

Eschatology: Revelation 17-20

Outline of Revelation

1. The Vision of Jesus (Revelation 1)
2. Seven Churches (Revelation 2-3)
3. Jesus Takes the Scroll (Revelation 4-5)
4. Seven Seals (Revelation 6:1-8:5) – expansion and persecution of the church
5. Seven Trumpets (Revelation 8:6-11:19) – warning judgments
6. The Times of the Trumpets (Revelation 12-14)
7. Seven Bowls (Revelation 15-16) – final judgments

Revelation 17

This is a symbolic description of Jerusalem and unbelieving Jews as “the great harlot” and “Babylon.”

Revelation 17:1-2

Jerusalem is about to be judged. She “sits on many waters.” That is, she does not have her own sovereignty but is dependent upon Gentile nations. Indeed, she trusts these foreign nations, rather than Yahweh. She is a harlot, spiritually speaking (Isaiah 1:21, Jeremiah 2:20-24; 2:30-33; 3:1-3; Ezekiel 16; 23; Hosea 9:1).

Revelation 17:3-6

John sees that the woman (Israel/Jerusalem/Jews) is in the wilderness. Why was she in the wilderness? She was persecuting the church, which had fled to the wilderness (12:14). The Jews were persecuting the church.

The woman is sitting on a scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns. This is the sea beast (Rome) from chapter 13. Unbelieving Jews are sitting on Rome in that they are trusting Rome, not Yahweh.

The colors of the woman’s adornment matches those of the Temple and the priesthood. The high priest also wore a gold plate on his forehead that was engraved “holiness to Yahweh” (Exodus 28:36-38). Because the priesthood is now unbelieving, they symbolically wear a plate that identifies them as “Babylon, the mother of harlots.” The priests were the ones that led the persecution of the saints. They are “drunk” with the blood of the saints and martyrs.

Most Reformers saw the Babylonian harlot as the Roman Catholic church. We can certainly see similarities between how the Reformers were persecuted and how the first century church was persecuted. In fact, every person in every age who is persecuted can find similarities between their persecutors and the original persecutors of the first century church.

These are typological parallels, and these are legitimate connections. The Reformers were right in seeing typological parallels between the Roman Catholic Church of their day and the Babylonian harlot of Revelation 17. However, they were wrong to make an absolute identification.

Revelation 17:7-10

The Beast (Rome) himself will eventually be destroyed, which will cause the world to marvel. The woman (harlot = Jerusalem) sits on seven heads, which are seven mountains. Rome was built on seven hills. John learns that these seven mountains are also seven kings. Here, we gain insight into the time that Revelation was written.

John is told about seven kings of Rome. Five kings have fallen, or died. The sixth king is still alive, and the seventh king is not reigning yet. Starting with Julius Caesar, the sixth king is Nero, and the seventh is Vespasian. When John recorded the book of Revelation, Nero was reigning, which dates the book to between ad 54-68.

Revelation 17:11-18

There is a lot of detail here that describes the relationship between Rome and Jerusalem, but we are going to skip over it for now.

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Revelation 18

Revelation 18 describes the destruction of Babylon (Jerusalem).

Revelation 18:1-3

Jerusalem (Babylon) has fallen. This is classic Old Testament language to describe the apostasy of Israel.

Revelation 18:4-8

God's people are supposed to flee Jerusalem before the final wrath is poured out (cf. Matthew 24:15). Two lamentations come next.

Revelation 18:9-10

The first is the lamentation of the kings of the earth (land), that is the religious leaders.

Revelation 18:11-19

The second is the lamentation of the merchants. The merchandise listed matches that used to build the Tabernacle (Exodus 25:4-7) and the Temple (1 Chronicles 28-29). All the nations that assisted Israel in building the Tabernacle and the Temple are now lamenting her destruction.

Revelation 18:20

While the earth weeps for Jerusalem, heaven rejoices.

Revelation 18:21-24

The archangel casts a mighty stone into the sea, signifying that the surviving Jews will be scattered among the Gentiles. The city will be destroyed.

Revelation 19

Chapter 19 continues the reaction of heaven to the destruction of Jerusalem.

Revelation 19:1-3

Those in heaven rejoice because God has judged Jerusalem, the great harlot who polluted the land with idolatry and killed the saints.

