

MAKING SENSE OF THE MILLENNIUM: RESURRECTION IN REVELATION 20*

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper will first deal with background material of Revelation as a whole. Subsequently a more detailed look at Rev 20:1-10 will conclude with observations pertaining to the type of resurrection mentioned in this hotly debated text. Throughout these arguments a position on the millennial issue becomes evident.

II. GENRE BACKGROUND AND STRUCTURE

The Book of Revelation is complex. A perusal of commentaries and other introductory works warrants this observation. This is further borne out when one attempts to “work through” the actual exposition of the book in the many writings available. Even when a seeming scholarly consensus concerning a particular aspect of study appears to dawn on the academic horizon, dissenters from the group are still to be found.¹

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¹One thinks immediately of the issue of which genre characterizes the Revelation. Merrill Tenney’s observation in the 1950’s still holds true for many: “In literary type the Revelation belongs to the class of apocalyptic writings, and is the only specimen of this kind in the New Testament.” *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), 14. A brief but helpful survey of the debate can be found in Arthur W. Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 143-46. Besides the dissenting voices mentioned by Wainwright, others who are reluctant to see Revelation as apocalyptic include Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 23-29; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974), 12-29; Steven Lloyd Waechter, *An Analysis of the Literary Structure of the Book of Revelation according to Textlinguistic Methods* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1995), 69-73.

A. GENRE

On the specific topic of genre, one must be impressed with the sustained efforts to provide definitions and nomenclature that will suffice for all students. This issue has received intense study since the two world wars. An issue of the journal *Semeia*² back in 1986 continued the work done collectively by scholars since the early seventies. Based on these types of studies and the general consensus among students of the Apocalypse, it is sufficient to accept the book as having apocalyptic coloring.³ The uniqueness of John's "Apocalyptic Work" is that it is also *Scripture*. It cannot fit into any genre wholesale. It is God's final word to man. The book must be read, not so much in conjunction with other apocalyptic works, as it must be read in light of other scriptural works.⁴ Both *Sola Scriptura* and *Tota Scriptura* are significant for

²*Semeia* 36 (1986): 1-95, was particularly focused on the genre in relation to the Book of Revelation.

³Christopher Smith, following David Aune, claims "It has been said the peculiar idiom of apocalypses...is to thinly conceal what it purports to reveal so that the audience may themselves have the experience of decoding or deciphering the message." "The Structure of the Book of Revelation in Light of Apocalyptic Literary Conventions," *Novum Testamentum* 36 (1994): 382. A few years earlier Smith noted that an appreciation of the genre of Revelation is important, but that one must see how John "...transforms and transcends the very genre in which he is writing, because that is one means of appreciating the profound revelation he received." See "Revelation 1:19: An Escalated Prophetic Convention," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33 (December 1990): 465. Smith claimed that the author adapted his work to contrast it with other similar works that were not divinely inspired. Craig Blaising has argued along similar lines stating, "John's rejection of pseudonymity concurs with his own testimony as a prophet to the Christian community and distinguishes his 'apocalypse' as true in contrast to many others with which his readers might be familiar." See "Premillennialism," in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrel L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 209, n. 72.

⁴Other Scriptures which have also been identified as apocalyptic will no doubt lend much help to the understanding of Revelation's message. An important study has been conducted by John Andrew McLean, *The Seventieth Week of Daniel 9:27 as a Literary Key for Understanding the Structure of the Apocalypse of John* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: Mellen Press, 1996). Noting ten categories developed by genre scholars, McLean claims: "These

understanding the Apocalypse of John. Scripture alone is what is definitive for belief and behavior. This necessarily includes the idea that one can understand the Book of Revelation without recourse to extra canonical works. All of Scripture is also needed, as the progress of revelation has been gradual, yet now completed. In light of the entire Bible, Revelation can be understood as the concluding chapter to a long and epic work.

features will help provide the parameters for defining the literature of apocalyptic...These categories will provide a common groundwork for the comparison of the apocalypses of Daniel and Revelation” (p. 17). The definitions that McLean garners are as follows: “An apocalypse is a genre that is shaped by its incorporation of apocalyptic features. This definition specifies a work as apocalyptic by the qualitative impact of apocalyptic features upon composition, rather than the quantitative presence of a certain number of features. A few features could impact a composition so thoroughly that it would be classified as an apocalypse. Apocalyptic eschatology is a deterministic view of the future that anticipates the intervention of a sovereign and autonomous God to judge the wicked, deliver the righteous, and inaugurate the kingdom. Apocalyptic eschatology may be found in apocalyptic and non-apocalyptic works. The world universally, rather than Israel individually, is the focus of apocalyptic eschatology. Israel may be included in the last day events, but it is not a prerequisite feature. Apocalypticism is a socio-religious movement by a group of oppressed and alienated people who envision an idyllic state in the celestial realm and anticipate deliverance with the intervention of God. Apocalyptic literature does not need to arise out of apocalypticism, nor does all literature that arises out of apocalypticism have to be apocalyptic” (p. 31). McLean’s study obviously draws heavily from Daniel, but he also utilizes the Synoptic Gospels for fuller understanding of the outline structure of Revelation. He summarizes, “The apocalypse clearly evidences the influence of the synoptic eschatological discourses on its content and structure. The first five seals patently parallel the ‘birth pangs’ of the Synoptics. These judgments follow the sequential order of all three Synoptic Gospels. Furthermore, the sixth seal has been shown to correlate with the eschatological passages in Luke to evidence the establishment of the midpoint of Daniel’s seventieth week. The cumulative testimony of thematic and linguistic affinities strongly suggests that John has also adapted synoptic motifs into the development of the latter chapters of his Apocalypse. John has amplified the synoptic eschatological discourses by means of apocalyptic imagery and incorporated new material to present his view of end time events” (p. 224).

