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Back to the Future: The Millennium and the Exodus in Revelation 20

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I. Intertextual interpretation

The Book of Revelation is a book of profound depth. It is multi-layered in its narrative and multi-valent in its meaning.[1] This literary complexity means that there will never be an exhaustive explanation of the book. It defies final analysis and comprehensive explanation. Its form is one of mixed genre, with its contents self-described as a revelation (apocalypse), a prophecy and a letter (1:1–4). This adds to the complexity of knowing how best to read it.

This complexity is increased because of the heavy intertextual dependence of Revelation on the Old Testament in ways that are less than straightforward. Interpretation becomes difficult, because, as Steve Moyise has said, the reader is not addressed by a single narrative voice but by a plurality of voices. As a result the recipient has an experience akin to listening to a badly tuned radio with two (or more) voices coming over at once.[2] Further complication occurs because John often weaves his message around a combination of several Old Testament passages (or other allusions) that he utilises simultaneously, as in 11:8 and 12:1–6.[3]

Why does John use intertextuality? One answer from the world of wider culture is provided by David Aune: 'Throughout the ancient world, both east and west, the imagined past was commonly considered the primary basis for assessing the legitimacy of the present and envisioning the shape of the future.'[4]

Revelation scholars are deeply indebted to insights from Richard Hays on biblical intertextuality, even though the main focus of Hays has been on the Pauline epistles. Hays notes the way Paul (and by extension, John) appropriates Israel's Scriptures for the Christian community who have now been incorporated into the people of God. Paul can therefore see the circumstances of the Christian

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1 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 2, 19.

2 Steve Moyise, *The Old Testament in Revelation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 143, 19.

3 G. K. Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 63.

4 David E. Aune, *Apocalypticism, Prophecy, and Magic in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr, Siebeck, 2006), 275.

church prefigured in the Old Testament narratives.[5] For Paul, these scriptures are a word spoken for Paul's own time.[6] Thus Paul draws attention to resonances, correlations and correspondences between the two situations.[7]

Paul's letters do not use the Old Testament as a reservoir of proof-texts to buttress Christian understanding that has been determined apart from those texts. The old shapes the new as the new also adds meaning to the old. In Paul's exegesis the Christian story draws out significance in the earlier texts that may not have been evident on the surface. However, interpretive shaping also runs the other way. The Old Testament, read aright, is determinative of Christian understanding. It contains *typoi,* 'types', to be read imaginatively as correlations/prefigurations of Christian truth.[8] As Brodie, MacDonald and Porter put it, the Old Testament is in some ways constitutive of the New, in some sense actually forming the text of the New Testament.[9] Old Testament texts can thus serve as templates, providing structure for a larger biblical meta-narrative, while allowing interpretive freedom to see in it meanings that arise because of the determinative revelation of the Christ event.

One needs to recognise that for Paul original intention is not a primary hermeneutical concern.[10] While finding continuity between Torah and gospel, Paul read the Old Testament Scriptures with intuitive apprehension, faithful to the living word of God but shaping new meaning with imaginative freedom in doing so.[11] Hays suggests that Paul did not behave as modern readers often do, either stripping texts of meaning that is suggestive of divine activity in the world (as a liberal, demythologising mindset often does); but also not approaching the texts in an attitude of conservative literalism (as fundamentalism often does). Instead, Paul approached the Scripture with an imaginative freedom that saw it as the word of God for the full people-of-God-in-Christ for Paul's own day also.[12]

Hays acknowledges that identifying linkages between Paul and the Old Testament writers is often difficult because the connections are often not direct quotations, but may be allusions, or even 'echoes'. The distinctions are not absolute – there is a continuum along a spectrum, moving from the explicit to the subliminal:

> As we move farther away from overt citation, the source recedes into the discursive distance, the intertextual relationships become less determi-

5   Richard Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 27, 101.

6   Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 55, 161.

7   Hays, *Echoes*, 20, 100.

8   Hays, *Echoes*, 100, 161.

9   Thomas L. Brodie, Dennis MacDonald & Stanley E. Porter, 'Introduction' in *The Intertextuality of the Epistles: Explanations of Theory and Practice* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 5.

