

The Millennium and the Mystery of Iniquity

Introduction

From the very start of the Book of Revelation the ‘end’ is approaching quickly and its time is near: “*The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place.... Blessed is he that reads and they that hear the words of the prophecy and take to heart what is written in it, for the time is near*” (Rev 1,1–3). The imminent ‘end’ is then described as the coming of Christ in glory at the consummation of history: “*Behold he comes with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the families of the earth will weep because of him. Yes, amen*” (Rev 1,7; cf. 22,12.20). As one commentator affirms: “The Apocalypse’s overall understanding of time is that the consummation of history is ‘only a little while’ away, whether this is viewed from the vantage point of Christians (1:1,3; 22:6–7,10,20), of exalted heavenly saints (6:11), or of Satan...(12:12).”¹

From chapter 4 onwards, the text moves inexorably towards this consummation. However, the narration is not arranged in a strictly linear way, but in stages, with each stage giving more detail on the events accompanying this ending. At least five times (Rev 6,17; 11,15–19; 16,17–21; 19,1–10; 20,11–21,8) the text arrives at the anticipated climax, only to withdraw from the brink and return to recount the events from a different perspective. In his commentary on Revelation, Mounce describes it like this: “There is progress in the book, but it is a progress that moves the reader to a fuller experience of the divine plan for final victory rather than a progress that ticks off the minutes on an eschatological clock. Each new vision intensifies the realization of coming judgment. Like a mounting storm at sea each new crest of the wave moves history to its final destiny.”² So much is indisputable. What scholars continue to discuss is the degree to which each stage is a progression or a recapitulation of what was described before.³

It is in this context that scholars debate chapter 20 with particular intensity. On the basis of its literary connections, the majority of biblical scholars say that the binding of Satan (20,1–3) and the millennial rule of Christ with his saints (20,4–6) must be understood as a progression from, and sequel to, the second coming of Christ described in the previous chapter (19,11–19). According to this ‘millennialist’ view,⁴ Christ’s millennial rule follows his second coming and is therefore a future development. It is said to be the natural reading of chapter 20 and on purely literary grounds it appears as the simplest and most obvious way to understand this chapter.

However, this view is disputed by a growing number of scholars, who have demonstrated that the vision of the Satan’s capture (20,1–3) and of Christ’s millennial rule (20,4–6) recapitulates the situation preceding the second coming, as described in other parts

¹ G.K.Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999, 993, following E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1985, 46.

² R.H.Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, Revised Edition, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998, 33.

³ A useful summary of the discussion is presented by Marko Jauhiainen in “Recapitulation and Chronological Progression in John’s Apocalypse: Towards a New Perspective”, *New Testament Studies* 49 (2003), 543–559. See also “A Structuration of Revelation 4,1 – 22,5” by Jan Lambrecht, in *L’Apocalypse johannique et l’Apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament*, J. Lambrecht (ed), Leuven 1980.

⁴ ‘Millennialist’ is here used synonymously with ‘chialist’ or ‘pre-millennialist’.

of the text (especially 1,5–6; 5,9–10; 6,9–11; 12,7-18; 15,2).⁵ This interpretation supports the ‘amillennial’ view of Christ’s rule as a recapitulation of the interval between his first and second comings, and therefore as a present reality.⁶ These observations are then confirmed by noting that there is no indication either in the text of the Revelation, or in the NT, or in the traditional teaching of the Church, for an interval of one thousand years between Christ’s second coming (19,11–19) and the final judgment (20,11–15), as predicted by the millennialist interpretation.⁷ Although the millennialist reading of chapter 20 may be arguable on literary grounds, it is entirely mistaken from the scriptural and theological points of view. This conclusion is further verified by Hill, whose research has convincingly shown that, except for the mention of the thousand-year time period, the book of Revelation has none of the features that characterize ‘millennialist’ compositions of the same period. He concludes that, according to the criteria of his time, the author of Revelation should not be considered a millennialist.⁸

While the debate becomes more and more detailed and sophisticated,⁹ the issue continues to divide Christians in ways that are perhaps more acrimonious and critical than ever before.¹⁰ The expectation of a blessed and holy millennial rule in the future, before the

⁵ Cf. R.F.White, “Reexamining the Evidence for Recapitulation in Rev 20:1-10”, *WTS* 51 (1989) 319-44; idem, “Making sense of Rev 20:1-10? Harold Hoehner Versus Recapitulation”, *JETS* 37 (1994) 539-51; idem, “On the Hermeneutics and Interpretation of Revelation 20:1-3 A Preconsummationist Perspective”, *JETS* 42 (1999) 53-66; G.K. Beale’s commentary on Rev 20 in *The Book of Revelation*, 972-1038; and Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

⁶ Still the most lucid and penetrating ‘amillennial’ exposition is that of St. Augustine in his *City of God* XX, 6-15, with some minor modifications to remove the few inconsistencies. The term ‘amillennial’ is slightly misleading in that it implies that advocates of this approach do not believe in the millennium. They do indeed believe in the millennium, but not as a specific period of time in the future, as premillennialists do. As a more accurate term for ‘amillennialism’, G.K. Beale has proposed ‘inaugurated millennialism’ (G.K. Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, JSNTSup 166, Sheffield: Academic, 1998, 356-57).

⁷ In the book of Revelation, for example, there is no hint of a thousand-year interval in the events following the seventh trumpet (11,15–19), which itself announces the fulfilment of God’s Mystery (10,7). Similarly, the opening of the penultimate seal in Rev 6,12-17 brings the world up to the Day of the Lord’s anger, which traditionally characterizes divine judgment at the end of history. There is little evidence here of a thousand-year pause in the delivery of this judgment. Furthermore, since the bowl plagues represent the final outpouring of God’s wrath (15,1), it is inconceivable that there should be a further outpouring of divine wrath after a peaceful interval of one thousand years (20,7–10). This last point is explained, with other arguments for recapitulation, by R. F. White in “Reexamining the Evidence for Recapitulation in Rev 20:1–10”, 330–31.

⁸ Charles E. Hill, *Regnum Coelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*, 2nd Edition, Grand Rapids/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2001.