B. AUTHORSHIP

As with the question of genre, the identification of authorship as well as the background to the book has evaded scholarly consensus. The meaning of the book should be discernible without access to its author and background setting. It is, arguably so, more certain having securely established those features. Is John the apostle *that* John or some other John? Was the book written in the 60's or in the 90's of the first century? These questions once answered may shed some light in aiding interpretation not only of the broad intent of the author (the proverbial forest), but also will help in clarifying the specific meaning of particular texts (the trees).⁵ Although detailed work on this issue is beyond the scope of this article, it is an added help for exegesis so must be briefly treated.

Robert Thomas has gathered some convincing evidence for a late date and for the apostle John being the author.⁶ Some have contended for an almost unanimous agreement by the early church regarding the

⁵For example, if it is securely established that the book was written during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian (AD 81-96), this will necessarily rule out the interpretive approaches that see the book as a prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Also of particular interest for our study, if the book is not a comfort for the persecuted believers as is so often thought, but rather an exhortation to faithfulness in the face of heresy, then other dimensions emerge as to the nature of the consummation, including the purpose of John's millennium of chapter 20. The future will not be seen as release from oppression, but as reward for righteousness and steadfastness to Christ. This question is beyond the scope of the present paper, yet brief mention of it will suffice in this note. The "overcomers" described in chapters 2 and 3 may not in fact represent all Christians but only those who endure the trials and finally persevere in faithfulness. By keeping His works till the end, the overcomer is not guaranteed just salvation, but is allowed much more by way of reward. Ruling in the earthly kingdom then, is not true of all by virtue of justification, but an experience awaiting those who evidenced spiritual progress and persevered in sanctification. The martyrs specifically described in the 20th chapter clearly fit in this category.

⁶See his commentary *Revelation 1-7*, pp. 2-29. Also note the observation by George Ladd: "This apostolic authorship was widely accepted by the ancient fathers." *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), 7. Merrill Tenney has also asserted, "The late date has the advantage of being confirmed by definite historical evidence"

date and authorship. This is not entirely accurate. Thomas has drawn our attention to dissenters from belief in Johannine authorship such as Dionysius of Alexandria. Based extensively on internal evidence, Dionysius argued dissimilarities between the Revelation and John's writings in which there was no dispute. Following Ned Stonehouse and G. B. Caird, Thomas has claimed: "In spite of this apparently pious regard for the Apocalypse and endeavor to be objective in his criticisms, it is admitted on all sides that Dionysius's entire criticism is motivated by dogmatic considerations and his arguments are one-sided and overstated."⁷ What was this dogmatic concern? It was his dislike for the literal understanding of the Revelation that naturally led to a literal millennial kingdom on the earth. If Dionysius could eliminate apostolic *authorship* for Revelation, then he succeeded in eliminating apostolic *authority* for Revelation's millennial kingdom!

Being prophetic in character, the book's author is described, lending weight to his revelations. Unlike the Gospel of John (which indirectly identifies the apostle John as the author), the function of the prophetic work necessitates clear identification of its author for sake of authority.⁸ It is plain to the reader of the book that the author makes sure there is no doubt as to his identity. In Rev 1:4 and 9 the author identifies himself both in the prologue and in the first vision. Also in 22:6-21, the epilogue to the book, the author again identifies himself in v 8. Here we are reminded of Guthrie's famous quip as to whether the early Church was so enamored with brilliant men named John that a mere reference to the name would enable one to discern who is who.⁹ The implication is

Interpreting Revelation, 19. For the early date view, see Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990).

⁷Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, p. 8.

⁸*Ibid.*, 10. Thomas notes that "...apostolic authorship was a major, if not the major, factor in the recognition of the Apocalypse as canonical."

⁹Steven Waechter said, "Discrediting Johannine authorship, however, leaves the question posed by Donald Guthrie unanswered: 'Was the Asiatic church overrun with brilliant Christians by the name of John, who would only need to announce their name for the Christians to know which was meant?'" Although the question of authorship is not foundational to a textlinguistic study, one's position on this matter will determine if micro- and macro-structural findings from the book of Revelation can be compared to and

that the early Church had but one John of this stature able to produce this work, and he was none other than John the apostle.

