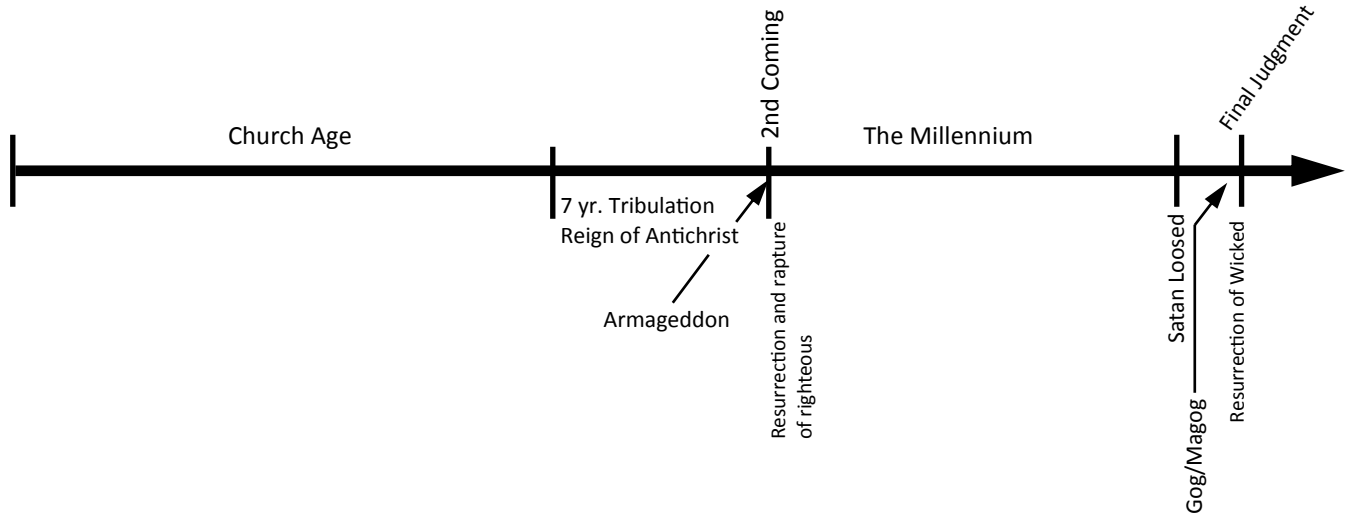


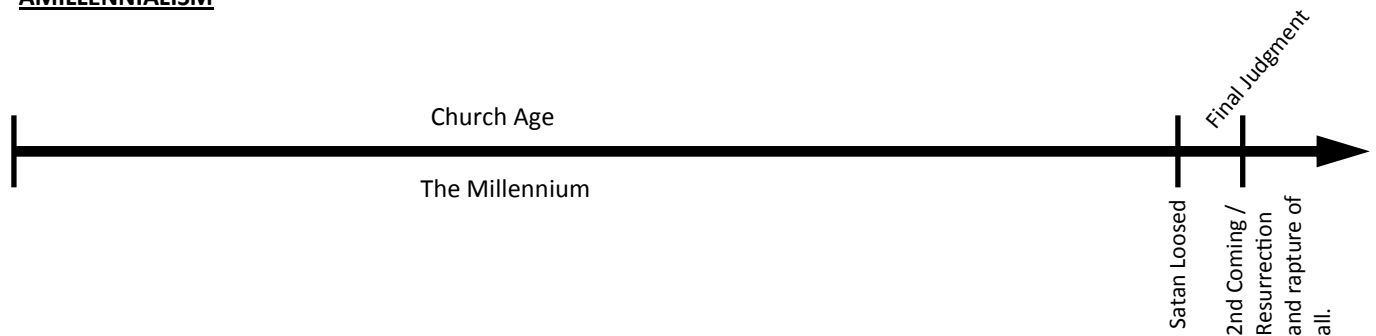
THREE VIEWS OF THE MILLENNIUM

HISTORIC PREMILLENNIALISM



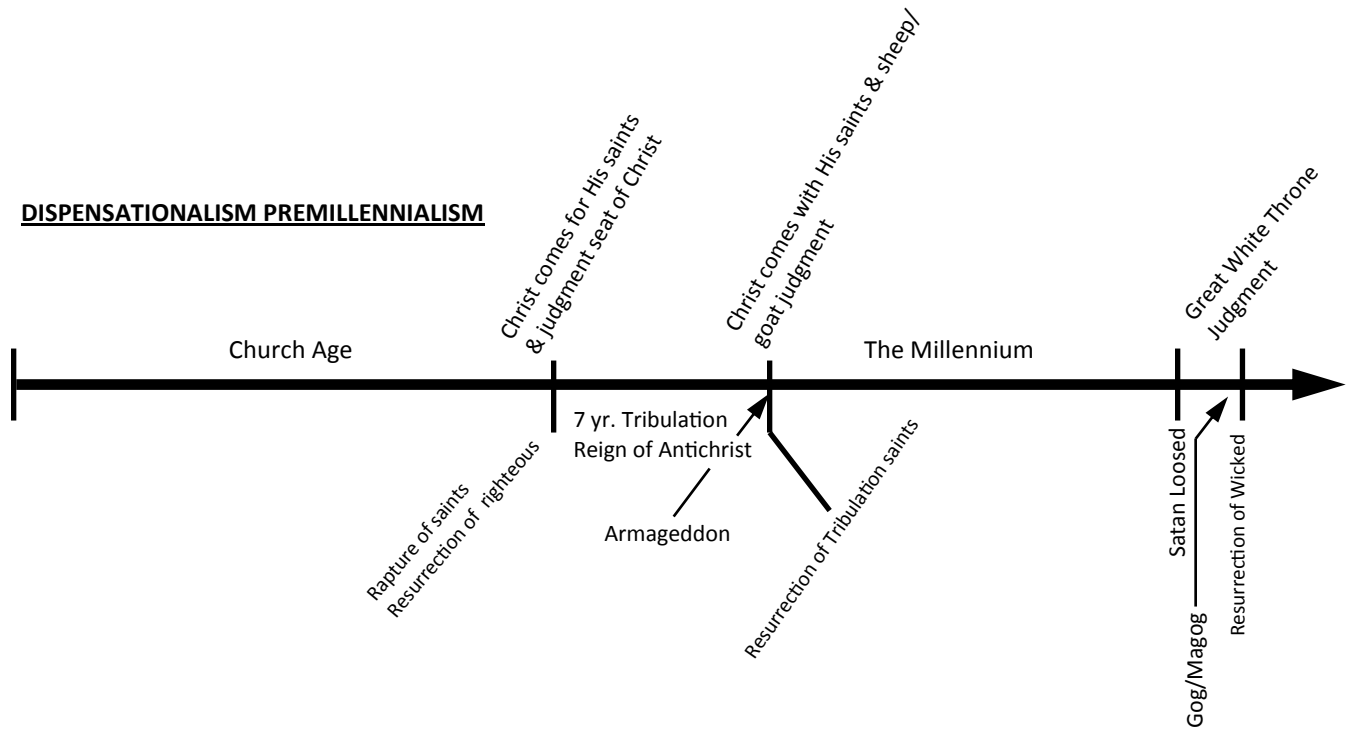
Historic Premillennialism is the oldest attested view in the church, showing up in the early church fathers. Proponents of this view make strong arguments for reading Revelation 20 as following chronologically the events of ch. 19, which portray Jesus' second coming. Therefore, the second coming precedes the millennium (1,000 year reign mentioned in Rev. 20), hence premillennialism. Reading Revelation 20 this way makes good sense, except for two factors: (1) the final battle mentioned in Rev. 20:7ff seems to be the same one mentioned in chs. 16 and 19, which means the 1,000 years comes before the final battle and second coming (see more on this below); and (2) the 1,000 year reign in 20:4-6 occurs in heaven not on earth, as in the premillennial interpretation. We know it's in heaven because these are souls (cf. Rev. 6) and because the only throne that's on earth in Revelation is the beast's; whenever a throne or thrones appear in connection with God and good, which is over 40 times, it's always in heaven. So while I can see how someone could read the text in a premillennial way it has some flaws and Revelation 20 certainly doesn't support the glorious descriptions often given for a millennial reign of Christ on earth.

AMILLENNIALISM



Amillennialism is also a very ancient view, being attested from the 300's. In this view, the 1,000 year reign mentioned in Rev. 20 is a symbolic way of referring to the period between Christ's first and second comings, i.e., the church age. Proponents of this view understand John to be cycling back to Christ's first coming in Revelation 20:1ff, as he does at other points in the book, rather than describing events that follow ch. 19 chronologically. This way of reading Revelation 20 makes good sense of the repetition of the final battle from chs. 16 and 19 and of the heavenly location of the 1,000 year reign, but it has its own flaws: (1) The description of what happens to the dragon (satan) as a result of Jesus' first coming in Rev. 12 doesn't match well with the description of him being bound and locked up in ch. 20; and (2) it certainly isn't a natural reading to see 20:1ff as a flashback to the events of the first coming; at least it's not readily apparent that that's what happening. So while I think this view has a lot of merit, it still has questions that are difficult to answer.

