

The Two Resurrections

Revelation 20:4-6

By Phil Kayser at Dominion Covenant Church on 2018-08-12

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Text

4 And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them; also, I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded on account of the testimony of Jesus and on account of the Word of God, even those who had not worshipped the Beast or his image and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. 5 (Now the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were finished.) This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy is the one having a part in the first resurrection; upon such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and will reign with Him a thousand years.

Introduction

We come to another passage on which godly men and women have had very strong disagreements. Actually, I have very good friends who land in at least four different camps. I'm not going to highlight every camp because it would make this sermon way too complicated. But the critiques I have given to two main viewpoints should rule out every other alternative theory. And by the way, the fact that you have a four page outline does not mean the sermon is going to be longer. I just wanted you to have detailed notes to take home. I think you will find them helpful.

I. What everyone is agreed on

But there is good news. The good news is that there are some things in this paragraph that everyone is in agreement on. So the statements under Roman numeral I are not controversial at all.

A. The first sentence in verse 5 is a parenthetical statement

First, everyone agrees that the first sentence of verse 5 is a parenthetical statement, and that the second sentence in verse 5 returns to the theme of last sentence of verse 4. So if you just put a parenthesis around the first sentence of verse 5 (like Pickering's translation does), it will help you visually to see the theme being worked out. So if we deleted the parenthesis (which changes subjects), the text would read this way (starting with the last sentence of verse 4): "And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years...

This is the first resurrection.”

So the first sentence of verse 5 explains what happens to all the others that weren't raised in the first resurrection. There is no controversy on that. The way it is written may seem confusing, but there is no controversy on that fact.

B. This also means that the thrones and judgment of v. 4a happen at the time of the first resurrection, not the time of the second resurrection.

The second thing that people are agreed on is that the thrones and judgment of the first sentence of verse 4 are associated with the first resurrection, not the second resurrection. So there is no need to stress your brains on that clause.

C. Everyone seems to be in agreement that the second resurrection (v. 5a) is a literal resurrection of bodies

Third, everyone seems to be in agreement that the second resurrection is a literal resurrection. Hallelujah! I don't have to argue that point! I have over 100 commentaries from every orthodox viewpoint, and they all are agreed - the resurrection at the end of the 1000 years is a literal resurrection of bodies from the ground. Beale has read far more commentaries than I have and he too says, “all commentators apparently agree.”¹ Even the majority of Full Preterist commentaries that I take issue with say that it is a literal resurrection at the end of the 1000 years - they just weirdly transform the 1000 years into the 40 years from AD 30-70 - and I can't buy that. And I'm not going to get into all of those debates now. The key thing is that the first phrase of verse 5, that says, “Now the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were finished” is interpreted by everyone as a literal resurrection. That makes my job of showing you the meaning of this paragraph much, much easier.

II. Where the controversies lie

A. The nature of the first resurrection. The main theories are:

Where the controversies lie are on the nature of the first resurrection and the nature of the thousand years. I dealt with the thousand years adequately last

¹ He says, “the coming to life of “the rest of the dead” mentioned in v 5a is clearly a physical resurrection (on this all commentators apparently agree)” G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 1003.

week, and I want to quickly dispose of the vast bulk of the Amil and Postmil interpretations of the two resurrections. I am a Postmil on most points in this book, but on the nature of the two resurrections, I solidly side with the Premils. And recently there have been other Amils and Postmils who do as well - they too see these as two literal resurrections.

Where we would disagree with the Premil interpretation is on timing - they think the first resurrection is sometime off in our future, and then they say there will be another resurrection 1000 years later. But to claim that the first resurrection that has happened in human history is in our future is a complete denial of the centrality and priority of the resurrection of Jesus, even if you don't count all those who were raised with him. Every time the word "first" modifies resurrection in the New Testament, it is a reference to at least the resurrection of Jesus. He is the first to rise from the dead, the firstborn from the dead, the firstfruits from the dead, etc. So, according to Scripture, the first resurrection has already happened in the first century and the text goes on to say that the rest of the dead will not be raised till the thousand years are finished, which means a Post-1000 years resurrection or a Postmillennial resurrection. Far from being a strong Premil passage, this is an incredibly strong Postmil proof. Many Premils (like George Eldon Ladd) have said that if it wasn't for this passage, they would ditch Premillennialism. And that is because they don't know how to interpret the two resurrections as anything but two literal resurrections. Well, my interpretation helps them over that hump.

