

The Binding of Satan — Background and Introduction to the Controversy¹

In Revelation 20:1-3, John is given a remarkable vision:

“Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. 2 And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3 and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, 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.”

In verse 7, John adds, “and when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison.”

The binding of Satan as depicted in this passage raises several obvious questions, especially in light of the on-going debate between amillennarians and premillennarians about the timing and character of the millennial age. This is the only biblical text which specifically mentions a thousand year period of time in which Satan’s power and activity are curtailed (the millennial age). The two most obvious questions raised by John’s vision are, “what does it mean for Satan to be bound in such a manner?” and “are the thousand years a present or a future period of time?” Amillennarians and premillennarians take quite different approaches to this passage and offer conflicting answers to these questions.

Amillennarians believe that the binding of Satan is but another way of speaking of Jesus’ victory over the devil during our Lord’s messianic mission. The thousand years are not a literal period of time, but refer to the entire age between Christ’s first and second coming (the inter-advental period). If true, the binding of Satan begins with our Lord’s death and resurrection, continues throughout the present age, and ends with the release of Satan from the abyss (abussos) shortly before Jesus returns at the end of the age when Antichrist is revealed during a time of final apostasy (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12). This brief apostasy is followed by the final consummation which includes: the general resurrection (1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11; 1 Corinthians 15:50-57), the final judgment (Matthew 25:31-46; Revelation 20:4-6, 11-15), and the ushering in of a new heavens and earth (2 Peter 3:4).

Premillennarians, however, contend that the thousand years are a literal period of time commencing with Christ’s second advent, who then establishes his physical rule over the earth in a millennial kingdom (Revelation 20:1-7). During this time, Satan is bound. The thousand years end with Satan’s release from his imprisonment so as to lead the nations in a final revolt against Jesus’ rule, immediately before the final judgment at the end of the millennial age (Revelation 20:7-10). I address the serious problems with this understanding of redemptive history here: *Evil in the Millennial Age? A Huge Problem for Premillennarians*.

To summarize, amillennarians understand the binding of Satan to be a present reality, while premillennarians see this scene as an entirely future event. In this essay, I will consider and evaluate the biblical background to John’s vision and then respond to the premillennial challenge, “when and how is Satan is bound?” And “why is there so much evil in the world if he is?” These are two important questions which merit response.

The Redemptive Historical Background to John’s Vision

¹ Taken from the Riddleblog @ kimriddlebarger.com

There is significant biblical background which provides context to help us understand what John sees, and which ought to be considered before we turn to the details of the vision given John as recorded in Revelation 20:1-3, 7. The scene depicted in Revelation 20 occurs in heaven (where the thrones are) and actually makes much sense in light of Old Testament imagery and events, especially when these are interpreted in light of the dawn of the messianic age in which Jesus triumphs over the devil and his legions. Since the context behind John's vision is important and often overlooked in this debate, I will endeavor to trace out these images and events to aid us in our interpretation of the binding of Satan in Revelation 20. There are three categories of biblical events which give us considerable aid in understanding and interpreting John's vision.

First, we consider Satan's influence upon the nations. We start with the obvious fact that Satan was instrumental in the fall of our race during a time of probation in Eden (Genesis 3:1-24). A fierce adversary is introduced into the biblical narrative from the very beginning, although it is foretold that this adversary ultimately will be defeated by the seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15). According to the subsequent chapters of Genesis, Satan managed to deceive much of the world soon after Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden, although an elect line did remain—the line of Seth, as recounted in Genesis 4:26. The first city was built by Cain in the land of Nod, and named for his first born son, Enoch. The Cain-Enoch genealogy in Genesis 4:17 ff. implies that the city became a center of unbelief and opposition to the purposes of God. Then we read of the Nephilim (Genesis 6), followed by YHWH's judgment upon "the world that was" in the form of the flood (Genesis 6:9-9:29). No sooner did Noah and his family leave the safety of the ark, we read of the rise of two more cities hostile to God's purposes and his people, Nineveh (Genesis 10:11-12) and Babel (Genesis 11). The early course of redemptive history is characterized as a period of increasing human wickedness, manifest in city-states hostile to God due to the spiritual darkness of satanic deception (Genesis 6:5).