C. LIFE SETTING

With regards to the life setting, it is safe to say that, despite a few objectors, the time of the writing is in Domitian's reign. The persecution could well have reached Asia Minor. John's exile for his commitment to Christ was one form of that persecution.¹⁰ Drawing on the historical record concerning the imperial cult of the first century, Robert Wall states, "In our view the letters to the seven churches (Revelation 2–3), together with the vision of Babylon's destruction (Revelation 17–18), reflect the *Sitz im Leben* (life setting) of the Asian church during the Domitian period (AD 81–96)."¹¹ With these issues

contrasted with the Gospel and the three Epistles of John. The present writer holds to the traditional view that the Book of Revelation was composed by the same author who wrote the Gospel and the three Epistles of John, namely, John the disciple of Jesus," *An Analysis of the Literary Structure*, 66, 67.

¹⁰Persecution is not to be the only factor for the writing of the book. Waechter posits another reason: "The threat of persecution as the most pressing problem behind John's writing is suspect... a more urgent matter was doctrinal integrity and loyalty to Christ under threat of heretical teaching concerning the sovereign rule of God. Accordingly, John's intent was not to comfort those wounded by persecutions but to challenge those wooed by heretics. Perhaps the reference to virgins in 14:4 refers to doctrinal purity in the same way that adultery in the Old Testament prophets indicated falling away from the one true God," *An Analysis of the Literary Structure*, 68, 69.

¹¹Robert Wall, *Revelation* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 5. See also Robert Mounce, who adds, "when one turns to the Revelation itself, it is evident that the background is one of conflict between the demands of a totalitarian secular power and allegiance to the Christian faith... it was not until the reign of Domitian that failure to honor the emperor as a god became a political offence and punishable.... While the picture of universal enforcement of the imperial cult given in Revelation 13 is a forecast rather than a descriptive account of the condition under Domitian, all the elements were present in the final decade of the first century from which a reasonable projection could be made. Within the book itself is an indication that the storm of persecution is about to break. The author has been banished to the island of Patmos 'on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus' (1:9). Even if this exile resulted from the action taken by a local authority, it is not unreasonable to assume that behind the decision was a general policy emanating from Rome,"

squarely behind us, it is imperative to focus on the actual structure of the book's contents.

D. STRUCTURE

It is probable with regard to structure that more diverse opinions exist than with any other matter pertaining to the Apocalypse.¹² Here the words of Waechter are particularly significant: "Text structure is ultimately related to authorial intent."¹³ This is especially important for Evangelicals with a high view of Scripture. We must discern from the text of God's Word what *God* is saying to us through the human author. Despite Waechter's concern that the text of 1:19 has been used more so to provide legitimization of a pre-conceived dogmatic approach to the book, this writer believes that 1:19 does in fact serve as a structural indicator.¹⁴ Although sharing a commitment to all of Scripture as inspired and therefore inerrant, we must make the observation that it is the risen Lord Jesus Christ who is speaking at this point. Ultimately we must see that it is God who gave the outline to John.

The Book of Revelation (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 32-33.

¹²For a survey and critique of some current views on the structure of Revelation see John Andrew McLean, *The Seventieth Week of Daniel*, 235-75. Included within this evaluation are the various approaches common in the secondary literature. See also Frederick David Mazzaferri, *The Genre of the Book of Revelation from a Source-Critical Perspective* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 330-65.

¹³Steven Lloyd Waechter, *An Analysis of the Literary Structure*, 173. With regards to his methodological approach of Discourse Analysis, Waechter asserted: "Applying textlinguistics to a written document starts from the presupposition of literary unity," (p. 65). Also important are the comments by Christopher Smith in discussing the presentation of the texts denoting the sixth and seventh trumpets (9:21 and 11:15-19), "...the literary order here is legitimate in terms of John's larger purposes. We should not blame a careless redactor, as some commentators do...." "The Structure of the Book of Revelation in Light of Apocalyptic Literary Conventions," *Novum Testamentum* 36 (1994): 389.

¹⁴Here I follow in part Thomas's outline with some brief modification. See *Revelation 1-7*, pp. 43-46.

III. OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK'S CONTENTS

Revelation has a clear prologue, 1:1-8. There is also an epilogue to the work in 22:6-21. The seven churches in chapters 2–3 are a unit. In chapters 4–5 the heavenly scene is also a unit. It is with the beginning of chapter 6 that a pattern begins to unfold with seals, trumpets, and bowls that make up the bulk of the next major section.¹⁵ In 19:1 there is a declarative praise indicating something magnificent is about to occur. This is fulfilled in 19:11ff., which describes the coming of Christ in power with judgment on His enemies. In the next chapter we have the millennial rule of Christ with His saints. Finally in chapters 21–22:5, we see the consummation of all redemption as God has made all things new.

From the text itself, it is plausible to see the threefold outline given by Christ to John as a key to the text of the book from 1:9–22:5.¹⁶ These divisions would be as follows:

I.	<i>Ha eides</i> (The things which you have seen) 1:9-20. The vision of a risen Christ.
II.	<i>Ha eisi</i> (The things which are) 2:1–3:22. The condition of the church.
III.	<i>Ha mellei genesthai</i> (The things which will take place after these things) 6:1–22:5. The trials, the Kingdom, and the Glory. ¹⁷

¹⁵For a good discussion of the relationship between the seals, trumpets, and bowls, see Robert Thomas, “Excursus 3” in *Revelation 8-22*, pp. 525-43.