10   Hays, *Echoes*, 156.

11   Hays, *Echoes*, 161.

12   Hays, *Conversion*, ix.

nate, and the demand placed on the reader's listening powers grows greater. As we near the vanishing point of the echo, it inevitably becomes difficult to decide whether we are really hearing an echo, or whether we are only conjuring things out of the murmurings of our own imaginations.[13]

II. Intertextual interpretation and the Book of Revelation

What Hays has identified in relation to Paul applies very significantly, though obviously with variation, to the writer of the Book of Revelation. Difficulties of intertextual interpretation are heightened in Revelation because it does not utilise direct quotations from the Old Testament. Rather it has numerous allusions, the reference to 'Gog and Magog' in Revelation 20:8 being a very obvious example (cf. Ezek. 38:1). Other allusions are often much fainter; some of these may be better described as echoes; while yet others may only doubtfully be present. As David Aune has stated: 'Even though it is theoretically possible to identify and analyse the sources used in a document such as the Apocalypse of John… the task of reconstruction is extraordinarily difficult and inevitably subjective.'[14] Hence we see questions such as: has the dragon of Revelation 20 got any connection with the Pharaoh/dragon of the exodus? And: is the narrative storyline of Revelation 20 shaped in any way by the storyline of the exodus as portrayed in Isaiah 51:9–10? Identifying intertextual connections and interpreting their significance is a challenge in much of Revelation. This is made greater because John does not stick consistently to the Hebrew or Greek text, but seems to draw at will from either version.[15]

The task of interpreting Revelation is also more complex because its intertextual dimensions make Revelation part of a web or matrix of texts.[16] Linkages need identification, along with interpretation that utilises all the threads that help form the web of Revelation. This calls for creative imagination held in tension with sensible, evidence-based reason. Intertextual interpretation of Revelation is not an exact science. Yet it has the ability to open up Revelation to insights that are remarkably fresh and surprisingly sane.

It is said that the best guide to future conduct is past behaviour. While John does not use *ex eventu* prophecy, as if the events are yet to come, he does draw heavily from past events and the past activity of God to explain the present and 'predict' the future. John's rhetoric reminds his hearers of the past and thus 'provides a reliable basis for divining the future'.[17] Although Revelation 20 is a puzzle

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13 Hays, *Echoes*, 23.
14 Aune, *Apocalypticism,* 153.
15 Beale, *John's Use*, 61–62.
16 Steve Moyise, 'Intertextuality, Historical Criticism and Deconstruction', in *The Intertextuality of the Epistles: Explanations of Theory and Practice* edited by Thomas L. Brodie, Dennis MacDonald & Stanley E. Porter (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 24–34, here 24.
17 David A. deSilva, 'Final Topics: The Rhetorical Functions of Intertexture in Revelation

as simple future prediction, it makes sense as a creative re-echoing of the past as a guide to the future.

III. The interpretive puzzle of Revelation 20

Alan Bandy has suggested that in looking for the macrostructure of Revelation we approach the material at three levels: levels of discourse, intertextuality and intratextuality.[18] When analysing Revelation a number of scholars have expressed caution about excessive analysis of the book. This is both to preserve the impact of the book as a whole and to recognise that its imaginative form calls for an imaginative reading.[19] Caird has warned that one should not 'unweave the rainbow'.[20] Fiorenza likewise has compared Revelation to a symphony which needs to be listened to as a whole before analysis of elements, details and techniques employed in its composition.[21] Bandy similarly expresses caution that levels of analysis must be done in such a way that it still preserves the literary unity of the book as a whole.[22] I will use Bandy's three categories in analysing the first part of Revelation 20, accepting his cautions and those of other scholars in doing so.

Much of the discourse level of Revelation 20 seems straightforward – but also odd. The spine of the narrative indicates that Satan is seized and locked up in a pit-prison for a thousand years. There is no direct indication when such an event occurs, but it is a time of triumph for Christian martyrs. There is interpretive debate as to whether the triumph is for martyrs alone or whether the martyrs are representative of a much greater pool of faithful Christians (the martyrs being an extreme but typifying version of faithfulness, of following the Lamb wherever he goes, as in Rev. 14:4). The latter seems the preferred option.[23]

The discourse becomes particularly problematic after the millennium ends. Satan is released. This twist to the story-line is puzzling. Who would let Satan out? Satan has been imprisoned, if not directly by God, then at his behest through an angel-emissary. God has been clearly identified in Revelation as 'Almighty'. That would indicate that God could keep Satan in prison forever if he so chose. So, why then, if he chose to imprison Satan, would he subsequently choose to release him? What an odd story-line! After Satan's release the story quickly wraps up with a final battle and Satan's confinement to a lake of fire. But who let Satan out?