⁹ The complexity of the debate can be appreciated by reading, for example, Beatrice Neall’s “Amillennialism Reconsidered” in *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, Vol.43, No. 1, 185–210, or Dave Matthewson’s “A Re-examination of the Millennium in Rev 20:1-6: Consummation and Recapitulation”, *JETS*, 44/2 (June 2001) 244.

¹⁰ In contemporary Christianity, one of the most contentious issues arising from the dispute between amillennialists and millennialists is the current support for Israel, otherwise known as Christian Zionism. This support is heavily based on the millennialist belief that, after the full restoration of Israel, Christ will come and start his millennial reign in Jerusalem. This is a serious cause of irritation and division between the established Churches, which are mostly amillennialist in outlook, and the independent evangelical communities around the world, which are millennialist. See for example: ‘The Jerusalem Declaration on Christian Zionism’, by the Patriarch and Local Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, 22th August, 2006 available at <https://imeu.org/article/the-jerusalem-declaration-on-christian-zionism>. The causes and consequences of this division will be discussed later.

end of history, is a strong and unpredictable inspiration for dramatic, and often violent, social, religious and political movements.¹¹ In brief, it is a subject that is crying out for resolution.

The Hermeneutical Key

Although the notion of a temporary messianic kingdom is to be found in several apocalyptic and intertestamental writings, and also in subsequent rabbinical speculation, the author of Revelation is the first to describe this as a period of one thousand years.¹² The thousand-year duration of Christ's rule is mentioned six times in six verses (Rev 20,2.3.4.5.6.7), and is not mentioned anywhere else in the text of Revelation. Most scholars agree that this emphasis on the thousand-year duration of Christ's reign evokes one particular passage in the OT:

“A thousand years in your sight (Lord)
Are as a day, a yesterday that is passing away,
A watch in the night.” (Ps 90,4)

In the light of this OT passage,¹³ the thousand-year reign of Christ is to be understood from both a human and a divine perspective. From the human point of view, the poetic comparison in this verse makes it very unlikely that the thousand-year interval should be understood literally as a period of exactly one thousand years, but rather as a somewhat protracted historical era. From the divine point of view, it should be seen not only as if it were a single day, that is to say a rather brief period of time, but also as if it were a day that is already passing away.¹⁴ The indisputable allusion to Psalm 90,4 strongly supports the interpretation of the thousand-year reign of Christ as the retrospective vision of an era that is passing away

¹¹ History is scattered with illustrations, see Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*. 3rd edition. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1970.

¹² See Excursus 20A in Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, (WBC 52c, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1104–1108, especially 1108: “An indefinite period is mentioned in 2 *Apoc.Bar.* 40:3 and 4 *Ezra* 12:43 (cf. 1 *Cor.* 15:24-28). Later rabbinic literature attributes a variety of opinion to various sages (here the traditional dates of the sages mentioned have no necessary relationship to the dates of the traditions associated with their names, and often are much later): R. Akiba (died A.D. 135) reportedly proposed a messianic kingdom lasting forty years; R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus (ca. A.D. 90) proposed two thousand years (the most widely held opinion); R. Jehoshua (ca. A.D. 90) proposed seven thousand years; and R. Abbahu (ca. A.D. 300) also proposed seven thousand years. John is the first author who anticipates a messianic interregnum of one thousand years, a number symbolic for a lengthy yet limited period of time (see *Apoc. Elijah* 5:36-39).”

¹³ As with many other passages in Revelation, and indeed of the NT, the key to its interpretation lies in the OT. “Conversely, the New Testament cannot be fully understood except in the light of the Old Testament” Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People And Their Sacred Scriptures In The Christian Bible* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002) II A 6.

¹⁴ The comparison of the thousand year period to a day in the eyes of the Lord, a day that is already passing away, resonates strongly with the finding that the liturgy celebrated before the throne in the heavenly sanctuary, and unifying all the diverse visions in the book of Revelation, is a synthesis of the liturgical activity that took place on the Day of Atonement in the ancient temple (see *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple: A New Approach to the Book of Revelation*, John and Gloria Ben-Daniel, Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan 2003, 17–79). The divine day that corresponds to the millennium is not just any day, therefore, but the Day for atonement—a finding that further supports the identification of the millennium with the present age of reconciliation and salvation in Christ.

and nearly over. The author's evocation of Ps 90,4 can then be explained as a device for guiding the interpretation of the millennium in this direction.¹⁵

Reframing the problem

On the basis of this insight, both the millennialist and the amillennialist views can, to a certain extent, be reconciled: the author does indeed present the millennium as if it will follow Christ's second coming, while at the same time indicating, through the allusion to Psalm 90,4, that it should be understood as a vision that is retrospective in its scope. The millennium does indeed seem to be in the future, but when that future arrives it will be revealed as having passed, for it already exists in the present. The debate between the two sides, though not entirely resolved, can now be reframed to enquire why the author should have described the millennial rule of Christ in such an ambiguous way.

The first, and simplest, explanation is that the order of the visions here reflects, and is probably intended to recall, the passage in the book of Daniel which provides the most relevant background for understanding of Christ's millennial reign:¹⁶

"The ten horns shall be ten kings rising out of that kingdom; another shall rise up after them, different from those before him...He shall speak against the Most High and oppress the holy ones of the Most High...They shall be handed over to him for a time, two times, and half a time. But when the court is convened, and his power is taken away by final and absolute destruction, then kingship and dominion and majesty of all the kingdoms under the heavens shall be given to the holy people of the Most High, whose kingdom shall be everlasting: all dominions shall serve and obey him." (Dan 7,24–27)

Just as in Daniel the saints of the Most High receive kingship and dominion over all the kingdoms of the earth after the power of the tyrant is taken away, so in Revelation Christ's followers appear to reign with him (20,4–6) only after the two tyrannical beasts and their armies are destroyed (19,11–21) and Satan is chained (20,1–3). Reproducing the order in Daniel 7,9–27 has the effect of linking these two passages, and indicating the fulfilment of Daniel's vision in Christ's millennial kingdom.

However, the order in which the events are presented in this vision of fulfilment should not necessarily be taken as the order in which they occur. Revelation never sticks rigidly to the former prophecies of the OT, but rewrites them in the light of Christ's coming.¹⁷ Regarding this particular passage, Beale notes: "Furthermore, that there is no concern to develop a precise, linear chronological understanding of Daniel 7 in the Apocalypse is

¹⁵ This explanation would then affirm and clarify the question posed by Jack T. Sanders in 'Whence the First Millennium? The Sources behind Revelation 20': "Can John have thought of a millennium for his version of the messianic period because Ps 90.4 said that 1000 years are like a yesterday? The sense of that connection is not apparent." (*New Testament Studies*, 50 [2004] 450).