Revelation 19:4-10

God is praised for carrying out his vengeance. As Jerusalem is destroyed and the last vestiges of the Old Creation are put away, the Lamb is preparing to take a new bride, the church. She wears fine linen, which is a symbol of the righteous acts of the saints.

Revelation 19:11-16

This is obviously a description of Jesus. Many see this as a portrayal of the second coming, and there are probably typological parallels between this description and the second coming. However, if we keep in mind the context of the book of Revelation, we understand that this is Jesus coming in judgment. As Jesus comes in judgment, so the church also expands through the preaching of the word, which is the sword coming out of Jesus' mouth. The great commission is being fulfilled.

Revelation 19:17-21

Those who survived the destruction of Jerusalem are eventually taken out, including the beast and the false prophet.

Background of Revelation 20

The defining feature of Revelation 20 is the "thousand years," mentioned six times in the chapter. Theologians have labeled this thousand year period as the "Millennium" (*mille* = 1000; *anne* = year).

According to Revelation 20, Satan is bound at the beginning of the Millennium. Christ reigns for the "thousand years." Near the end of this Millennium, Satan is released and leads one last rebellion before he is defeated. The final resurrection and the final judgment take place after the Millennium.

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Historically, the church has had difficulty assimilating the Millennium as described in Revelation 20 with what the rest of Scripture says about eschatology. Three main positions have been forged.

Premillennialism

Some believe that the Millennium of Revelation 20 is entirely future. Jesus Christ will return (Revelation 19) to reign upon the earth for a long period of time (perhaps exactly 1000 years). During the Millennium, the earth will be peaceful (Isaiah 11, 65, etc.) and believers will prosper. The Millennium is ended when Jesus crushes the final Satanic rebellion.

This view is known as "Premillennialism" because it holds that the second coming of Christ starts the Millennium. This is currently the majority position in American churches. Two popular proponents of Premillennialism are John MacArthur and John Piper.

Postmillennialism

Others believe that the Millennium of Revelation 20 encompasses the entire time between the first and second comings of Jesus. During the Millennium, Jesus rules from heaven, and he builds his kingdom through the church as she fulfills the Great Commission. Eventually, the earth will be peaceful (Isaiah 11, 65, etc.). The Millennium ends when Jesus returns to the earth in his second coming.

This view is known as "Postmillennialism" because it holds that Christ will return at the conclusion of the Millennium. Postmillennialism was the dominant position during the Puritan era. Two popular proponents of Postmillennialism are R.C. Sproul and Keith Mathison.

Comparing Premillennialism and Postmillennialism

Notice that both Premillennialists and Postmillennialists believe that the Millennium will be a time of peace on the earth, leading to the fulfillment of passages like Isaiah 11, 65, etc. Thus, they agree on the **character** of the Millennium.

The difference is in the timing. Premills believe that Christ's second coming happens at the **beginning** of the Millennium. Postmills believe that Christ's second coming happens at the **end** of the Millennium.

Amillennialism

There is a third view of the Millennium, known as "Amillennialism" (*a* = not). Technically, Amillennialism means "no Millennium." However, this is not exactly what is meant. Amillennialists disagree with both Premills and Postmills on the character of the Millennium. Amills hold that the Millennium is not a time of idyllic conditions upon the earth.

During the Millennium, Christ reigns in heaven, but the church on earth is locked in a perpetual struggle against evil. This struggle between the church and the world continues throughout the "Millennium." Neither side prevails until Jesus' second coming at the end of the Millennium.

Thus, Amillennialists agree with Postmills on the **timing** of the Millennium. They both believe that the Millennium encompasses the entire time between the first and second comings of Christ. However, they disagree on the **character** of the Millennium.

Amillennialism is currently the majority position in Reformed churches. Two popular proponents of Amillennialism are Michael Horton and Kim Riddlebarger.

Summary of Millennial Positions

Millennial Position	Timing of the Millennium	Character of the Millennium
Premillennialism	Starts at 2nd Coming	Peace on Earth (immediate)
Postmillennialism	Starts at 1st Coming Ends at 2nd Coming	Peace on Earth (gradual)
Amillennialism	Starts at 1st Coming Ends at 2nd Coming	Struggle on Earth (perpetual)