14:14–16:21', in *The Intertexture of Apocalypse Discourse in the New Testament*, edited by Duane F. Watson (Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 215–41, here 240.

18 Alan S. Bandy, 'The Layers of the Apocalypse: An Integrative Approach to Revelation's Macrostructure', *JSNT* 31: 4 (2009), 469–99.

19 Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 172.

20 G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (London: A & C Black, 2nd edn, 1984), 25.

21 Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 32.

22 Bandy, 'Layers', 471.

23 Beale, *John's Use*, 372.

IV. Intratextual help from Revelation 12

Intratextual aspects help supplement the discourse narrative. Most striking are the descriptors of Satan. He is 'the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan' (20:2).[24] Providing Satan with four descriptors rather than a single descriptor is unnecessary and unusual within the Revelation discourse. However, virtually identical language is used in Revelation 12:9. Significant too is the fact that John commits a solecism in Revelation 20:2. The second descriptor of the evil one ('the ancient serpent') should be in the accusative case, corresponding with the 'dragon' reference there. However, 'the ancient serpent' is expressed in the nominative case – a solecism. It is quite likely, however, that the solecism is intentional, a close echoing of Revelation 12:9, where 'the ancient serpent' is also in the nominative case.[25]

Such closeness of language suggests that Revelation 12 is related in some way to Revelation 20 and that the former chapter should be utilised to assist with comprehending the latter chapter. The notion of using Revelation 12 in this manner is strengthened when one notes that the overall storyline of Revelation 12 has a number of similarities with that of Revelation 20, as the following chart indicates:

Similarities	Rev. 12 references	Rev. 20 references
Very similar vocabulary is used in describing Satan	'The great dragon . . . that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan' (12:9)	'The dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan' (20:2)
The dragon is overthrown	'The great dragon was thrown down' (12:9)	'He seized the dragon and bound him' (20:2)
An angel is involved in the overthrow	'Michael and his angels' (12:7)	'An angel' (20:1)
The overthrow is somehow connected with the martyrdom of Christians	'They have conquered him . . . by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death' (12:11)	'I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. . . . They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years' (20:4)
The victory over Satan is an ambiguous one	Though Satan is thrown down, he then seeks to pursue and destroy the church (12:12–17)	Though Satan is bound, he is released after 1000 years and gathers an army against 'the camp of the saints and the beloved city' (20:7–10)

Given the appropriateness of reading Revelation 12 alongside Revelation 20, there are two features of Revelation 12 to note. The first is that its complex

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24 The New Revised Standard Version is used throughout this article for the English text.
25 Beale, *John's Use*, 335.

story of cosmological conflict is eventually explained as the overthrow of Satan through the death of Christ (12:11). This aspect provides support for Augustine's classic amillennial reading of Revelation 20, that Satan's binding occurs through the first coming of Christ.[26]

The other feature of Revelation 12 to note is the strong linkage of that chapter with certain aspects of the exodus story. These include the Joseph story (12:1; cf Gen. 37:9), the Moses story (12:4; cf Exod. 1:15ff), the wilderness experiences (12:6, 14; cf Exod. 2:15ff; Exod. 13:20), the 'dragon' adversary (12:13; cf Isa. 51:9–10), and the threatened drowning (12:15–16; cf Exod. 14:9ff). It is noteworthy that unlike the exodus story, Revelation 12 does not end with the final overthrow of the adversary (the 'Pharaoh', the 'dragon'). The Revelation 12 story ends with the dragon taking his stand 'on the sand of the seashore' (12:18). Thus to the extent that the exodus story is a template for the Revelation 12 story, the Revelation 12 story concludes between the two exodus deliverances. There has been a deliverance from Egypt following the cycle of plagues which culminated in the death of sacrificial lambs and first-born sons. But in Revelation 12 the equivalent of the second deliverance – through the 'Red Sea' (Sea of Reeds), culminating in a celebration of victory on the far shore (15:2–4) – has yet to take place. The 'dragon' is still pursuing God's people (12:13). The people remain in great danger. They are trapped by the dragon on the sand of the seashore. Echoes of earlier references to Israel's enemies being like the 'sands of the seashore' (Josh. 11:4; Judg. 7:12; 1 Sam. 13:5; also Rev. 20:8) heighten the sense of the gravity of the danger.