As the course of redemptive history continues to unfold throughout the balance of the Old Testament, we read of repeated instances of various nations and empires arising and persecuting the people of God. The list is long, but includes the Egyptians and its pharaoh, followed by the various Canaanite tribes, most notably the Moabites, then the Assyrians and the fall of the northern kingdom (Israel), before Nebuchadnezzar conquers Judah and destroys the city of Jerusalem and its temple. Although Jerusalem and the temple were rebuilt in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, the people of God now find themselves as tenants in their own land, living under the rule of a series of pagan Gentile empires. These are nations who fell under Satan's sway, did his business, and marshaled their resources against the people of God. This extensive evidence from the biblical narrative points in the direction that Satan's influence upon the nations during their opposition to God's purposes is very likely in the background of John's vision when he refers to nations being freed from satanic manipulation.

A second factor to be considered is Satan's power of deception, which often takes the form of idolatry and the worship of pagan deities is expressed in continual apostasy among the Israelites, seen initially in the wilderness of the Sinai, and then more openly once the Israelites have conquered the promised land of Canaan. The Canaan narratives inform us that like Adam, Israel never fulfilled the commission given them in Isaiah 49:6, "I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." Because of Israel's rank unbelief seen in the nation and the idolatry of successive kings evident in their persistent disobedience to YHWH's covenant, Israel comes under the covenant curses and repeatedly ends up as subjects of godless gentile nations and their foreign gods. Israel's witness to the Gentile nations regarding YHWH's gracious promise of future restoration, coupled with the hope of a final redemption from sin, was largely absent. In the absence of such a witness which chases away satanic error, Satan continues to deceive the nations and is able to keep them walking in

darkness.

Third, we fast forward to the New Testament era, where much more information is given us about the devil, his intentions, and the extent of his power. He is called Satan, which comes from the Hebrew for “accuser.” He is also called the devil, (diabolos—the Greek translation of the Hebrew satan). We learn of two names given to Satan, Belial and Beelzebul. He is variously identified as the Adversary, the Dragon, the Enemy, the Serpent, the Tester, and the Wicked One.[1] Satan is said to rule a host of fallen angels (Matthew 25:41), and he has been given control of the world (i.e., Luke 4:6), which indicates that Satan’s actions are limited by God’s providence, a point well captured by Martin Luther’s famous dictum, “the devil is God’s devil.”

Satan dominates non-Christians (John 8:44; Colossians 1:13), he is destructive of life and property (Luke 8:33), and he must be resisted (1 Corinthians 7:5). He is said to be exceedingly cunning (2 Corinthians 2:11), he tempts people to sin (Ephesians 6:11), and he opposes those who preach the gospel (1 Thessalonians 2:18). Especially important for our discussion, recall that Jesus responds to a hostile crowd by declaring, “you are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). Satan is, therefore, the progenitor of lies and deception, and will do anything in his power to oppose the proclamation of the gospel. We see his opposition to the gospel at work when Jesus tells Peter, who implores our Lord not to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die, “get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you [Peter] are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (Matthew 16:23).

An important theme running throughout the New Testament is the repeated references to Jesus’ triumph over Satan and the curtailing of his deceptive powers through our Lord’s death and resurrection. Jesus appeared in the fullness of time (Galatians 4:4-5), but his public ministry did not commence until after he had resisted Satan’s temptations in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11). In an unexpected turn of events, Jesus’ messianic mission appeared to come to an end with his death by crucifixion on Good Friday. But by Easter Sunday, it was abundantly clear that Satan’s victory over the promised Messiah was actually a complete and total defeat. By orchestrating the death of Jesus, ironically Satan ensured his own demise.

Our Lord completes the redemptive mission which Adam and then Israel failed to accomplish, when he fulfills all righteousness through his own personal obedience to God’s commandments, thereby providing a justifying righteousness for his people, while bearing the guilt of our sin in his own flesh. The accuser can no longer accuse if the guilt and power of sin is removed from those whom he would otherwise incriminate. Paul encourages struggling Christians in Colossae by reminding them of Satan’s complete and total defeat. “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him” ((Colossians 2:13-15). Satan is a thoroughly defeated foe whose end is certain, which echoes what Paul had previously told the Romans. “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Romans 16:20).