DISPENSATIONALISM PREMILLENNIALISM



Dispensational Premillennialism is the view in the popular Left Behind novels. It is the newest view on the market, first appearing in the 1830's. It is part of an entire theological system (Dispensationalism) that has serious flaws. In classic dispensationalism, the church was a plan B after Israel rejected Christ. God's people is still Israel and he is still focused on fulfilling his OT promises to them, and these promises will be fulfilled for the Jews in the millennium. The New Testament is clear, however, that Christ's rejection and death were always part of God's plan to redeem both Israel and the rest of mankind. And the New Testament also regularly asserts that promises made to Israel in the OT are being fulfilled in Christ and His people—the church—that includes both Jews and Gentiles. According to Romans 11:17ff, God has one family tree and in Christ it includes both Jews and Gentiles. Classic dispensationalism fails to recognize this. Furthermore, as you can see from the chart above, dispensational premillennialism posits multiple returns of Christ (as many as 3), multiple judgments, and multiple resurrections. Many sincere, God-loving, Bible-believing brothers and sisters in the faith hold this view, but I don't believe this is the best way to read Revelation or the rest of New Testament. Progressive dispensationalism is correcting some of the flaws of its heritage, moving back towards historic premillennialism. This is a step in a positive direction.

Some Thoughts on How I Read Revelation 20

In the preceding chapters of Revelation, we've already seen what happens to the harlot Babylon and to the two beasts. The focus in Revelation 20 is on what happens to the dragon. The preliminary question is: When does this happen? Notice that no clear chronological note is put on this event in the passage itself. Does this event happen after the events of chapters 17-19 or does it happen parallel to those chapters? It seems best to me to understand this event as parallel not consecutive for the following reasons.

- The passage ends with a description of the final battle. In the story of the dragon and his cohorts (12-22), this battle is referred to in 16:13-16 and both the dragon and the two beasts are there together. Then this battle is described again in 19:19-21, but only mentioning the two beasts. And now in Rev. 20 this battle is mentioned again, but only referring to the dragon. The best way to understand this is not that there are three final battles but that all three passages refer to the same final battle, which involves all three characters as in ch. 16: ch. 19, then, focuses on the end for the two beasts and ch. 20 focuses on the end for the dragon. Therefore, chs. 19 and 20 overlap, telling the same story with a different focus.
- That these two passages overlap as stated above is implied in 20:10, which points out that the dragon's fate is the same as the two beasts' and together they will be tormented forever. I suppose it is possible that the beast and the false prophet were thrown into the lake of fire 1000 years before the dragon and then God threw the dragon in as well, to join their torment. But it is much more natural to assume that when God starts throwing people into the lake of fire it all happens at once. The point is, then, that after the final battle the beasts were thrown into the lake of fire and so was the dragon. The ending to the stories reads very much the same.

Ultimately, this passage, the sole passage in the NT referring to the 1,000 years, should not set the framework for end-times chronology and the clearer passages which mention nothing of such a period then forced to fit its framework. Rather, the clearer, non-apocalyptic passages should be our guide and this passage should be harmonized with them. Since the non-apocalyptic texts have a unanimous chronology (Jesus returns, final judgment comes, and that's the end), we should work to figure out how this symbolic passage fits into that chronology. If the consistent testimony of all apostolic authors is that Jesus returns and that's the end (nothing follows but eternity), then to teach that Jesus returned in Rev. 19 but there is a whole lot of earth's history left and the end doesn't come until 1,000 years later seems to put John at odds with the rest. Two solutions are possible: John knew something they didn't or we've misunderstood his intent. I think the latter is more likely, so I think it's best to see ch. 20 as overlapping with material elsewhere in the book so that the 1,000 years doesn't describe a period after the second coming but before it.

Such overlap is part and parcel of Revelation. We've seen this all the way through the book. Two scenes cover the same ground from slightly different angles. Or within a scene John retraces the same territory adding details (e.g., 12:6 and 12:13-14). So it is not unusual for this to happen again in ch. 20. Here's how I think the latter part of Revelation works. Chapters 12-22 is like a 2nd Act in a two Act play. The major characters in these chapters are the dragon, his two beasts, and the harlot Babylon, as well as God and Christ. The plot revolves around how the four "bad guys" make war against Christ and His people. In chs 15-16, we see 7 angels who hold 7 bowls of wrath that bring God's wrath to completion. Starting with ch. 17, then, we zoom in one-by-one on the 4 main antagonists in the story and watch them be judged by God and suffer his wrath: chs. 17-19:10 = the harlot Babylon; 19:11-21 = the two beasts; 20:1-15 = the dragon. And with that God's wrath is complete. Judgment has come. Evil is eradicated and new creation comes in fullness in chs. 21-22. Thus the ultimate point of Revelation 20 is the removal of the final enemy of God and His people, the great enemy that stands behind all enemies. What a glorious day that will be when evil is no more, and all that remains is God and goodness and love and joy and peace! Amen, come Lord Jesus, come!