

Revelation 20: Some Challenges for Interpreters

1. We should be honest that Revelation 20 is not easy to understand and, thus, is prone to misinterpretation. It is best to start with clearer passages in the Bible when trying to understand the end-times, rather than focusing first or primarily on Revelation 20.
2. The number one problem for (false) interpretations of Revelation 20 is reading Rev 20:1-6 as following chronologically upon Rev 19:20-21. Rev 20:1-6 is actually a prophetic vision of past reality (like a “flash-back” scene in a movie) that rehearses how Satan comes to his ultimate end. Satan’s defeat does not begin on the last day, but in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus where Satan’s was bound (i.e., his power was limited and his future destruction made sure). Therefore, if you want to read chronologically from Rev 19:20-21 (the destruction of the two beasts into the lake of fire), then you would skip forward to Rev 20:7-10 (the destruction of Satan into the lake of fire). These two events are “last day” events that unfold sequentially after the return of Christ.
3. There is also confusion about the identity of the “angel coming down from heaven” in Rev 20:1. This is none other than Jesus Christ, who is called “another mighty angel coming down out of heaven” in Rev 10:1 and who as the pre-incarnate Son was known as “the Angel of the Lord” in the Old Testament (e.g., the call of Moses in Exod 3:2).
4. There is also confusion about what the image of binding with a chain means (cf. Matt 12:29). Binding is a metaphor that means Satan’s sphere of power is limited; it does not mean that he does not remain active on earth.
5. There is very serious confusion when the 1000 years is taken as a future period of literally 1000 years, instead of a present symbolic period between Christ’s first coming (when Satan was bound) and Christ’s second coming (when Satan will be destroyed). The use of 1000 as a symbolic period is seen in Psalm 90:4, “For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.” This desire for a future earthly reign for Christ grows, in part, from a lack of seeing how the reign of God was established on earth in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection (cf. Matt 28:18) and continues now in the church until the last day.
6. There is also confusion about the mention of “the first resurrection” (Rev 20:5b; which implies that there is the second resurrection) and “the second death” (Rev 20:14; which implies that there is “the first death”). The first death must be “spiritual death,” so we need the first resurrection, which is the spiritual resurrection of baptism (cf. Rom 6:1-10). The first resurrection is when we become spiritually alive and begin to reign with Christ (Rev 20:4), not the last day physical resurrection (Rev 20:5b), which is the second resurrection. This means that the referent of “This is the first resurrection” in Rev 20:5b is *not* what immediately precedes it (“The rest of the death did not come to life until the thousand years were ended”), but the *prior* sentence in Rev 20:4c (“They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years”). “The second death” is eternal separation from God, the lake of fire (Rev 20:14). Those who share in the first resurrection need not worry about the second death (Rev 20:6).

For further reading, see Paul Raabe, “Millennialism,” *Lutheran Witness* (June 1988): 4-6.

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666, the Mark of the Beast, and Other Mysteries from the Book of Revelation

Beyond the challenges in the interpretation of Revelation 20, there are some other prominent questions that often arise in the study of the Book of Revelation.

1. Who are the two beasts in Revelation 13?

Satan likes to imitate the true God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.. The dragon (Rev 12:3) is a parody of the Father. The first beast (Rev 13:1) who comes doing signs and wonders is a parody of the Son. The second beast (Rev 13:11) seeks to get people to worship the first beast, so he is a parody of the Holy Spirit. The dragon and two beasts are broad and inclusive symbols for Satan's activity in every generation. There are false gods, false christ, and false worship.

2. What is the "mark of the beast" mentioned in Revelation 13:17?

"Mark" is used earlier in Revelation 7 when speaking of how the followers of Christ are sealed with the divine name in baptism. The 144,000 that are sealed are symbolic of the finite number of believers that make up the church or the new Israel at any particular time (cf. Revelation 14:1). Just as the saints are symbolically marked with God's own name, so the mark of the beast on the forehead or hand is a symbolic mark given to unbelievers in the book of Revelation. You know whether a person is a believer or unbeliever based upon whose name they bear or confess.

3. What is the meaning of the number 666 in Revelation 13:18?

Since 7 is a number of completeness or perfection (creation), then 6 is a number of incompleteness. 666 is an ultimate number of imperfection and incompleteness. Revelation 13:18 is an example of Gematria (the practice of giving a name a numerical value) and Isopsephism (when the numerical value of two names or titles is the same). Gematria was prominent among Jews familiar with Hebrew. The numerical value of the Greek word for "beast" transliterated into Hebrew is 666 (~~see reverse side~~). The numerical value of the Greek title "Nero Caesar" transliterated into Hebrew is also 666 (~~see reverse side~~). The beast is a symbolic figure of every false Christ or God on this earth. How should we understand what manifestations of this beast will be like, look at Nero. What does this mean? To see Nero, is to understand a flesh and blood example of the beast in action.

4. What is Armageddon mentioned in Revelation 16:16?

This is the place where the forces of evil assemble for one final onslaught. This Greek term transliterates the Hebrew *har megiddon* or "mountain of Meggido," which is a famous battle site in central Israel. It is being used symbolically here and does not mean that there will be a literal final battle in Israel. A modern equivalent would be to say that we are facing our "Waterloo" or "storming Normandy."

5. What is the central message of Revelation that oftentimes gets lost?

The lamb, not the dragon or his two beasts, has conquered through the blood that he shed at the cross and reigns victorious over all already NOW. The central scene of Revelation's drama is chapters 4-5.