¹⁶George Ladd commented on 1:19, “John’s commission was now repeated; he was told: **Write what you see**, i.e., the vision of the glorified Christ, **what is**, i.e., the state of the seven churches of Asia in chapters 2–3, and **what is to take place hereafter**, i.e., the consummation of God’s redemptive purpose and the coming of the Kingdom of God. This begins with the breaking of the seven seals in chapter 6 and continues to the end of the book.” *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 34.

¹⁷See McLean’s outline, which is similar to the above construct. *Seventieth Week*, 230-31.

This type of outline considers the literary development of the book and is therefore the most trustworthy. Other approaches which take their cues from the text have also seen a literary progression.¹⁸ The significance of this outline is important in that it strongly suggests that the recapitulation idea (so prevalent in amillennial exegesis) is probably incorrect.¹⁹ We now turn to the matter of Revelation 20. Where does it fit in the outworking of God's plan and how do we interpret the text itself?

¹⁸See Waechter's phrase by phrase outline. Waechter suggests that although his textlinguistic approach rules out literary recapitulation it does not necessarily deny *historical* recapitulation. He claims, "The textlinguistic analysis...supports literary progression instead of reiteration. This method has no bearing, however, on chronological progression of events in actual fulfillment. Most of the narrative sequence of the Book of Revelation is straightforward," *An Analysis of the Literary Structure*, 184-85. If one sees the progression of the prophecy in a narrative framework, then a chronological and sequential reading would demand a chronological fulfillment, otherwise why is it cast in the form that it is? Unlike Waechter's hesitancy to see this book as history foretold but merely a literary work, this writer prefers to see in this writing an actual prediction of what will transpire at the time of the end. George Ladd stated well, "The prophecy of Revelation goes far beyond any known historical situation in the first century." Later on he claimed, "It is the nature of apocalyptic writings to be concerned primarily with the consummation of God's redemptive purpose and the eschatological end of the age....It is the nature of apocalyptic symbolism...to refer to events in history leading up to...this eschatological consummation...the book claims to be a prophecy....The nature of prophecy is to let light shine from the future to the present." *A Commentary on the Revelation*, 9, 14. Hence, what *will* happen in the future affects what *should* happen in the present.

¹⁹Thomas's disclaimer should be heeded. However, he states, "The progressive sequence of the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls does not, however, rule out some measure of recapitulation in sections of intercalation. In particular, the interlude in 11:1-13 regarding the two witnesses, the one in Revelation 12-14 between the sounding of the seventh trumpet (11:15) and the description of the seven bowls (chapters 15-16), and the one in Revelation 17-18 between the announcement of the seventh bowl (16:17) and the personal intervention of the Warrior-King (19:11-16)—these three intercalations are partially recapitulatory. But recapitulation is limited to the intercalatory portions of the book, with the main structure of the book revolving about the progressive sequence of the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls." *Revelation 8-22* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 540-41.

IV. REVELATION 20:1-10

A. INTRODUCTION

Approaching chapter 20 in light of the outline found in 1:19²⁰ we assume that it follows chronologically the preceding passage which describes the second coming of Christ in 19:11-21. Consequently the millennial rule is to be established at the arrival of Jesus at the conclusion of the period of the great tribulation. Not only are the preceding extended narrative chapters 6–19 a part of “The Things Which Shall Take Place After These Things,” but chapter 20 is also, thus precluding it as a part of “The Things Which Are.”²¹

B. CONTEXT

This scenario of 20:4-6, when seen in its place in the immediate context of 19:11–20:15, reads as an end-time phenomenon, as part of and following the events associated with the second coming of Christ to the earth. It seems artificial and a case of special pleading to place this “living and reigning with Christ” anywhere other than right after

²⁰See footnote 17.

²¹Amillennialists such as William Hendriksen and Anthony Hoekema approach chapter 20 somewhat differently. Their outline to the Book of Revelation, which they see as a series of recapitulations of the same period, with progression as a mark of intensification as the chapters unfold, does not recognize chapter 20 as following chronologically after chapter 19. Instead they believe chapter 20 takes the reader back to the first coming of Christ. Hendriksen claims, “Our division is as follows:

1. Christ in the midst of the Seven Golden Lampstands, 1-3.
2. The Book with Seven Seals, 4-7.
3. The Seven Trumpets of Judgment, 8-11.
4. The Woman and the Man-Child persecuted by the Dragon and his Helpers (the beast and the Harlot), 12-14.
5. The Seven Bowls of Wrath, 15, 16.
6. The Fall of the Great Harlot and of the beasts, 17-19.
7. The Judgment upon the Dragon (Satan) followed by the New Heaven and Earth, New Jerusalem, 20-22.”

Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1947), 30. See also Hoekema “Amillennialism” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed., Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 156-58.