But even though the Premils do not get the timing right, their arguments are water tight on the nature of the two resurrections being two physical resurrections. That's why I say that some Amils and Postmils have adopted that view. It actually destroys Premillennialism when you think about it, and much better supports the Postmil view. But enough on that for now. I want to spend the majority of my time disagreeing with the majority view of the Amils and Postmils. We must correct this view if we are to get a hearing.

Wrong view #1 says that it is the regeneration of the soul

Of the two that are listed in your outlines, by far the most common interpretation is the one that claims the first resurrection is the regeneration of our soul. This was the view of Augustine and Calvin, and it is the view of many modern Reformed people like Kim Riddlebarger,² Norm Shepherd,³

2 Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times*, expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013) 249

3 Norman Shepherd ("Resurrections of Revelation 20," *WTJ* 37, no. 1 [Fall 1974], 36

Sam Hamstra,⁴ Sydney Page,⁵ Floyd Hamilton,⁶ and William Cox. Cox says, “We believe entrance to the on-going millennium is gained solely through the new birth, and that John refers to this as the first resurrection.”⁷

Strength of this position:

And the people who hold to this view are not stupid. Some of them are brilliant. Ken Gentry holds to this view, and I respect him a great deal. Let me share their reasons for holding to this view. In your outlines I’ve listed three of their strongest arguments in favor of the first resurrection being spiritual and the second resurrection being physical.

Regeneration is likened to a resurrection of the soul (Mark 12:26–27; John 5:25–29; 11:25; Rom 6:4–6; 8:10–11; Eph 2:1–7; Col 2:12–13; 3:1; 1 John 3:14; 5:11–13)

The first argument is that regeneration is indeed likened to a resurrection of the soul in other passages. All Calvinists believe this. Total depravity means that the totality of man’s being is spiritually dead and unable to respond to God. Ephesians 2:1 says, “you He has made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins.” Verses 5-6 say,

...even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

He is clearly likening regeneration to a resurrection, and obviously the resurrection of our souls must precede the resurrection of our bodies. That’s why it is called the first resurrection. That’s their argument. Colossians 2:12-13 says almost the same thing. 1 John 3:14 says, “We know that we have passed from death to life...” And I have given the other Scriptures that they have typically used in their commentaries. So I agree. There is a resurrection of our souls when God gives us new life in regeneration. Hallelujah! That’s a wonderful doctrine. The question is, “Is that the resurrection that is referred to here?” At least theoretically it is a possibility. We’ll start by granting that.

Verse 4 references “souls” who are resurrected, not bodies.

A second strong point in their argument is the phrase in verse 4 that says, “I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded...” And it is those “souls” that are later said to be resurrected. They say that a soul is not a body, so if a soul is resurrected, it must be dealing with a spiritual resurrection, not a

4 Sam Hamstra Jr., “An Idealist View of Revelation,” in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, 120.

5 Sydney H. T. Page, “Revelation 20 and Pauline Eschatology,” *JETS* 23, no. 1 [March 1980]: 37–40.

6 Floyd Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1942) 117.

7 William E. Cox, *Amillennialism Today* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1966), 4.

physical resurrection. What kind of spiritual resurrection does the Bible talk about? Regeneration. That's a pretty good argument. If I didn't know better, I might almost be convinced by now.

John 5:24-29 contrasts two resurrections. Verses 24-25a describes the spiritual resurrection which happens "now" as well as the physical resurrection which happens in an hour to come.

And then finally, they appeal to John 5:24-29. Go ahead and turn there with me. This is their prize verse that teaches two resurrections. And in context it is actually a very strong proof text. I can see why they are convinced by it, and it wouldn't bother me at all if you end up being convinced by it. I do not deny that our regeneration is a kind of resurrection. John 5:24-29.