¹⁶ This point is stressed, for example, by Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, English trans. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2001, 568.

¹⁷ Ugo Vanni, for example, describes it like this: "The author never uses an explicit quotation, but inserts entire expressions from the Old Testament, often literally but with some slight alteration, so bringing the context of the Old Testament back to life with the prospect that has been added to it by the New" (our trans.). See also: Ugo Vanni, "Gerusalemme nell'Apocalisse", in *L'Apocalisse: Ermeneutica, Esegese, Teologia*, Bologna: EDB 1988, 369.

evident from such texts as Rev 1:13ff., which pictures the Son of man already reigning in the midst of the first-century churches in inaugural fulfillment of Dan 7:13; likewise, 5,9–10 shows the church as already beginning to fulfill the Dan 7:18,22,27 prophecy of the reign of the saints. In addition, the “opening of the books” in Dan 7:10, which precedes the judgment of the beast in Daniel, follows the judgment of the beast in Rev 20:12, where it is applied to unbelievers. Rev 22:5 applies the reigning terminology of Daniel and of Rev 20:4–6 to the eternal state.”¹⁸ The very fact that Christ’s ascension and glorification occurred long before the final destruction of the beasts should, in fact, alert us to a significant change in the sequence of events described by these visions.

A second, and more theological, explanation for the very late setting of the ‘millennial’ vision (20,4–6) concerns the delayed recognition of Christ’s reign. The allusion to Psalm 90,4 emphasizes the divine perspective, implying that a shift in perspective—from human to divine—is needed in order to recognize the millennial rule of Christ. This would explain why it is not apparent to most people in its time, but will be revealed only at its conclusion, when “*the kingdom of this world has become our Lord’s and his Christ’s*” (Rev 11,15)—a time when one would certainly expect such a shift in perspective to occur. Since this only happens after the destruction of the main sources of evil in the world (Babylon and the two beasts, 17,1–19,6; 19,19–21), the presence of these evil agents may be helping to obscure the vision of Christ’s millennial reign with his saints, even though this reign is already a reality in the present.¹⁹

This explanation agrees well with what we know of Christ’s kingdom from other parts of Revelation and the NT. In the text of Revelation, there is an evident correspondence between those who reign for a thousand years with Christ in the first resurrection, who have authority to judge and are called priests of God and Christ (Rev 20,4–6), and those whom Christ has acquired for God with his blood from every tribe, tongue, race and nation, and formed into a kingdom and priests that reign (will reign)²⁰ over the earth (Rev 5,10). It is difficult to avoid identifying these two groups on the basis of the details given: both are described as Christ’s priests and both are destined to reign with him. Furthermore, similar terms are used to describe those whom Christ has freed from their sins and ‘made into a kingdom, priests to his God and Father’ (Rev 1,5–6). There could hardly be a better description of the Church in the present age of salvation.

From other passages in the NT, it is clear that, on the human level, Christ’s kingdom cannot easily be recognized for what it is. Because of its humility and service, the reign of Christ is very different from other kingdoms in the world (Mk 10,42–45; Lk 22,25–30). It is accessible only to those who are most child-like in their faith: “*Amen I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter into it*” (Mk 10,14–15; Mt 18,3–5). Being *in* the world, but not *of* this world (Jn 18,36), Christ’s kingdom can only be perceived with divine insight or accepted as a matter of faith. These few depictions of Christ’s reign are entirely consistent with the suggestion that, although it exists already in the

¹⁸ Beale, *Revelation*, 982

¹⁹ This observation will be discussed in detail at the end of this essay.

²⁰ The present tense (βασιλευουσιν–‘they reign’) is attested by the best text witness A (Alexandrinus) and the Koine manuscripts. The future tense (βασιλευσουσιν–‘they will reign’) is found in the rest of the manuscripts and is accepted by the majority of commentaries and translations. For reasons in favour of the present tense in this context, see Beale, *Revelation*, 362–4; Vanni, *L’Apocalisse*, 361. However, to avoid overestimating the significance of the tense here (Rev 5,10), it should be noted both past and future tenses are used in the parallel passage at 20,4–6: “...and they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years....they will be priests of God and of Christ, and will reign with him for a thousand years”.

Church, this reign is not widely recognized, but will be revealed plainly only after “*the kingdom of this world has become our Lord’s and his Christ’s*” (Rev 11,15). And then his millennial reign will be revealed as ‘a yesterday that is passing away’ (Ps 90,4). To place the retrospective vision of Christ’s reign after his second coming implies that many, if not most, of the earth’s inhabitants will not recognize Christ’s reign, or enter under his rule, before his coming in glory.²¹

A third reason for the late presentation of the vision is that the author wants to emphasize that the ‘millennial’ reign of Christ corresponds to the final period of creation – the stage immediately preceding the attainment of its eternal perfection. Based on the Genesis account of creation in seven days, and taking each day to be one thousand years (according to Psalm 90,4), this final period of creation came to be viewed as analogous to the last day of creation: the Sabbath, the day that God rested. In apocalyptic literature it was anticipated to be a transitional period of rest, peace and blessing on earth under the leadership of the Messiah, the sovereign anointed by God.²² In Revelation, this is indicated by the description of those participating in Christ’s millennial rule as ‘blessed and holy’ (Rev 20,6), and by the granting of ‘rest’ to the martyrs and saints in the following contexts:

- a) the martyrs under the altar in heaven were told to *rest* a short time more until the judgments of God take place at the end of time (Rev 6,11);
- b) those who die in the Lord (the saints) are able to *rest* from their labours; nevertheless their good works follow them (Rev 14,13).