His arrival to shepherd (*poimanei*) the nations (cf. 19:15). This hearkens back to the promise made to the Church at Thyatira. In 2:26-27, Jesus promised the overcomers that they were to rule and shepherd (*poimanei*) the nations only if they held fast to what they already had *till His Coming* (2:25).²²

C. ISSUES

A key structural indicator begins 20:1. The phrase *kai ēidon*, although not clearly proving chronological succession, is most naturally consistent with it.²³ The text 20:1-10 contains the angel coming down and imprisoning Satan (vv 1-3); saints resurrected and reigning with Christ (vv 4-6); and the release of Satan and a final rebellion leading to Satan's consignment to the lake of fire (vv 7-10). Within these verses, particularly 2-7, one encounters the phrase *chilia etē* six times. The key questions that must be addressed are: (1) What is the nature and purpose of the binding of Satan? (2) What is the meaning and significance of the word *ezēsan* in vv. 4 and 5? (3) Is the phrase *hē anastasis hē prōtē* a metaphorical/paradoxical expression or a plain reference to bodily resurrection? To these questions we now proceed.

D. BINDING OF SATAN

A standard amillennial explanation concerning the binding of Satan is to associate this with the *first* advent of Christ.²⁴ The approach draws heavily from Augustine, who saw the work of Christ of binding the strong man in His first coming (Mark 3:27) as the same as the binding

²²Another text from the broader context of the Book of Revelation is 5:10, where the declaration is made concerning those whom Jesus saved with His blood, that they shall rule on the *earth*. Revelation 20:4-6 is but the intertextual fulfillment of the preceding expectation.

²³See 4:1; 6:1; and especially 19:11; and 21:1.

²⁴See Sydney Page, "Revelation 20 and Pauline Eschatology," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 23 (March, 1980): 32-35; Hoekema, *The Meaning of The Millennium*, 161-64. Also the essay by Robert Strimple, "Amillennialism" in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell Bock. Postmillennialist Kenneth Gentry, "Postmillennialism" also in *Three Views on the Millennium*, offers a similar argument. Also, J. Marcellus Kik, *Revelation Twenty* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 27-32, presents a postmillennial view along the same lines.

of Satan in Revelation 20.²⁵ In attempts to defend this approach, it is also claimed that what in fact is in view is not total cessation of activity but a curbing of deceptive influence. This means that Satan is bound but really is still free to roam, yet to a lesser degree than before the first advent of Christ.

Sydney Page tied this idea with the expansion of the church's mission to the Gentile world. Prior to the binding of Satan the Word of God was restricted, now it is unbound as Satan is bound. Although this view seems theologically sound, and to some degree reflects partial truth concerning the importance of the coming of Christ in the first century, the problem remains that exegetically it is very weak indeed.

The text reads:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold on the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while (Rev 20:1-3 NKJV).

This passage notes certain features that are decisive for a position that sees complete inactivity of Satan throughout the thousand years. First, the authority of the angel connotes his ability to enforce confinement to the abyss. Second, an actual binding of Satan is expressed before he is cast into the abyss. Third, a closing of the abyss is followed by a seal placed on him.²⁶ The compounding of elements in

²⁵Hans Bietenhard, "The Millennial Hope in the Early Church," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 6 (1953): 18, 29, explains how Gaius was the first to propound this theory. Augustine was the most influential in spreading its acceptance.

²⁶In the Greek the seal is placed *epano autou* which is to be understood as above him rather than on him. The abyss is the holding place of demons from which they arise at the appointed time to engage in their activities. Prior to emerging from the abyss, they are unable to move on the earth. See Rev 9:1-2; 11:7. Hence at the end of the thousand years Satan will be released in order to once again return to his activities on the earth. This sealing strongly affirms a complete inactivity of Satan during the millennial reign. Amillennialists have tried to tie Revelation 20 with Revelation 12 because of the similarity in

this brief description necessitates a view which has Satan absent from the earth and totally inactive in relation to its inhabitants.

V. THE KEY PASSAGE: REVELATION 20:4-6

We must now look at the following passage to answer our remaining questions.

And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. And *I saw* the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshipped the beast or his image, and had not received *his* mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This *is* the first resurrection. Blessed and holy *is* he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years (Rev 20:4-6).

John sees in his vision thrones and certain ones sitting on these thrones. Judgment has been given over to them. Next is a description of some or all of these as having been axed (literally beheaded, *pepelekismenōn*) because of their refusal to receive the mark of the beast which would have revealed their worship of the beast. These then “live” and “reign” with Christ for the duration of the Millennium.

A. IDENTITY OF THOSE LIVING AND REIGNING

Before addressing directly the meaning of “lived,” we must discern where the scene is set and who these people are.²⁷ The latter is addressed

the terminology “thrown down.” As Blaising has noted, “In 20:1-3, the language of key and pit is repeated echoing the situation of chapter 9. But the notion of confinement is emphasized even more by the language of ‘chain,’ ‘bound’ (*edesen*), ‘locked’ (*ekleisen*), implying the use of ‘key,’ (*kleis*), and ‘sealed...over him’ (*esphragisen epano autou*). The contrast between Satan’s activity in chapter 12f. and the inactivity in chapter 20 could not be more greatly stressed.” Craig Blaising, “Premillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell Bock, 218.