Yet this place of extreme danger is also a place of great hope. John's audience has the benefit of knowing that God came through with a second deliverance in the exodus story – despite their being hemmed in earlier on the seashore. That repeating story gives confidence to John's audience that God will come through for them as they find themselves after the first deliverance (a deliverance linked with the blood of the Lamb) facing tremendous threat prior to the second deliverance. Revelation 12 ends inconclusively – but hopefully.

V. Intertextual aspects of Revelation 20

Having noted the strong intratextual links between Revelation 20 and 12, we need to explore the intertextual aspects of Revelation 20, particularly in the context of the Old Testament literature. Exploring the millennium in Revelation 20, Beale has cautioned about putting too great a weight on a concept that occurs only twice in Scripture. In his view the best way to identify the significance of the millennium in Revelation 20 is first to examine linkages between Revelation 20 and other parallel material in Revelation, and then to explore linkages between Revelation 20 and other parallel Old Testament and New Testament material.[27] The second task is crucial, given an increasing sense among many scholars that

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26 Augustine, *City of God*, 20:7-8.
27 G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 972.

the Old Testament is the matrix for so much New Testament theology and litera-ture and that this seedbed influence is particularly pronounced in the Book of Revelation.[28]

While Revelation 12 strongly utilises the exodus story, Revelation 20 may seem not at first glance to do so, opting rather to draw from the storyline of Ezekiel. This linkage is patent with Revelation's use of 'Gog and Magog' language (20:8), even though such language seems otherwise superfluous to the Revelation 20 narrative. However, it clearly recalls the text of Ezekiel 38–39 (though there it is 'Gog *of* Magog'). Parallels between the two narratives include the notion of resurrection (Ezek. 37; Rev. 20:4–6), the overthrow of 'Gog' (Ezek. 38–39; Rev. 20:7–10), and the restoration of the temple/city of God (Ezek. 40ff; Rev. 21:9ff). One thing that the Ezekiel parallels do not explain, however, is the letting out of Satan. Apart from the notion that Satan must be let out so that there can be a final battle, as in Ezekiel, that book sheds no further light on why Satan is re-leased in Revelation 20. Thus while George Beasley-Murray sees close connec-tion between Ezekiel material and Revelation 20, he recognises that this does not explain Satan's release in Revelation 20, which he rather links with the Genesis story, noting testing by Satan in relation to both the first and the last paradise.[29] And while Caird connects the Ezekiel material and Revelation 20, he recognises that the Ezekiel material provides a 'simple but inadequate answer' to the puzzle of Satan's release.[30]

However, further clarification occurs through considering Revelation 20 in the light of both Revelation 12 and the exodus story. Caird, in relation to the Son of Man vision in Revelation 1, suggests that John's aim in interweaving Old Testament allusions 'is to set the echoes of memory and association ringing'.[31] This John does in the opening verses of Revelation 20 with his striking language concerning a 'dragon' and an 'abyss'.

Before looking at that language more closely we can take note that John's de-scription of the army as numerous as the 'sands of the sea' (20:8) faintly ech-oes Revelation 12:18 where the dragon stands 'on the sands of the seashore'. It is as if the Revelation 20 narrative completes what has been left unfinished in Revelation 12. In addition, both chapters point back to the exodus. While the exodus allusions may initially appear less obvious in Revelation 20 they remain significant. Thus the oddity of the fourfold descriptor of Satan in Revelation 20 finds explanation also in the exodus story. The common descriptors of Satan in

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28 On the Book of Revelation see, for example, Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), x; Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 76, 96–99; Moyise, *John's Use*, 36, 43, 56, 81. On the New Testament more broadly, see, for example, Brodie, MacDonald & Porter, *Intertextuality*, 5, 286–87; Hays, *Echoes*, 14, 16, 55, 155, 157, 165; Hays, *Conversion*, ix, 27.

29 G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, New Century Bible Commentary (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1974), 289–91.