The fact that the saints work for salvation on earth and take their Sabbath rest in heaven guides the authentic interpretation of the millennial reign of Christ with his saints (cf. Heb 3,7–4,11).²³

It may be objected that although the description of Christ’s millennial reign in 20,4–6 recalls features from other parts of the text (esp. 6,9–11;15,2 and 1,5–6), it also differs in important respects. For example, the term ‘first resurrection’ is introduced here for the first time, in connection with Satan’s imprisonment and the saints’ ‘living and reigning’ for a thousand years. These new features seem to describe a completely new state of triumphant existence. Some even suggest that the ‘first resurrection’ refers to a bodily resurrection, but there are good reasons for rejecting this interpretation.²⁴ Far from forcing us to see here a complete break with previous visions, the new information given here simply broadens the information given in preceding descriptions of the ‘kingdom and priests’ redeemed by Christ (1,5–6; 5,9–10). This is, in fact, a literary technique frequently used by the author of Revelation, whereby he progressively constructs an image piece-by-piece using different but related descriptions in various contexts.²⁵ Here, the author is revealing additional details

²¹ In other words: “The kingdom will be fulfilled, then, not by a historic triumph of the Church through a progressive ascendancy, but only by God’s victory over the final unleashing of evil, which will cause his bride to come down from heaven. God’s triumph over the revolt of evil will take the form of the Last Judgement after the final cosmic upheaval of this passing world.” paragraph 677, *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, 155–6.

²² For the background to the temporary messianic kingdom in the Jewish and apocalyptic traditions, see Excursus 20A in David E.Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, 1104–1108.

²³ I.e. the millennium does not consist in the enjoyment of sensual pleasures, or even in the absence of wickedness in the world, but in the participation of the faithful in the vocation and mission of the Christian community.

²⁴ For the arguments against a bodily resurrection here, and in favour of a spiritual resurrection, see Beale, *Revelation*, 1004–1007.

²⁵ Under the title ‘Accumulation of Images’ in his work *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire*, Oxford: OUP 1990, 43–45, L.L.Thompson illustrates this technique with the vision in Rev 19,11–16.

about those who participate in Christ's kingdom—a kingdom whose existence had been referred to earlier in the text.

Confirming the Identification of the Millennial Reign

The identification of Christ's millennial reign with the Church in the present age finds confirmation in the text of 20,4. Although the interpretation of this passage is somewhat complex, most commentators see here representatives of the entire Christian Church (cf. Matt 19,28; 1Cor 6,2).²⁶

*“And I saw thrones and they sat on them,
and power to judge was given to them,
and (I saw) the souls of those who had been beheaded
because of the Witness of Jesus and because of the Word of God;
also (I saw) those who did not worship the beast or his image
and did not receive the mark on their forehead and on their hand;
and they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.”* (Rev 20,4)

It has been suggested that all three groups described in this passage refer to single group of martyrs. This is proposed by explaining the absence of an identifiable subject in the first group as a stylistic peculiarity referring to the second group²⁷ and the indefinite relative pronoun introducing the third group (καὶ οἱτινες) as an exegetical expression also referring to, and clarifying, the second group.

However, this approach is unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. Firstly, on the basis of its use elsewhere, the indefinite relative pronoun (καὶ οἱτινες) is most likely to have an adjunctive use and refer to a different group, or sub-group, of martyrs from the one described previously.²⁸ Secondly, it is doubtful that the martyrs in the vision can be identified with those sitting on thrones, since the very same martyrs have already been seen as resurrected souls in heaven (Rev 6,9–11), not seated on thrones, but standing before God's throne (Rev 15,2). The third objection to this approach is that it envisages martyrs as the only ones who reign with Christ in his millennial kingdom. This suggestion conflicts with those parts of the text that offer messianic authority to all who overcome (Rev 2,26–27; 3,21), unconditioned by whether, or not, they become martyrs in the process.

It is more fitting to see here three groups: the first is simply described but not identified (they who sit on thrones and judge), the second are the Christian martyrs who have been killed throughout history because of their Witness to Jesus and to the Word of God (cf. 6,9), and the third are those of any faith or creed who were martyred because they did not pledge their loyalty to the beast, in any way, in the final period of history (cf. 6,10–11; 15,2–

²⁶ See Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, 1084.

²⁷ See Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, 1084–5, who explains this stylistic peculiarity “from the author's tendency to use the literary device *hysteron-proteron*, i.e. reversing the logical order of narrative events (a device he frequently uses elsewhere; see Rev 3:3,17; 5:5; 6:4; 10:4,9; 20:4–5; 22:14) and from his tendency to describe *where* an individual or group of people sits before describing them (Rev 4:2,4; 14,14; 20:11;...)”.

²⁸ For the reasons why the adjunctive use here is preferable, see J. Webb Mealy, *After the Thousand Years: Resurrection and Judgment in Revelation 20*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1992, 112; and Beale, *Revelation*, 1001.

3). The last group is added at the end, because they are indeed the last to be included in the millennial kingdom of Christ.

The question remains as to who are those whom the author sees sitting on thrones, to whom judgment was given (Rev 20,4). Accepting the identity of the priests who reign with Christ in 20,4 with the priests who are to reign *on earth* in 5,9–10, then clearly the vision of the millennial kingdom in 20,4–6 cannot be exercised solely in heaven, but must also be established on earth.²⁹

Seeing that the last two groups in 20,4 both refer to martyrs, who were previously seen standing in heaven (6,9–11; but esp. 15,2), there is no alternative but to recognize the first group—those unidentified people who are sitting on thrones—as those who are ruling on earth. Since they are on earth, they cannot be identified with the 24 elders sitting on 24 thrones in heaven, as suggested by a number of commentators.³⁰ There is only one other passage in Revelation that could shed light on the identity of those sitting on thrones: “*To the one who overcomes—I will let him sit with me on my throne, as I also overcame and sat with my Father on his throne*” (Rev 3,21; cf. 2,17). The unidentified people sitting on thrones, and ruling on earth, can therefore be identified with those members of the Church who have received, already in their own mortal lives, this particular promise of the Risen Christ for those who overcome.³¹

The three groups envisioned in 20,4–6 can therefore be understood as representatives of the Church in the present age of salvation, and consisting of members in heaven and on earth. In heaven, Christ’s rule is represented by the souls of those martyred throughout history, with special mention of those killed during the great tribulation at the end of history. The reign of these martyrs is realized materially through those who have overcome and can therefore participate in Christ’s millennial reign during their own regenerated lives on earth. It is not unreasonable at this stage to postulate a ‘mystical communion’ between the earthly and heavenly groups in this vision.³² And in fact, it is only a small step to see, here, as the visible expression Christ’s millennial reign on earth, the thrones, or ‘*cathedrae*’, of the bishops in the Church.