²⁷George Ladd asks and answers this question rather well. “How many groups does John see?” He ponders, then adds, “Many interpreters recognize only one group and limit this ‘first resurrection’ to the martyrs, maintaining

first. It is quite possible that two classes of people are being described. Those seated (*ekathisan*) are "...the army of Christ that accompany Him, at His return."²⁸ The others in the passage, would refer to a particular group. "This detailed description" as Walvoord says, "...fits only one class of saints, namely, the tribulation saints who in refusing to worship the beast are martyred."²⁹ But by the time they are all reigning with Christ as stated of both groups in the latter part of v. 4, something has transpired. This is the occurrence of a resurrection (*ezēsan*) as a precondition for their ruling (*ebasileusan*) with Christ.

B. HEAVEN OR EARTH?

If it is safe to assume that this scenario is describing the earth, it will, of necessity rule out certain interpretations. The evidence of seeing this description on the earth can be summarized as follows: First, Jesus has just returned in His glorious second advent (19:11f). This was predicted long ago, that to the earth He would return, just as from the earth He ascended on high (cf. Acts 1:11). Second, the angel has just descended from heaven (Rev 20:1), to eliminate Satan from the earth. Third, Rev 5:10 spoke of the future reign on the earth, of which Rev 20:4-6 is a fulfillment. Fourth, when Satan is loosed again at the end of the thousand years, he amasses an army *from* the earth to attack Jesus and His saints *on* the earth (Rev 20:7-10). Finally, a setting needs to be found which will account for all the dimensions of the promises throughout the OT concerning the advent and rule of Messiah.³⁰

that God has some special blessing for those who have died because of their faithful witness to Jesus. However, the RSV correctly reflects the Greek idiom, which could be literally translated: 'And I saw thrones, and [people] sat upon them, and judgment was given to them; and [I saw] the souls of those who had been beheaded....' The language suggests two different groups: one group to whom judgment was given, and a smaller group who are the martyrs of the great tribulation." *A Commentary on the Revelation*, 263.

²⁸Robert Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, p. 414.

²⁹John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ: A Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 296.

³⁰Most of the chapters of the book, *A Case for Premillennialism: A New Consensus*. eds., Donald Campbell and Jeffrey Townsend, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), deal with OT texts such as Isaiah 2; Jeremiah 31; Psalm 89; Ezekiel 36; and Daniel 2.

C. MERELY “LIVED,” OR MORE LIKELY, “CAME TO LIFE”?

No doubt the setting is one on earth, and one that follows chronologically Christ’s return to it. The word “lived” then, must connote an existence to which one has returned. As an ingressive aorist,³¹ *ezēsan* is best translated “came to life.” A reinstatement to embodied existence is what is being described. What is obviously precluded, is seeing this reference to “coming to life” as an experience of saints in heaven prior to the return of Christ as amillennialists often suggest. On the contrary, as Blaising has stated,

John interprets his own words in 5b-6. This coming to life is the “first resurrection.” “The second death has no power over them” recalls the promise of 2:11, that they would receive “the crown of life” from Jesus, who himself had come to life....John clarifies that he has resurrection from physical death in view, followed by a reign of the resurrected with Christ on the earth, and he repeats the point that this reign will last a thousand years.³²

D. THE FIRST RESURRECTION: PARADOXICAL OR PLAIN MEANING?

Meredith Kline wrote an article about twenty-five years ago that has drawn both praise and criticism alike.³³ He begins with how the word “first” is used both contextually in the Revelation and in other significant NT texts aiding his evaluation. His main contention is that

³¹Thomas has said, “The verb *ezēsan* (they lived) is an ingressive aorist, conveying the force of ‘they came to life’ or ‘they lived again.’ This is the meaning of the same form in 2:8 and 20:5 (cf. Rom 14:9). This second life is comparable to the second death that is the destiny of the unfaithful (cf. 2:11; 20:6, 14)” *Revelation 8–22*, p. 416.

³²Craig Blaising, “Premillennialism,” 222.

³³Meredith Kline, “The First Resurrection,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (Spring, 1975): 366-75. Recent acclaim has come from Bruce Waltke, who referred to this article as containing, “magnificent exegesis.” “A Response” in *Dispensationalism Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, eds. Craig Blaising & Darrell Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 356. Blaising, who co-edited the above volume shares a different approach. In his essay “Premillennialism,” he exclaims, “It seems incredible that Meredith Kline could devote two articles attempting to defend a traditional amillennial view of ‘the first resurrection’ by means of an argument on the word ‘first’ completely ignoring the operative term ‘resurrection,’ (p. 224, n. 96.)

the word is not used in an ordinal sequential way, but rather is employed as a contrasting term. In Revelation 21, Kline states,

“Second” as well as “new” serves as the antithesis of “first.” Whatever accounts for the preference for “first” over “old” in describing the present world, the use of “first” naturally led to the use of “second” alongside of “new” for the future world, particularly for the future reality of eternal death for which the term “new” with its positive redemptive overtones would be inappropriate.³⁴

Specifically in Revelation 20, Kline establishes a paradoxical reading of the passage.³⁵ He therefore denies that the term *anastasis* retains its normal usage in this passage. Clearly the burden of proof falls on Kline to establish this highly unusual meaning of a word that, in every instance in the NT, refers to physical resurrection of the body.³⁶

Blaising’s comments here are apropos:

John’s meaning is established by his use of the word “resurrection” (*anastasis*) to clarify “came to life” (*ezēsan*). The word *anastasis*

³⁴Meredith Kline, “The First Resurrection,” 367.