Of great significance for our discussion is that in foretelling of his coming death and resurrection, Jesus speaks of “binding” the devil and destroying his works (cf. Matthew 12:27-29, Mark 3:22-27, Luke 11:14-23). Our Lord’s victory over Satan sets the stage for the command for God’s people to make disciples of “all nations” (Matthew 28:19). After Jesus tells his disciples that the gospel must be

preached as a witness to those same nations before he returns (Matthew 24:14), he promises to be with his people until the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). Jesus also informs his disciples that the gates of Hell will not prevail against his church (Matthew 16:18), words which are an obvious reference to limits to be placed on Satan's power. Initially, Jesus sends out the twelve to preach the gospel, but they are followed by the commissioning of seventy-two disciples to do the same (Luke 10:1 ff.). Upon their return, when they report to Jesus that demons are subject to them, Jesus tells the returning preachers that through their preaching he saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Satan has been "cast down" to earth (Luke 10:18), a point also made in John 12:31, when Jesus speaks directly to the matter of the binding of Satan. "Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out." As we will see momentarily, the same thing is also affirmed in Revelation 12:7-17.

This, then, is the redemptive historical context through which we must attempt to understand John's vision of the "binding of Satan" in Revelation 20:1-3, 7. Satan being bound and cast into the abyss is not an isolated event yet to occur and still off in the distant future. Jesus is the light to the nations and protector of his people. The truth of his gospel overcomes the darkness and deception of the devil's lies. The biblical evidence reveals to us that the devil is currently bound as the direct result of Jesus' messianic mission, his cross, and the empty tomb. Satan is bound, says our Lord, through the preaching of the gospel. When we survey the biblical data regarding Satan's binding before giving careful consideration to John's vision in chapter 20:1-3, 7, it becomes apparent that the binding (or "casting down") of Satan is a reference to the success of the gospel now that Satan's power to deceive the nations has been broken.

What Does John Mean When He Speaks of Satan Being Bound in Revelation 20:1-3, 7?

John's visions in Revelation are given in the language of apocalyptic symbolism. John does not intend for us to understand these things literally, but rather to read them in light of the Old Testament, where these symbols and images appear previously. The symbolic nature of the vision is obvious. How can an angel bind an immaterial spiritual being (Satan) with a real chain? How can a spiritual being be locked away in a pit? This is apocalyptic symbolism plain and simple.

First up is the matter of the proper identification of this particular angel and then determining the meaning of the symbolism of the key to the abyss and the chain. The answer to the angel's identity is tied to the use of "keys," which are mentioned throughout the Book of Revelation. In Revelation 1:18, Christ holds the keys of Death and Hades in his hand. In chapter 3:7, the Holy One has the key of David which opens and shuts. In Revelation 9:1-2 we read that "the fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss."

Given the symbolism of the keys prior to this vision, we already possess the "key" (pun intended) to interpret correctly the symbols mentioned by John in Revelation 20:1-3, 7, with some degree of certainty. The Abyss is a reference to Death and Hades—the realm with which Satan is most closely associated in the Book of Revelation. Having been cast out of heaven (according to Revelation 12:7-9), John sees an angel (who is either Jesus, or an angel exercising the Lord's authority) confining Satan to the abode of the dead. Satan has been cast from heaven where he had been making accusations against the saints (i.e., Job 1:6-12; Zechariah 3:1-10). According to verses 2-3 of Revelation 20, which are repeated here, the angel "seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the

nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.”

John’s vision should be interpreted in light of the background we have previously established. But we must also give due consideration to what John specifically says of this “binding.” Satan is bound to the Abyss—the realm of Death and Hades—for a specified time (a thousand years). He is bound for a specific purpose—he is prevented from “deceiving the nations” until the thousand years are over. The imagery of the devil being bound restates in apocalyptic symbolism the biblical data considered previously. Satan has been “cast down” and “bound.” After Jesus’ death and resurrection, Satan is prevented from deceiving the nations en masse. This is unlike the prior period of redemptive history (considered above) when the devil was able to mobilize pagan gentile powers to oppose and assault the people of God until his defeat on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. John is describing the age of the gospel, in which that gospel is to be proclaimed to all the nations. Therefore, the correct reading of Revelation 20:1-3 is that Satan is currently bound by the preaching of the gospel. His lies are exposed and his powers of deception are greatly diminished in the new covenant era. It is the proclamation of Christ crucified and risen which “binds” the devil.