The vision of the millennial kingdom of Christ is therefore not only retrospective from the point of view of Christ’s second coming, but also comprehensively describes the ruling authority of the Church as composed of those members who have ‘overcome’, whether they are presently in heaven or on earth. For reasons that will be explored later, this kingdom is recognized only by the eye of faith and cannot be recognized by most people until its consummation at the end of history. It will then be revealed, from the divine perspective, as a period that is already passing away.

²⁹ Against the conclusions of Michel Gourgues, O.P. in “The Thousand-Year Reign (Rev 20:1–6): Terrestrial or Celestial?” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 47 (1985), 676–81, for example. The establishment of the millennial rule on earth (Rev 20,4–6) is also implied by the earthly setting of the passages immediately before (20,1-3) and after (20,7-10), see Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, 1089.

³⁰ Mealy rightly notes: “If John had wanted to refer unambiguously to the elders in Rev. 20.4a, he could have mentioned them by that term. Yet he does not” *After the Thousand Years*, 108.

³¹ It has been argued that the inheritance of the promises in the letters to the churches must await the eschatological fulfilment (e.g. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice and Judgment*, 75–76). This position is challenged by Beale, who argues convincingly that “Those in the church who begin to overcome may even enjoy the inauguration of the promise before death, since it is clear from ch. 1 that believers are already participants in Christ’s kingdom” *Revelation*, 310 (see also 271–272).

³² By no mere coincidence, this ‘postulate’ happens to be an established doctrine of the Church, see CCC paragraphs 954–962.

The implications of the amillennialist view

If this explanation of the millennial reign of Christ in the Church is accepted, then certain important implications follow. Firstly, we must not look to the future for the establishment of the millennial rule of Christ, but rather take every opportunity to participate in his kingdom here and now, within the Church. Christ's millennial rule will conclude only at the consummation, when 'the kingdom of this world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ' (Rev 11,15). However, the ending of the millennial reign is not so much a conclusion but an eternal and universal extension, for then his servants "*will reign for ever and ever*" (Rev 22,5).³³

The second implication concerns the contested nature of the 'first resurrection'.³⁴ It refers primarily to the resurrection of the faithful soul after death and its entrance into a state of blessedness and rest in heaven (cf. 14,13). This state of existence, however, is not confined to heaven but can be experienced also on earth by those who have been regenerated by faith in Christ and have 'overcome' all temptations against this faith. This view is consistent with the doctrine expressed elsewhere in the NT (cf. Col 3,1–4; Eph 2,4–7).

The third implication is that the dragon is already now, in the present era, locked and chained in the abyss, so that he is no longer able to deceive the nations (Rev 20,1–3). The literal significance of the imprisonment of the devil, and its practical effect on the activity of evil in the world, is much debated by biblical scholars and theologians.³⁵ It is rarely noted, however, that affirming the devil's incarceration in the present age of salvation appears to contradict the part of the text that describes the sign of the devil in heaven: "*And another sign was seen in heaven and behold, a great fiery-red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and with seven diadems on his heads*" (12,3).³⁶ How can the devil be represented in heaven by a sign, while at the same time be confined to the abyss? The presence of the devil's sign in heaven (12,3) seems to support the millennialist point of view, by suggesting that the devil himself is still active in heaven and therefore cannot at the same time be confined to the abyss. It therefore offers some scriptural justification for the rejection of the foregoing amillennial interpretation of the reign of Christ in the Church.³⁷ Indeed, a large number of people, including faithful Christians, simply cannot reconcile the persistence of some

³³ In effect, then, the millennial rule merges without a break with the eternal kingdom of God and Christ. This recalls the Nicene Creed: "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end".

³⁴ "The first resurrection... How should one understand it? The responses to this question extremely varied, and their ingeniousness betrays the lack of an adequate solution" Ugo Vanni, 'L'Apocalypse johannique: Etat de la question', in J. Lambrecht (ed.), *L'Apocalypse johannique*, 42; quoted by Mealy in *After The Thousand Years*, 102.

³⁵ For a summary of the various views, see Beale, *Revelation*, 984–991.

³⁶ The contradiction can be ignored only if this chapter is understood in a preterist sense, as representing (albeit in a mythological way) the historical experiences of the early Church, culminating in the historical downfall of the devil and his subsequent incarceration in the abyss. However, this interpretation can be rejected on several counts, not least because it ignores the end-historical context of the vision of the signs in heaven (Rev 12,1,3; cf. 10,7). For further criticism of the historico-mythological interpretation of Rev 12, see this author's article "Towards the Mystical Interpretation of Revelation 12", in *Revue Biblique*, Vol 114–4 (2007), 594–614.

³⁷ As an objection to the amillennialist view, this point is argued by Dave Matthewson in "A Re-examination of the Millennium in Rev 20:1-6: Consummation and Recapitulation": "In my mind, it is still difficult to reconcile the binding of Satan in 20:1-3 so that he is no longer able to deceive (...) the nations with his activity in 12:9 as the one who deceives (...) the entire inhabited world." (*JETS*, 44/2 [June 2001] 244).

diabolical activity and influence in heaven, and on earth, with the fact that the devil is already locked and chained in the abyss.

Further investigation of this paradox is worthwhile, not only because it helps to understand the millennialist attitude and its consequences, but also because it can shed further light on the meaning of the ‘abyss’ and the devil’s incarceration there. In fact, although it leads us into some very deep water, this investigation is indispensable for a fuller understanding of the author’s vision.

The Mystery of Iniquity

Since the cardinal ‘sign’ of the devil is ‘sin’ (Rev 12,3), the figure of Babylon, the prostitute-city whose sins “*have piled up to heaven*” (Rev 18,5), is key to understanding the paradoxical presence of the devil’s sign in heaven during its simultaneous imprisonment in the abyss (20,1–3). The fact that Babylon’s sins have ‘piled up to heaven’ suggests that it is through her sins that the devil is able to exercise his influence in heaven and on earth, despite being locked and chained in the abyss. This becomes clearer on recalling that the devil had delegated his power to the beast (Rev 13,2) and that the beast is found to be supporting Babylon, in a way that is described as “*the mystery of the woman and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that is supporting her*” (Rev 17,7). The relation between the devil, the beast and Babylon is, therefore, a basic element of this mystery, which can equally be termed ‘the mystery of iniquity’.³⁸ It is proposed that, through the ‘mysterious’ liaison of the beast and the prostitute-city, the devil continues to have influence in heaven and sow corruption on earth, thus preventing many Christians from seeing the millennial kingdom of Christ in the present age. To comprehend this mystery fully, the identities of the prostitute and beast of Rev 17–18 need to be clarified.