³⁵This paragraph represents the essence of his article. Kline explains, “The proper decipherment of the ‘first resurrection’ in the interlocking schema of first-(second) resurrection and (first)-second death is now obvious enough. Just as the resurrection of the unjust is paradoxically identified as ‘the second death’ so the death of the Christian is paradoxically identified as ‘the first resurrection.’ John sees the Christian dead (v. 4). The real meaning of their passage from earthly life is to be found in the state to which it leads them. And John sees the Christian dead, living, and reigning with Christ (vv. 4, 6); unveiled before the seer is the royal-priestly life on the heavenly side of the Christian’s earthly death. Hence the use of the paradoxical metaphor of ‘the first resurrection’ (v. 5f.) for the death of the faithful believer. What for others is the first death is for the Christian a veritable resurrection!” “The First Resurrection,” 371.

³⁶It is well known that from over 40 references, the possible exception to a literal bodily resurrection of the term *anastasis*, is found in Luke 2:34. J. Dwight Pentecost, commenting on this passage, had this to say however: “Simeon declared that Israel’s destiny was tied into this person. Jesus was ‘destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel (Luke 2:34).’ Those who received Him would rise with Him but those who rejected Him would fall under His curse.” *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids:

is never used in the Bible for the continuing existence of the physically dead. Other than an instance in which it has no reference to death (Luke 2:34, although an oblique reference to resurrection cannot be ruled out), it *always* refers to *the elimination of the condition of physical death through bodily resurrection*.³⁷

Kline's thesis, although winning some advocates³⁸ has some problems. The most important are the contextual issues. Kline's approach fails to take into account what the Revelation has been leading up to all along: A vindication of the risen Christ on the earth.

From the beginning of the book Jesus is expected to return (cf. 1:7). In Rev 11:15, the great pre-announcement of what transpires in the millennium, requires an earthly rule: "The kingdoms of this world have become *the kingdoms* of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever."

Also, Kline's view concerning the concept of "first" being part of the present order of things which is destined to pass away, will reach an insurmountable problem of explaining how our Lord Himself is the *firstfruits* of those who have fallen asleep (1 Cor 15:20, 23). He is also described in the NT as the *firstborn* from the dead (Col 1:18, Rev 1:5); He is the *firstborn* over all creation (Col 1:15); He is the *firstborn* among many brethren (Rom 8:29); He is the *firstborn* of Mary (Matt 1:25); and He is the *first* and the last (Rev 1:17). Clearly Jesus Christ does not belong to the order of things that is passing away. On the contrary the coming world derives its form and function, as well as retains its splendor throughout all aeons because Jesus the Savior *first* loved us with an everlasting love.³⁹

In addition, there is no reason to think that an intermediate kingdom prior to the eternal state is incompatible with the resurrected state of believers. According to Kline, the heavenly reigning with Christ would still be "on this side of consummation. It is only the intermediate, not the

Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 65. It may not be inappropriate then to claim that bodily rising is *always* the meaning of the word *anastasis*.

³⁷Blaising, "Premillennialism," 223-24.

³⁸Don Garlington in "Reigning with Christ: Revelation 20:1-6 in Its Salvation-Historical Setting," *Baptist Review of Theology* 4 (Spring, 1994): 4-37, follows Kline quite closely in this study.

³⁹See 1 John 4:19; Jer 31:3.

final state.”⁴⁰ If the saints in heaven are not yet in the consummated state, then there is an imperfection in heaven. If an imperfect (non-resurrected) person can exist in heaven (perfect environment), then why can there not be an imperfect environment (millennial earth) where perfected (resurrected) people can exist? Unless Kline believes the non-resurrected state to be ideal, there is room for the millennial (intermediate) earthly kingdom using a variation of Kline’s own ideas.

E. RESURRECTION OR RESURRECTIONS?

Kline has therefore failed to convince this writer of his view of “the first resurrection.” There is clearly in the text of the passage more evidence for an alternate approach to Kline’s than has been provided thus far. In 20:5, we are told that the rest of the dead *ouk ezēsan* (did not come to life again) until the thousand years were over. Here John makes a recognizable distinction. Those resurrected at the beginning of the millennium were not all the dead. Other dead ones are to be resurrected after the thousand years are complete. These, no doubt, will include the wicked dead and possibly those who die during the millennium.⁴¹

The resurrection of the wicked should cause us no alarm. It is of the nature of humanity to “live” eternally. The resurrection of Christ according to 1 Corinthians 15 is the Firstfruits. The guarantee of all rising is found in the historical resurrection of Jesus. Paul’s discussion of this is in 1 Corinthians 15. In vv. 20-28 the idea of orders of resurrection is found. Each will rise in his own *tagmati* (order).⁴² Revelation 20 merely shows us the outworking of the earlier expectation that Paul had.

The first resurrection then is not to be understood as the first actual occurrence of a resurrection resulting in a perfect re-embodied state. This has transpired in history but once. It is Christ’s resurrection that is first numerically and therefore no other resurrection can be first in that sense. What then is the meaning of the term “first”? Its significance

⁴⁰Kline, “The First Resurrection,” 371.