30 Caird, *Revelation*, 256.

31 Ibid., 25.

the New Testament corpus are 'Satan' and the 'Devil'. What would be evoked in the minds of John's audience, many of whom would likely be steeped in the language of the Old Testament, when they heard the word 'dragon'? 'Dragon' is not otherwise used in the New Testament, and Satan is elsewhere described there as 'serpent' only in the context of direct allusion to the Eden temptation narrative (2 Cor. 11:3). Thus in terms of the New Testament literature as a whole, 'dragon' and 'serpent' language are atypical in being employed in Revelation 20. However, this oddity of language is markedly reduced when one recognises that Old Testament poetic allusions to the exodus story several times portray the primary adversary (Pharaoh or Egypt) as a serpent or dragon (Ps. 74:13–15; Isa. 27:1; 51:9). Further linkage of Egypt with a dragon occurs in the Septuagint version of Exodus 7:9 where Aaron's staff becomes a *drakōn* rather than a snake. The oddity of Revelation's 'serpent' and 'dragon' language diminishes markedly once one realises that such language is shaped by and invokes memories of the exodus story. It is significant that after such apparent evocation, John reverts to the more straightforward 'Satan' and 'Devil' terminology.

Further exodus-Revelation 20 linkage occurs with Satan being cast into the *abyssos*. While this term has links with primeval beginnings in Genesis (1:2; 7:11; 8:2), the term in the Septuagint also has strong links with the exodus event as set down in several Old Testament books. In Psalm 77, the psalmist celebrates the redemption of God's people, the descendents of Jacob and Joseph (v.15). He (or she) then notes how the waters of the depths (*abyssoi*: v.16) were stirred up, before referring to thunder and lightning, God making a path through the sea, and God leading them by the hand of Moses and Aaron (vv.17–20). Clearly Psalm 77 connects the *abyssos* with the exodus and probably with the Red Sea/Sea of Reeds deliverance. The linkage with the Red Sea/Sea of Reeds deliverance is patent in Psalm 106:9: 'He rebuked the Red Sea, and it became dry; he led them through the deep [LXX, *en abyssō*]'. Deutero-Isaiah also connects the *abyssos* with the Red Sea/Sea of Reeds deliverance. In Isaiah 44:27, God says to the *abyssō*, 'Be dry – I will dry up your rivers'. And in Isaiah 51:9–10, several questions are put to Yahweh: 'Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the *abyssou* [LXX]; who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over?' This latter reference is doubly significant for Revelation 20, which connects the exodus story with both the *abyssos* and (in the Hebrew text) the dragon. In Ezekiel 29:3 Pharaoh is explicitly linked with the dragon/sea monster. That is also the case in Ezekiel 32:2 in a context where prophetic doom is pronounced against Egypt (and other nations) such that they will go down to the depths (the LXX here using the term *bathos*). While the section addresses the present and the near future, to some extent it does so in terms of the past exodus, for example, a prediction that Egypt will be drenched with flowing blood (32:6), with its animals destroyed (32:13) and its face covered with darkness (32:8). Hence, references in Revelation 20 to the 'dragon' and to the 'bottomless pit' significantly call the exodus event to mind.

One other aspect of the exodus event that is subtly echoed in Revelation 20

relates to the directive in Exodus 19:6 that the people are to be a 'priestly king-dom and a holy nation'. In Revelation 20 the resurrected ones are to be 'priests' and they are to 'reign', a point John has already made in Revelation 1:6 in lan-guage more directly allusive of Exodus 19:6. The adversaries of the 'holy ones/saints' (20:9) are identified as 'nations' (20:8). These adversaries surround the camp (*parembolēn*) of the people of God (20:9), much as Pharaoh's army did when the Israelites were camped (*parembeblēkotas*) by the sea in Exodus 14:9.

VI. The story-line puzzle of the release of Satan in Revelation 20

Having unpacked intratextual relationships of Revelation 20 with Revelation 12, and intertextual relationships with the exodus story, we are now ready to address the otherwise odd story-line of Satan being released after he has been bound. This article takes the view that the exodus story is a significant shaper of the Revelation story in general and of both Revelation 12 and Revelation 20 in par-ticular. The exodus story has the 'oddity' that after God has brought about the apparently unconditional release of his people from the might of the Pharaoh through the plagues, this release is challenged, with the Pharaoh having second thoughts, and making efforts to re-enslave the Israelites. The threat reaches its climax when Israel is trapped at the Sea of Reeds (with possible echoes of that location with the dragon on the sand of the seashore at the end of Revelation 12). In the exodus story all seems hopeless. Better not to have tried to escape; better to have stayed as slaves of the Egyptians (Exod. 14:11–12). But God brings deliverance, a final overthrow of the evil one. Completion of this process (the overthrow of Pharaoh) comes in two stages – but overthrown he finally is.