The identity of the beast is not fully revealed until he ascends from the abyss (11,7) or sea (13,1) at the start of his brief 42-month rule over all the earth (Rev 13,5–7), immediately prior to Christ’s second coming (cf. Rev 17,14). At that time, the beast is the ruling global power, governed by one man (cf. Rev 13,18), whose actions and characteristics identify him as the ultimate antagonist of Christ, known in Christian tradition as the antichrist.³⁹ However, before revealing himself fully in this way, the beast is seen covertly supporting the prostitute from under the surface of the ‘waters’ on which she sits (comparing Rev 17,1 and 17,3). The ‘waters’ therefore correspond to the abyss, or sea, from which the beast will later emerge and

³⁸ In the context of Revelation, this mystery is the diabolical counterpart to the Mystery of God (cf. Rev 10,7). Although the ‘mystery of iniquity’ was briefly introduced by the Apostle Paul in 2Thess 2,7, it is the author of Revelation who gives us the most complete picture of its historical expression. More than a tenth of the text is devoted to this subject.

³⁹ On one hand, he acts decisively against Christ and his followers: he kills the two witnesses (Rev 11,7), persecutes the saints (Rev 13,7) and goes off to make war against the Lamb (Rev 17,14). On the other hand, many aspects of his rule resemble the mission and imitate the mystery of Jesus Christ: one of the heads of the beast is fatally wounded (Rev 13,3), but his recovery (Rev 13,12,14) signals the ascension of the beast from the abyss (Rev 11,7; 13,1) and the full manifestation of its power in the world (13,2–8), in ways that appear to emulate the Passion, Resurrection, Ascension and worship of Jesus Christ following his glorification in heaven (cf. Rev 5,9–14). This combination of terminal hostility to Christ and his followers, together with imitation of the true Saviour, leads to the conclusion that the beast is the last and most powerful manifestation of the antichristian spirit, known in Christian tradition as the antichrist. This is confirmed by his position in a hierarchy of three evil figures (the devil, the beast and the false prophet) that the author contrasts with God, his Christ and their prophet, John.

reveal himself. Synonymous with the abyss and sea, these ‘waters’ represent “*races and crowds and nations and tongues*” (Rev 17,15), which is an expression that the author employs to refer specifically to the unredeemed peoples of the world (cf. 5,9; 7,9; 13,7).⁴⁰ Not only has the beast inherited the devil’s power, kingdom and great authority (Rev 13,2), as well as a similar form and colour (Rev 12,3; 13,1), but he is also submerged in the abyss, where the devil is said to be chained (Rev 20,1–3). From these observations on the beast, and from his diabolical attempt to take the place of God in the lives of his subjects, it can be inferred that the beast is nothing less than the historical embodiment of the devil.⁴¹ In other words, the beast is that part of the abyss, or unredeemed multitude of people, in which the devil is presently confined.⁴²

The prostitute, whose name is Babylon, is somewhat harder to identify, since the concealment of her identity is an even more essential element of the mystery of iniquity. She is described as an international authority based in a city with seven hills (Rev 17,9.18), which is an ancient and widely known allusion to the city of Rome (cf. 1 Pet 5,13). But this city cannot be equated with ancient Rome, since her destruction is described as one of the eschatological judgments of God (Rev 16,19: the ‘bowl plagues’), which have not yet taken place. Furthermore, her destruction will be eternal and complete (18,21; 19,3), whereas the ancient city of Rome was rebuilt and repopulated after her fall in the fifth century AD. Therefore, there is no alternative but to concede that Babylon, the prostitute, represents an international authority that currently exists and is based in Rome.

Babylon can be more precisely identified by the fact that she is described metaphorically as a woman who is drunk and behaving as a prostitute (Rev 17,1–5.6). The metaphor of prostitution was often used by the ancient prophets to depict the idolatrous practices of the people of Israel (e.g. 1Chr 5,25; Ps 73,27; Jer 3,6; Ezek 16,17; 23,19; Hos 9,1), since it aptly represented their idolatry as infidelity to God, Israel’s only spouse and protector. Applied to Babylon, then, this metaphor indicates that she is a religious community

⁴⁰ The abyss, sea, or waters, therefore refer to the multitude of unredeemed people on earth, a conclusion that is strongly reminiscent of St. Augustine, for whom the abyss symbolizes “the countless number of godless men whose bitter hatred of God’s Church comes from the abysmal depths of their hearts” *City of God*, book 20 chapter 7. As Beale rightly comments: “It is wrong to picture the devil being “cast out of the earth” in some spatial sense, so that he is no longer present on earth. This would be to take “abyss” in an overly literalistic manner... The abyss is one of the various metaphors representing the spiritual sphere in which the devil and his accomplices operate” *Revelation*, 987.

⁴¹ The beast blasphemes against God and heaven (Rev 13,5–6), but is then worshipped as God for his unrivalled power (Rev 13,4; cf. Ps 113,5; 89,7.9; 86,8; 35,10; Ex 15,11). The devil is worshipped on account of the beast’s power (Rev 13,2.4). Those who do not worship the beast, or his image, are put to death (Rev 13,12.15). Furthermore the beast assumes a title (“the beast that... was and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and goes to destruction”, Rev 17,8) that parodies God’s name (“The One who was and is and is to come”; Rev 1,8). The beast’s inflated pretension to be God invites us to understand the beast and the devil as one—the diabolic counterpart to the unity of God and his Messiah.

