

Revelation as Trilogy
The Return of the King
Chapters 20: Victory – Part 2

Introduction: This chapter contains some of the most controversial aspects of Revelation, including the 1000-year era of peace and the binding of Satan. The 1000-year reign has posed problems for commentators for centuries. When is the 1000 years? Is it a real 1000 years? Is it a metaphorical (numerological) 1000 years? Does the 1000 years come before Jesus returns? Does it come after Jesus returns? Is it the age of the church? Why bother with 1000 years of peace if we are only going to let Satan loose again? What does it mean for Satan to be bound? All these questions and more face those who venture into Chapter 20.

The Story: The chapter begins with the binding of Satan. An angel seizes the “ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan”, binds him and then throws him in a bottomless pit. However we are told that before the final judgment of the world Satan must be let out again. This imagery tells us a couple of things about Satan. First, Satan has no real power. Notice that even an angel of God, and not God in God’s own self, can bind Satan. In a sense, this means that Satan only has the power that God allows, and that people give to him. What I mean by this is that as Revelation has made clear, human beings have the capacity to follow the Lamb and not Satan. We are not predisposed to reject God’s messiah in the world. Second, there will be a time when Satan is not present to tempt people. This idea, that Satan is the tempter, is one that grew in Judaism following the Persian period. Prior to that time, Satan worked for God as God’s district attorney.

Once Satan is bound, there comes the first resurrection. Yes, there is more than one resurrection of the dead in Revelation. This first resurrection is of the martyrs, those who died for their faith without having worshipped the beast. They are raised and reign on thrones with Christ for a thousand years. These saints are guaranteed that they will not die again (more about this later) and that they will be priests of God.

The story now returns to Satan’s release from prison. Once again, he will deceive the nations. This implies two things. First, that God allows people to make their own decisions about following. Second, that people, even after a thousand years are easily duped by Satan’s deception, which if we return to the whole Biblical story, means they are duped into believing that they can be like gods knowing good and evil, and that wealth, power and privilege are more important than living as servants of the Christ. The number of this army is as numerous as the sands (recall that Abraham is promised descendants that are more numerous than the sands) and they surround the camp of the saints and the beloved city. But fire came and consumed them, and Satan is thrown into the Lake of fire.

The chapter concludes with the final judgment in which heaven and earth meet as one new reality. All the dead come before the throne and are judged according to their works as recorded in the Book of Life. Finally, death and hades are destroyed along with those whose names are not in the Book of Life.

Reflection: The promise of Revelation is that God and God’s followers win. The promise is also that along with God’s victory there will be judgment, giving some eternal life and others death...though Revelation hedges its bets on the basis for this judgment. For Christians who face persecution, this story holds out hope, that faithfulness will be rewarded and so they are not to give into the beast of their generation. It is also a reminder that our choices have eternal consequences should be made carefully.

Questions:

1. How do you interpret the 1000-year reign of Christ and the martyrs?
2. Why do you suppose that Satan is bound and then loosed?
3. How do you interpret the images of the two books on which a final judgment it made?