In the Revelation context, remaining a Christian – remaining in a Christian community – seems an option of hopelessness and despair. This parallels ear-lier times when God's people also seemed helpless in the face of overwhelm-ing, hostile, military might, particularly in being enslaved in Egypt, and also centuries later being overwhelmed by the Babylonian juggernaut. Such earlier helplessness is now being repeated as John's churches are starting to experience the horrors and hostility of the Roman Empire, the Roman beast (13:15–18; 17:3, 6, 9, 18). In John's framework, perceptions of Egypt, Babylon and Rome are in-tertwined (11:8; 17:5, 18). Now the people of God face the might of Rome just as, much earlier, they faced the might of Egypt and of Babylon. John's Christian communities are living now right where Satan's throne is (2:13). The great whore is drunk with the blood of the saints (17:6). The beast has overwhelming power – who can fight against it (13:4)? Better to give up and go back to 'Egypt'. Certainly there has been a deliverance from the Devil's power – overcome by the blood of the Lamb (12:11). But back he is again, an overwhelming threat (20:7–9a), as murderous as ever.

So why is Satan 'released' in the Revelation 20 storyline? There is no one de-finitive answer. We should, for example, acknowledge the possible influence of a Zoroastrian myth which includes the binding of the wicked serpent, Azi-

Dahaka, and his subsequent release by the evil spirit Ahriman for a thousand years prior to the serpent's being finally slain.[32] However, a more crucial shaper of the Revelation 20 storyline is the exodus story. There are significant parallels between the circumstances of Israel prior to the final deliverance at the Sea of Reeds and those of the seven churches of John's day. Both are apparently trapped and in a hopeless situation. Revelation 20 follows the story-line of the exodus where there needed to be two deliverances to effect a total emancipation. In that story the situation between the first deliverance (following the ten plagues) and the deliverance at the Sea of Reeds, which seemed to be a situation of hopelessness, was in fact in hindsight a situation of hopefulness and soon-to-be triumph.

VII. Resolution of the story-line puzzle about the release of Satan

What John is doing in Revelation 20 is re-framing the pressured Christian communities' understanding of their situation. John's portrayal of the need for two deliverances, a binding of Satan and his final overthrow, meshes with the lived experience of the Revelation Christians. They have had their first deliverance, their exodus, through the blood of the Lamb. But the Devil is not finished with them yet. In fact the Devil's power seems as overwhelming as ever. They feel trapped. But they can take heart. As God came through for his people at the Sea of Reeds, so he will come through for the embattled Christian community. There is the promise, the hope, the confidence – final victory, final judgment over Satan, final victory over all evil – forever. Yes, the smoke, the burning, the destruction of evil will continue forever and ever (19:3; 20:10). The present experience, however, of the small Christian communities, is that of being cornered, of being trapped in the face of overwhelming evil. 'Take heart' says John. 'That is not the end. In fact your situation is hopeful, not hopeless. Think of the exodus. Think of the second deliverance at the Sea of Reeds. Don't give up. The second deliverance – that will be the last word. Stay on the winning side – forever.'[33]

Connecting the binding and loosing of Satan in Revelation 20 with the exodus could be seen as the leap of an overly fevered imagination peering into midnight shadows and discerning there unicorns of the mind. However, Exodus-Satan-type connections predated Revelation by a couple of centuries at least. This is evident in the Book of Jubilees, within which the exodus story is 'thickened' by the story of a Satan-type figure, 'Prince Mastema', who is the shadowy force behind the Egyptian actions. Mastema is both 'bound' for several days so that

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32 Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 286; Jack T. Sanders, 'Whence the First Millennium? The Sources behind Revelation 20', *New Testament Studies*, 50:3 (2004), 444–56. See also 1 Enoch 10:4–10.