⁴² The incarceration of the devil in the abyss therefore refers to the removal of his purely spiritual status and his physical confinement within the unredeemed human population metaphorically called the ‘abyss’ or ‘sea’. This severely restricts his level of operation to activities dependent on human agency – an interpretation that is entirely consistent with the fact that, in this state, he cannot “deceive the nations any more until the thousand years are finished” (Rev 20,3). This restriction evidently does not imply that evil ceases to exist in the millennial age, but indicates, rather, that evil is restrained from perverting the truth of God embodied by Christ and his gospel. This facilitates the propagation of the Gospel and creates the necessary conditions for every living soul to choose freely whether to accept or reject it.

that has been unfaithful in her relationship with God, in this case because of her idolatrous love of riches and wealth (Rev 18,3.7.14).⁴³

Finally, the religious character of this community is given away by the statement that she is drunk with the blood of the saints and martyrs of Jesus (Rev 17,6). In addition to the fact that saints, unlike martyrs, are not killed in the witnessing of their faith, there is nothing in the text of Revelation to suggest that Babylon is guilty of shedding the blood of these people.⁴⁴ Instead, the expression reveals that the life-blood of these holy followers of Jesus has affected Babylon's mentality so as to cause her to behave in an inappropriate, exalted and uninhibited way, like a woman who is drunk. This intoxication tells us much about the identity of Babylon. Firstly it implies a certain assimilation of, and identification with, the lives of the saints and martyrs of Jesus, confirming the suspicion that the international religious authority represented by Babylon is Christian. Secondly, when interpreted in the context of Babylon's prostitution, it tells us the exact nature of her transgression. Being drunk with the blood of the saints and martyrs of Jesus (feeling 'high' and exalting herself on account of their merits) predisposes and prompts Babylon to behave as a prostitute (to indulge her idolatrous desire for riches, luxury and wealth). In short, Babylon exploits the merits of the saints and martyrs of Jesus in order to satisfy her idolatrous love of wealth and luxury.

It is difficult to avoid the identification of Babylon, the great prostitute, with the historical centre of the Catholic Church at Rome.⁴⁵ In the prophet's vision she is accused of exploiting the cult of the saints and martyrs by using the money collected in their name in order to finance her opulent and luxurious lifestyle. However, in spite of being identified with a specific location, it is evident from the text of Revelation that Babylon's corrupting influence has spread far beyond Rome and now extends throughout the whole world (Rev 19,2).

In the light of these findings, it becomes easier to understand why so many people, including faithful Christians, have been unable to identify the millennial kingdom of Christ in the Church. This millennial kingdom is simply not evident in the Church, because it has been obscured by spiritual pride, corruption and worldly behaviour at the highest levels. This unchristian behaviour has not only prompted large numbers of people to separate themselves from the Church, but it has also caused them to expect the 'millennial kingdom' in the future, as a lengthy period of global Christian domination, between Christ's second coming and the final judgment. In its most popular contemporary form, this expectation for a future

⁴³ Without an established relationship, or covenant, with God, idolatry per se is not unfaithfulness to God but ignorance of him. For this reason the idolatrous power that is called Babylon, and is described as a great prostitute, should not be identified as an idolatrous pagan power such as Imperial Rome, since the idolatry in that city was performed out of ignorance of the true God and not unfaithfulness.

⁴⁴ As claimed by the majority of commentators, e.g., Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, 937–38; Beale, *Revelation*, 860; H.B. Swete, *Apocalypse of John*, 3rd ed., London: Macmillan 1917, 217–18.

⁴⁵ There is probably no better way to consider these prophetic accusations than in the context of the late Pope John Paul II's invitation to the Church to "become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel and, instead of offering to the world the witness of a life inspired by the values of faith, indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly *forms of counter-witness and scandal*." (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 33); also important in this respect is the International Theological Commission's "Memory and Reconciliation: the Church and the faults of the past" (2000).

messianic rule is focused on historical Jerusalem, in a restored Israel, and is the basis of what has come to be known as Christian Zionism.⁴⁶

So apart from the diffusion of corruption throughout the world, a negative attitude towards the Church, leading to the projection of the ‘millennium’ into the future, are two important consequences of the ‘mystery of iniquity’ as represented by the figure of the prostitute sitting on the beast in Revelation (Rev 17–18).

Discussion

Commenting on St. Paul’s presentation of the mystery of iniquity (or ‘lawlessness’) in his second letter to the Thessalonians, Markus Bockmuehl writes: “What is interesting about the ‘mystery of lawlessness’ in our text is that Paul envisions a clandestine present activity in the world, even prior to its eschatological manifestation in the antichrist... The mystery of lawlessness is the destructive masterplan of the prince of darkness, set in terminal hostility against the salvific designs of God. Just as in the ongoing preaching of the gospel the mystery of Christ is being manifested, so also the evil mystery is working itself out. It will ultimately be personified in the revelation of the antichrist, and in this figure in turn the counsels of Satan will be overcome at the final confrontation”.⁴⁷

The foregoing analysis of the ‘mystery of the woman and the beast’ in Revelation, brings us somewhat closer to understanding what Bockmuehl, following Paul, defines as the current ‘working out of the evil mystery’, which ‘will ultimately be personified in the revelation of the antichrist’.

Adhering to the warnings of Christ (Mt 24,24; Mk 13,22), the Early Church seems to have identified the workings of the mystery of iniquity with the activity of false teachers and false prophets within her growing communities (cf. 2Tim 4,3–4; 2Pet ch.2; Jude, 1Jn 2,18–23; 2Jn 7–11; Rev 2,2.14–15.20). Following the institution of Christianity as the religion of the Empire (4th cent. AD), and the formulation of the creeds and doctrines of the Church, the threat from false teaching receded. According to the vision of Babylon in Revelation, however, the mystery of iniquity did not cease, but continued to operate by corrupting the leadership of the Church with riches and wealth.

Tempted and corrupted by its desire for wealth and luxury, and associating intimately with the powers of this world, the Church leadership ceased to represent the humble millennial kingdom of Christ. Down the centuries, this corruption has scandalized the faithful, causing their separation from the Church and forming many of the historical divisions of Christianity. In the same way, however, the separated communities fell for the

⁴⁶ In its various forms, including Dispensationalism, Christian Zionism is undoubtedly the most popular, as well as politically significant, form of millennialism in the world today. This Christian support for Zionism is heavily based on the belief that, once the Land of Israel is fully restored, Christ will come and start his millennial reign in Jerusalem. (This is not to suggest that Christian support for Israel should be withdrawn, but that it should be based on other premises). If Christian millennialist fervour becomes the main motivation for supporting Jewish Zionism, Christian support then runs the risk of becoming disassociated from the principles of Christ’s present kingdom and supportive of the future restoration of Judaism’s goals (for which, see Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Book 14: Judges, Treatise 5: Kings and Wars, chs. 11–12). In fact, one could say that, consciously or not, Christian millennialism (mainly evangelical) presently plays a crucial role in facilitating the achievement of these goals. The removal of the millennial aspect from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict might help to unite and strengthen Christian witness to both Jewish and Muslim sides.

