution). But why is this admittedly brief period referred to as *1,000 years*? Here is one possible answer: It may be significant that Greco-Roman tradition said the dead dwelt in Hades 1,000 years before attaining new life.<sup>5</sup> In Rev. 20:3, the “dragon” is released from the pit and brought back to life in the person of Emperor Nero. He halted preaching of the gospel to “the nations” through a new persecution far worse than anything before the time of Claudius.

Although everything in Revelation has been fulfilled, it is difficult to pin down the fulfillment of every detail. Yes, we feel that the millennium is merely a “detail” of Revelation not actually referring to 1,000 years at all, its true meaning open to question.

Some readers, having attached much more significance to the millennium than we are allowing for, will not be satisfied with our thesis. However, *we* cannot be satisfied with *any* explanation that leaves

<sup>4</sup> John F. MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, NASB ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006), Rev. 9:16.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Republic*, Bk. X; Virgil, *Aeneid*, Bk. VI; cf. Justin Martyr, *1<sup>st</sup> Apology*, VIII.

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*anything* in Revelation unfulfilled because it would imply a failed prophecy and be inconsistent with numerous other references in the New Testament to the first-century fulfillment of all eschatological predictions. Our articles *Jesus Predicted a First-Century Return* and *The Apostles Predicted a First-Century Return of Christ* make it abundantly clear that *all* eschatological events were to take place within the first century. If they didn't, we might as well stop studying the Bible because its predictions are unreliable.

### ***Conclusion***

Since the book of Revelation was written in a genre referred to as *apocalyptic*, incorporating symbols and numbers never intended to be taken literally, it is not a good basis for establishing doctrine in the absence of external biblical support. We must conclude that today, far too much emphasis is being placed on the single brief passage referring to a millennium.

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