33 For an alternative interpretation which nevertheless sees the message of Revelation 20 as one of hopefulness and ultimate triumph in a time of delay, see R. Alistair Campbell**,** 'Triumph and Delay: The Interpretation of Revelation 19:11–20:10', *EQ* 80:1 (2008), 3–12.

the Israelites can successfully despoil the Egyptians of their goods, and then 'released' to assist the Egyptians to pursue the Israelites, prior to the Egyptians (and apparently also Mastema – the language is ambiguous) being thrown 'into the middle of the sea into the depths of the abyss'.[34] This material provides significant support for a reading which senses that the exodus contributed to the narrative framework of a two-stage defeat of Satan in Revelation, with a 'binding' occurring at the first stage of the defeat, and a 'release' occurring prior to the final defeat.

The enemy in the exodus was near invincible. Despite the ten plagues and the exodus, the enemy soon turned the tables and the people of God found themselves yet again in a situation of apparently near-total entrapment and hopelessness. Yet the enemy was overthrown – finally – in the end. The Revelation story-line for the youthful Christian communities of western Asia is similar: they have come out of 'Egypt', freed from their sins by Christ's blood (Rev. 1:5), freed through the overthrow of Satan (Rev. 12:9–11). And yet they live where Satan's throne is (Rev. 2:13), where a great whore makes herself drunk with the blood of the saints (Rev. 17:6), where life becomes impossible unless God's people accept the mark of the beast (13:16–17). What can be done in this unbearable situation? John points God's people to the past. God came through in deliverance for his people at the exodus. He will do so again. The 'hopeless' situation of John's audience is simply an interval between two deliverances. The first deliverance has occurred. The second will come. Victory, salvation and eternal glory are assured.

Essentially then, John's 'millennial' appeal in Revelation 20 is much more to the past rather than to the future. We can see a similar perspective in Jude 5–7. The writing here, while not apocalyptic in genre, has a strong indebtedness to Jewish apocalyptic ideas.[35] Three decisive events are referred to: the exodus, the fallen angels who cohabited with women (Gen. 6), and the Sodom and Gomorrah story. Each story is located in the past. And with the fallen angels' story, they are punished and 'kept in eternal chains' (c.f. the binding of Satan with a great chain in Revelation 20) in deepest darkness (c.f. the sealed pit in Revelation 20). This meshes with the fallen angels' story in 1 Enoch 6:12, which results in the angels being bound 'for seventy generations underneath the rocks of the ground' (1 Enoch 10:12). Jude explicitly connects his material with the Enoch story (Jude 14–15). The references in 1 Peter 3:19 (to spirits in prison) and in 2 Peter 2:4-5 (to angels cast into hell and confined with chains of deepest darkness), though less clear of reference, may also thicken the interpretation expressed in this paragraph.

So when does the millennium begin? It begins when Satan is 'bound' for a thousand years (20:2). And when does that binding occur? Popular material in Jubilees and in Jude, as well as the Exodus connections in Revelation itself, point strongly to a binding in the past, to the period of the Pentateuch. This may be

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34 Jubilees 48:9–19, especially vv.14–16.

35 Steven J. Kraftchick, *Jude, 2 Peter*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 17.

modified in Revelation with its focus on the Jesus event (see especially Revelation 12:9). But either way the millennium has deep connection with events that have already taken place.

Such a perspective turns commonly held, populist interpretations of Revelation 20 and the millennium on their head. Instead of the text being essentially a forward glance into an ultimate future, it is much more a backward glance to mighty acts of a gracious God who will act in the same sort of way again and again. This makes the millennium a metaphor. A millennial golden age may well lie in the future, but paradoxically it extends back even into the otherwise hopeless, present situation. The present and the future are to be understood in the context of a past which was initially 'impossible', but was eventually one of triumphant victory. What is the way forward in Revelation 20? The way forward for the people of God is to look back – and then they will know their present and their future.

Abstract

Revelation 20 has the puzzling story-line of a menacing Satan being released from a God-imposed imprisonment of one thousand years. Why would God let Satan out? There are strong intratextual connections between Revelation 20 and Revelation 12, that chapter also pointing to a two-stage overthrow of Satan. Revelation 20 has exodus linkage in its 'dragon' and 'abyss' language. In addition, Revelation 20 and the exodus tradition in the earlier Book of Jubilees both involve a two-stage overthrow of Satan ('Mastema'). Exodus thus seems to be a template for the Revelation 20 storyline, bringing a message of hope to a trapped people. As God came through a second time at the Sea of Reeds, so God will again bring about a final deliverance and overthrow of Satan for John's audience. Revelation 20 is thus not primarily about a distant millennial future but more about hope for a first-century embattled people.