

Without agreement on some basic premises, there can never be a proper exegesis of any passage of Scripture. Therefore, before beginning the actual exegesis of Revelation 20, we make the following observations.

1. The passage itself gives no explanation of John's meaning. Therefore, one must interpret this scripture by other scriptures.
2. There is a definite rule of hermeneutics which teaches us that obscure passages of Scripture must be governed by the clear passages. To teach that this obscure passage near the very end of the Bible is the key to understanding the rest of the Bible is to fly in the face of such known rules of interpretation.
3. It is self-evident that this lone passage dealing with the millennium is couched in a book of the Bible literally filled with symbols, numerology, figures of speech, poetic language, spiritual lessons couched in Old Testament terminology, etc. Although this is true, the very word 'revelation' in verse 1 of chapter 1 means 'unveiling.' This first verse of the Revelation also informs us that this unveiling was 'signified' to John. This word means that the message, or unveiling, was given in symbols, or figures. So, there is something amiss when a symbol which was given to unveil God's plan becomes a veil of obscurity dropped over in such a manner that only a chosen few can understand its meaning.

*'The youthful student of Scripture should be reminded, first of all, that its figurative language is no less certain and truthful than its plain and literal declarations. The figures of the Bible are employed not simply to please the imagination and excite the feelings, but to teach eternal verities' (E. P. Barrows, Companion to the Bible, p. 557).*

4. Since the Revelation was written primarily to bring comfort to the Christians of John's day, who were being persecuted, it is obvious that a correct understanding must be gained by learning what these symbols and figures meant to the people of that day. A study of that period reveals the fact that John's readers were accustomed to the Greek theatre, where everything was acted out, with the actors wearing different masks in different scenes to bring out the characters they portrayed. Therefore, it was the most natural thing for God to inspire John to portray his spiritual lessons as scenes of a drama of real life. We concur with the devoted New Testament scholars who have discovered for us that the Revelation is written as a drama and the form is apocalyptic. Two especially well-written books on this subject are *Worthy Is the Lamb*, by Ray Summers, and *The Meaning and Message of the Book of Revelation*, by Edward A. McDowell. Both books were published by Broadman Press, Nashville, in 1951.
5. Apocalyptic writings are known to have definite characteristics, such as figurative language, imagery, numerology, hyperbole, and the like. These are used for a purpose – to teach spiritual lessons to God's

people. These characteristics are used much in the same way a producer uses stage props and scenery. The important thing in watching a drama is not the props, but the message they help to portray. The same is true with reference to the apocalyptic literature, including that used by inspired men of the Bible. The numerology, imagery, etc., are not meant to be ends within themselves, but rather they are used as means to an end in teaching a lesson God has for his people. Few people would think of attending a play and becoming so interested in the scenery as to substitute it for the play itself. Yet this is often done by many who study the apocalyptic books of the Bible. They become fascinated by the chin-whiskers worn by the actor and miss his lines completely. They are so enraptured by the stage setting that they fail to grasp the story itself.

6. An axiom of Bible study is that most sections demand literal interpretation unless the context or other known Scripture passages demand figurative or spiritual interpretation. In apocalyptic literature the very opposite is true; here one must interpret figuratively, unless literal interpretation is absolutely demanded. The nature of such books as Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Revelation makes understanding impossible apart from an appreciation of the tools of the artist who painted the picture.
7. Premillennialists take only a part of Revelation 20 literally, while freely 'spiritualizing' most of the chapter. They also fail to harmonize the chapter, stopping short after verse 10. Every part of the chapter should be interpreted in its context. Whereas verses 1 through 10 are said to teach a literal millennial period following the second coming of Christ and falling between two resurrections and two judgments, verses 11 through 15 definitely teach a general judgment, attended by all the dead, small and great, after the millennium. These verses will be dealt with in more detail later; suffice it to say now that to find two opposing doctrines in the same chapter of the Bible is to contend that the Bible contradicts itself. Of course, no person who accepts the Bible as infallible can believe such a contradiction exists.

Revelation 20 falls into four natural divisions, each division containing a central thought. Let us get these divisions before us and interpret them as teaching spiritual truths in spiritual language, under the religious symbolism of the age in which they were written. Our conclusion must then be substantiated by clear teachings found in other sections of God's Word.