⁴¹Roy Aldrich, “Divisions of the First Resurrection,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128 (April, 1971): 117-19.

⁴²This military term is ideal, as it conveys a sense of orders of resurrection. See D. Edmond Hiebert, “Evidence From 1 Corinthians 15,” in *A Case for Premillennialism: A New Consensus*, 225-34.

is to be sought in what it results in. Those blessed to be a part of the first resurrection may actually rise at different times, as is the case of Jesus and those who rise at the time of His return. But the consequence of not being susceptible to harm from the second death is what defines the order of the first resurrection.⁴³ Since there are very few who would disclaim that the second use of the term *ezēsan* in 20:5 does not refer to bodily rising, then a strong suggestion that this is also the case in 20:4 can be made. Both times John speaks of bodily rising.

What separates these two words is the reign on earth for a thousand years. The saints who partake in the first resurrection are further described as being priests and ruling with Christ. “The saints constitute a kingdom” Ladd explains, “not because they are the people over whom Christ reigns, but because they share His reign.”⁴⁴ This reign then, can be expected only during the earthly rule that Christ establishes at His second advent. No other view, no matter how plausible, fits the context as well as does the basic premillennial understanding of this chapter.

VI. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

One other line of evidence is worth mentioning here. As one reads the final dramatic account of Jesus’ second coming and examines closely the judgment inflicted, some interesting observations can be discerned. John seems to make careful distinctions between the type of judgment administered to rebellious humanity on the one hand, and to the beast and false prophet on the other. In Rev 19:20-21 the first one dealt with is the beast, and with him, the false prophet. These two are

⁴³Walvoord perhaps said it best in claiming, “The term ‘first resurrection’ is not an event but an order of resurrection including all the righteous who are raised from the dead before the millennial kingdom begins,” *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 299. It would be wise to add to this definition that it is not necessary to encompass only those who rise before the millennium. The key to the concept of the “first” resurrection is that those who partake in it, no matter when, will in fact be raised to blessedness and will not be hurt by the second death. Conceivably, some will be raised at the end of the millennium who will also partake of the first resurrection, the only difference is that accordingly they will not reign with Christ for the thousand years but will partake of the blessed Kingdom which will last forever on the new earth.

⁴⁴Ladd, *A Commentary*, 264.

explicitly mentioned as the ones thrown into the lake of fire. The rest are killed in a manner leaving their bodies as food for the birds, suggesting they are *not* thrown into the lake of fire. Theirs is clearly physical and temporal, not eternal, punishment.

In Rev 20:7-10 a similar distinction is made in the battle after the millennium. This time Satan, who was merely imprisoned after the casting into hell of the beast and false prophet, is permitted to rise from the abyss. He amasses the army, named as Gog and Magog, to fight against the saints. In v 9 we see fire coming down from heaven killing the people gathered for battle. This appears to be physical death in a similar fate describing those who perished in chapter 19. Satan, however, is at this time cast into the lake of fire where the beast and false prophet had been consigned a thousand years earlier.

What is significant to note is that *only* Satan is so judged. The eternal banishment of the rebellious people awaits their physical resurrection that does not occur until 20:12ff. It is after the evaluation, made by God based on the data in the open books, that the wicked are also finally cast into the lake of fire. Here, as the text indicates, all the dead were made to stand before the Great White Throne. Presumably those who died physically in the battle described in chapter 19 are at this time also present with those who died in the battle in chapter 20. It seems that at this gathering the whole of humanity will be present. Only those who have their names written in the book of life will escape the second death. Those written in the book of life will be spared the condemnation of the lake of fire because they have been saved by faith. The data in the other open books will become the basis for the degrees of condemnation which the lost will experience.

Although Revelation doesn't explicitly state this, it is inferred from the fact that the judgment of God is made on the basis of people's works. In Matt 10:15; 11:22 and Luke 11:13, Jesus specifically describes degrees of condemnation of those who are lost. This appears to be the counterpart to the Bible's explanation of degrees of reward for the saved.

Then those not found in the book of life will join the devil and his hosts in the eternal fires of hell. The chronological distinction of judgment presented in these two chapters also indicates an interval of time. This too lends support for an intermediate earthly kingdom that lasts a thousand years, as Rev 20:4-6 informs us.

VII. CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this study, we expressed the notion that the Book of Revelation is complex. This is particularly true when one engages the secondary literature. Surprisingly enough, when one stays in the text of the Apocalypse itself, a chronological progression seems to become self evident, especially between chapters 6 and 22. In reading this complete text in one sitting, one gets the feeling that only a preconceived commitment to non-millennial doctrine is really at fault for missing it in the text itself. The millennial reign of Christ with His saints is an end time phenomenon, actualized after the Lord returns to the earth in the post-tribulational advent.

Premillennialism is the outcome of the plain reading of the text. Of course, Premillennialism must not become a litmus test for fellowship among Evangelicals. What must be overcome is eschatological agnosticism, especially when it arises from neglect of the Revelation of John. Is the Apocalypse complex? Yes, certainly. But is it incomprehensible? No, not at all. After all, “Revelation” means *disclosing* not *disguising*! The “thousand year” reign of Christ with His saints is clearly and repeatedly *revealed* in the Revelation.



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