⁴⁷ Markus Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998, 197–98.

same temptations to wealth and luxury, and have become daughters of their mother Babylon (Rev 17,5).

Because of past corruption and divisions, many Christians remain unable to identify Christ's millennial kingdom within the Church, in the present age, and therefore project the vision of this millennial reign into the future,⁴⁸ associating it primarily with the physical and spiritual restoration of Israel.⁴⁹ Exploiting this Christian expectation of a future messianic kingdom, the devil will, at the appropriate time, be allowed to impose his own candidate as global ruler and messianic pretender (the beast, or antichrist).⁵⁰ As prophesied in Revelation, this ruler then proceeds to destroy his former collaborator 'Babylon' (Rev 17,16) and to persecute all those who refuse to recognize his messianic claims and demands (the 'great tribulation', Rev 7,14; 13,7.11–17, 15,2). Viewed in this way, millennialism is clearly one of the main scriptural mechanisms driving the final and ultimate revelation of the beast or antichrist.

As noted above, millennialism itself is driven by the failure to perceive the millennial kingdom of Christ in the Church, in the present age, due to the generation of corruption at its highest levels, in a way that constitutes the 'mystery of iniquity'. As corruption in the Church is the stumbling block erected by the devil in order to obscure the millennial kingdom and cause divisions among the faithful, only repentance for these particular sins can reverse the separations and restore unity among Christians. This repentance manifests itself by a loosening of the attachments to the wealth and luxury acquired by Babylon's sin. In the prophecy of Revelation, the fruit of this repentance is indeed evident in the response to the divine call "*come out of her my people*" (Rev 18,4), just before Babylon's eternal destruction. Since there is no mourning for loss of life in the subsequent lament over her destruction (Rev 18,9–19), it is certain that all who were inside the prostitute-city obey the divine call to abandon her accumulated treasures and leave.⁵¹ This indicates, furthermore, that all the persons inside Babylon in those days are 'people of God'.⁵²

With the destruction of Babylon, there will no longer be any obstacle to seeing Christ's kingdom in the Church—a kingdom in which countless numbers of faithful are participating in a humble and selfless way.⁵³ Not long after the beast and his allies destroy Babylon, the returning Christ defeats the beast and his armies at the battle of Harmagedon (Rev 16,16; 17,14; 19,11–21). Christ's millennial kingdom will then be revealed to the inhabitants of the world, from the divine perspective, as "*a yesterday that is passing away*" (Ps 90,4). At the moment of the beast's eternal destruction (Rev 19,20), the devil is released from his incarceration in the beast's body, and promptly goes out "*to deceive the nations in*

⁴⁸ This is the cardinal feature of millennialism (which is synonymous with pre-millennialism)

⁴⁹ As in Christian Zionism.

⁵⁰ The shortest and clearest explanation as to why the devil will be allowed to do this is given by Paul in 2Thess 2,8–12.

⁵¹ The penitent attitude expressed by the former Pope's frequent petitions for forgiveness and reconciliation (see note 45 above), help us to understand why, in the eschatological condemnation and destruction of Babylon, the buildings of the institution are destroyed, while the personnel are saved. Even though the sins of former generations have become so embedded in this institution that they tend to be repeated and re-enacted, it is also true that, through repentance and divine forgiveness, the personnel will not, in the end, 'share in her sins or receive from her plagues' (Rev 18,4).

⁵² This is an important point for those who continue to identify a future Pope as the antichrist. The text gives *no grounds whatsoever* for identifying the Pope, or any of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, present or future, with the eschatological antichrist or 'beast' (Rev 11,7; 13,1–10), as suggested by the Protestants of the Reformation.

⁵³ Note the divine invitation to celebrate Babylon's destruction (Rev 18,20) and the report of the celebration itself (Rev 19,4). More significant, perhaps, is the fact that Babylon's destruction answers the martyrs' prayer for revenge (Rev 6,9–10; 19,2).

the four corners of the earth, the Gog and Magog, whose number is as the sand of the sea, to assemble them to the war” (Rev 20,7–10).⁵⁴

By compelling us to examine the ‘mystery of the woman and the beast’, the amillennial approach leads us to a new understanding of the exact ‘place’, in the ‘abyss’, where the dragon is chained and locked during the millennial rule of Christ (20,1-6). This ‘place’ is the body of the beast, which is clandestinely engaged in supporting the city called Babylon (17,3), thus contributing to her success as an international authority (17,18) and sustaining her ability to corrupt the earth until ‘her sins pile up to heaven’ (18,5). This ‘mystery of the woman and the beast’ in Revelation explains how the devil continues to be active in heaven and in the world (12,3.13) while at the same time being chained in the abyss (20,1-3). As a diabolical counterpart to the mystery of God (10,7), this ‘mystery of iniquity’ is a clandestine strategy for turning the faithful away from the Church in a way that ultimately prepares the ground for the full and final revelation of the beast, or antichrist (11,7; 13,1). After fully revealing himself as a human being (13,18) at the start of his brief 42-month reign at the end of history (13,5-7), the antichrist blasphemes the true God (13,6) while being worshipped as God (13,4), thus confirming that he is indeed the personification and embodiment of the devil. At the defeat of the beast by the returning Christ (19,11-21), the millennial rule (20,1-6) is revealed as ‘a day that is passing away’ (cf. Ps 90,4). At the same time, the devil is released from his human host and goes out as a free spirit to deceive the nations once more (20,7-8), before being defeated, judged and condemned to eternal destruction (20,9–10).

John Ben-Daniel,
Old City, Jerusalem.

⁵⁴ The battle of Gog and Magog (Rev 20,7–10) is therefore a direct continuation of the War of the great Day of Almighty God (Rev 16,14) at Harmagedon (Rev 16,16; 19,11–21).