But to be clear and avoid misconception as much as possible, the binding of Satan does not in any sense mean that all of his evil activities cease during the thousand years. In fact, John has already warned us in Revelation 12:12 that after Satan is cast out of heaven, “woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.” Like a sick or wounded animal sure to die, Satan is more dangerous now than he was when he had free access to heaven—even while confined to the abyss. Satan has been defeated by Christ’s death and resurrection. His doom is assured. One little word shall fell him. The truth of the gospel exposes his lies for what they are. But with the time he has left, Satan rages against the people of God trying to muster his increasingly feeble power. The gospel of Christ crucified is to Satan what kryptonite is to Superman.

Nevertheless, John reports in his prior visions that since Satan has nothing to lose, he wages war on the saints and at times, appears to overcome them. This is why Peter speaks of Satan as our enemy who “prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (I Peter 5:8). This is why Paul can speak of Satan as “the god of this age, who blinds the minds of unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 4:4). You can put a vicious dog on a chain, but you sure don’t want to get within the radius of the chain, or you’ll still get mauled!

At no point does John say or imply that Satan ceases all activity during the thousand years. In fact, Scripture warns us that the devil’s rage increases because he knows the end is coming. But John does say that Satan is prevented from deceiving the nations so as to organize them against the people of God (Christ’s church) as he once did during the Old Testament era. Is this not what John has been reporting from the very beginning of his Apocalypse? The Beast was already manifest in John’s day in the form of the Roman empire (the fourth empire of Daniel’s vision—cf. Daniel 7). But Christ has defeated the Roman Caesar, evident in the fact that we can go to Rome today and walk among the ruins of a once great persecuting empire.

Rome’s Antichrist emperors have come and gone, relegated to the annals of history. Indeed, beasts in many forms have come and gone throughout the age, persecuting the church for a time, only to be overcome by the testimony of the saints and the blood of the Lamb. Hitler’s thousand year Reich lasted less than fifteen years. Stalin’s great socialist utopia collapsed before our eyes. Even though nations who persecute the church come and go, they are prevented from organizing against the church as a whole and destroying it as the Assyrians and Babylonians did to the divided kingdoms of Israel. Inevitably

these empires all come to an end—often times a bloody end brought about by the providential intervention of God.

That said, in verse 7 John reveals that one day Satan will be released from the abyss at the time of the end. No longer bound, Satan will again organize the nations against Jesus Christ and his church, only to be crushed by Jesus on the day of his second advent when our Lord delivers his people once and for all, when we are raised from the dead, final judgment is meted out, and the new heavens and earth appear, the home of everlasting righteousness.

How Then Ought We Understand Jude 6 and 2 Peter 2:4?

Some interpreters connect the binding of Satan in Revelation 20 to Jude 6 (cf. 2 Peter 2:4), in which fallen angels are said to be kept in everlasting chains in darkness awaiting the final judgment. Does this have any relevance for interpreting Revelation 20. Likely not. The reference in 2 Peter 2:4-6 to angels being kept in chains in Tartarus (ESV, “hell”) until the judgment has a time reference, “when they sinned.” This would place the binding of such angels at the time of Satan’s fall, or else as Peter indicates in verse 5, at the time of Noah and the flood, which is “the destruction of the world that then existed” (2 Peter 3:6). Jude likewise speaks of these angels being bound until the day of judgment, which is possibly the subject of Isaiah 24:21-22, where we read: “On that day the Lord will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth. They will be gathered together as prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished.” Other than this scant mention, there are no other texts which speak to this. So, at the time of Satan’s fall, or at the time of Noah and the flood, a number of fallen angels were bound and are presently awaiting the time of final judgment.

Does this binding of fallen angels relate to Revelation 20 and to John’s reference to the binding of Satan? Probably not directly, although the reference to fallen angels also might be in the background of John’s vision. Whether or not Jesus is the angel who is said to bind Satan in Revelation 20:1-3, it is our Lord’s resurrection which gives him the keys (authority) over Death and Hades, which is the abode of the Dragon (Satan), as well as the key to the chains of Tartarus.[2]

A Response to Objections to the Present Binding of Satan

The most compelling and common argument against the amillennial interpretation of the binding of Satan is the painfully obvious fact that evil and unbelief flourish throughout the present age. The reality of such evil supposedly proves that Satan is not yet bound, therefore John’s vision must refer to a future event which occurs after Christ’s second advent. This is the standard premillennial objection to the amillennial interpretation and is, at first glance, quite compelling.

But this objection mistakenly assumes that the binding of Satan requires the complete elimination of evil, which is not the case. Furthermore, this observation, while true, overlooks the extensive biblical context for John’s vision as set forth above. It should be pointed out that this objection is merely an observation about the present age, and not an effort to interpret the vision in light of the biblical context which tells us what John actually means. When we place the vision in its biblical context, it is clear, if not obvious, that John is referring to the inevitable success of the missionary enterprise, not the elimination of all satanic activity. As previously noted, satanic resistance actually increases during the “thousand years,” yet is now too impotent to stop the progress of the gospel.

It is also probably worth noting that given the effects of the fall upon the human race, it is not as though

there would be no sin and evil apart from satanic activity and temptation. Our hearts are filled with deceit (Jeremiah 17:9), our thoughts are continuously evil (Genesis 6:5), we are darkened in our understanding (Ephesians 4:18-19), and we are prone to all sorts of evil desires (James 3:9). I could go on, but the point is made. There would be great evil in the world even if there were no devil.

But the nagging question lingers. How can deception of the nations persist if Satan is “bound?” The answer is that Satan is presently bound in the sense described above (through the preaching of the gospel). Jesus and the authors of the New Testament are clear that the devil is already defeated and cannot organize empires and nations to stop the missionary activities of the church during the present age, as he was able to do with Adam and Israel, before his ultimate defeat at Calvary and the Garden Tomb. No doubt, Satan will certainly attempt to thwart the progress of the gospel and the kingdom of God, but ultimately he will fail. Being bound does not prevent Satan from trying to deceive. But it does prevent him from succeeding.

Our contemporary world is rife with examples of nations which openly oppress God’s people and seek to silence them (i.e., The People’s Republic of China, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, the Islamic Republic of Iran). Yet, reports abound that many people become Christians in these nations despite the efforts of these governments to stamp out Christianity and prevent its spread. The kingdom of Jesus Christ will grow and thrive all the while persecution and political conditions appear to be getting worse (cf. Revelation 11 and the account of the two witnesses). The spread of Christ’s kingdom is a consequence of the proclamation of the gospel and tied to the effectual call of God’s elect—which John describes as a multitude so vast they cannot be counted (Revelation 7:9). But the relentless advance of Christ’s kingdom does not necessarily translate into corresponding economic, cultural, and religious progress as our postmillennial friends insist. In some cases, there is a corresponding positive effect upon the culture. But in many cases there is not. Preaching the gospel often results in persecution, hardship, and even martyrdom. Jesus says world conditions will be the same until his return, as they were in the days of Noah (Matthew 24:37). Yet, the gospel still accomplishes God’s purpose in the face of persecution, bringing his elect to faith and establishing congregations of believers.

According to John’s vision, Satan will be released for a short time before the end (Christ’s second advent), when the devil will be allowed to deceive the nations for one final outbreak of an organized political, economic, and military attack against Christ’s church (Revelation 20:7-10). Meanwhile, the gospel will go to the ends of the earth, even as Satan rages like a wounded animal. He is enraged precisely because he knows his time is short and his end is already determined (compare 1 Peter 5:8 with Revelation 12:12).

Summing Up

In Revelation 20:1-3, 7, John sees a vision of Satan as bound during this present age so that he cannot deceive the nations as he was able to do prior to Jesus’ death and resurrection, the basis of Satan’s defeat. The answer to the question, “how can Satan be bound even as evil continues?” is found by considering the context of the vision and then looking to John’s explanation as to what he means when he says that Satan is bound and cast into the abyss. Once confined, Satan can no longer “deceive the nations” until the thousand years are over. John even warns us that as a defeated foe, Satan’s rage is at its greatest before the Lord returns. But the devil’s power to deceive is broken through the proclamation of the gospel. Satan cannot stop the spread of the gospel, try as he will.

Therefore, when viewed against the backdrop of redemptive history (culminating in Christ’s saving

work), the binding of Satan is directly tied to the success of the missionary enterprise. Satan was bound when his power of deception over nations and empires was broken by Jesus's death and resurrection. John is not referring to the absence of all evil and unbelief as premillennarians contend. The amillennial interpretation is the correct one.

Also see: The Great Tribulation and the Great Commission

[1] Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988) s.v. "Satan."

[2] I refer you to the discussion of this in G. K. Beale, Revelation, New International Greek Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 984-991.