John 5:24 "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.

So this verse clearly refers to a spiritual resurrection of the soul - it has passed from death unto life. It really is a resurrection from the dead. Verse 25 goes on:

25 Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live.

On their interpretation, "the hour is coming" refers to the future resurrection of our bodies at the end of history, and the hour that "now is" refers to the resurrection of souls. They say that the same voice that will raise our bodies from the graves on the last day of history raises our spirits from spiritual death first.

In contrast, I actually see both of those resurrections as physical resurrections. I see the physical resurrection that "now is" as being the imminent resurrection of Jesus and Old Testament saints, and I see "the hour is coming" resurrection as referring to the resurrection at the end of history. But given the context of verse 24, I will grant that this is a very strong proof text for the regeneration view of the first resurrection. If Revelation 20 fits this, we can go with it. Continuing to read in verses 26-29.

26 For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, 27 and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. 28 Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice 29 and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

Weaknesses of this position:

So each of those three points are quite strong even though they can be interpreted two ways. But let's look at some weaknesses of their position

that I believe are so weak, that they completely discredit the interpretation. And I won't spend a lot of time on my own interpretation, because each of these weak points for their view is a strong argument in favor of my own view. And for sake of time I won't reiterate these points. Hopefully you can piece together why I believe in two physical literal resurrections.

The regeneration view violates the standard rules of grammar in the second sentence of verse 4

The first weak point is that the regeneration view violates the rules of standard Greek grammar in the last sentence of verse 4. If you don't know Greek, just close your ears for 30 seconds. John uses an accusative of time (χίλια ἔτη), which indicates that the saints so raised will reign for the entire period of the millennium, not portions of it.⁸ This is exactly the same accusative of time in verse 2 which says that Satan is bound for the entirety of the thousand years. The regeneration view of the resurrection inconsistently see Satan as bound for the entire thousand years, but it does not see these beheaded saints as reigning for the entire thousand years. Why? Because they see this as a metaphor for the regeneration of every Christian all the way up to the last to the last day of millennium. The Christian who gets regenerated on the last day of history will only have ruled for one day, not 1000 years. If John had intended to mean what they say he means, it seems that he should have used a genitive of time rather than an accusative of time, or simply said that they will reign during the thousand years rather than for the thousand years. But if they were physically resurrected (as I believe) it fits perfectly. Every one of them will indeed reign for the entire kingdom period. Now, we reign as well, but that is a subject for other paragraphs of Revelation.

Why is the regeneration of post-cross Christians likened to a resurrection, but not the regeneration of pre-cross Christians?

The second weakness is tied to the same clause. Who gets to live and reign with Christ for the thousand years? I believe it is all saints who died before AD 70. But on the regeneration view, it seems to exclude any saints who were regenerated before the thrones are set in place. Most of them tend to see the thrones as being out in place in AD 30, but it still presents a problem. The order of the text is thrones being set in place, the saints sitting on those thrones, judgment being committed to them, those beheaded being

⁸ See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1996), 201–3; cf. F. Blass, F. and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and rev. by Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 88–89; A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 469–71.

resurrected (perhaps because of their sitting on the thrones), then reigning for the thousand years. But this interpretation reverses that and has the regeneration taking place before verse 4. It makes the supposed meaning of the text extremely awkward. Old Testament saints were regenerated just as much as we are, so how does their regeneration usher them into the thousand year reign? That is the question. And the follow up question is, “How does their regeneration happen after thrones are put in place?” It can’t.

The souls of verse 4 seem to be saved before they are resurrected.

The third weakness is that the souls of verse 4 seem to be saved before they are resurrected. On their interpretation that would make them saved before they were regenerated - an impossibility. Let’s read verse 4 again:

And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them; also, I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded on account of the testimony of Jesus and on account of the Word of God, even those who had not worshiped the Beast or his image and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.

Who lived and reigned? The people in the preceding clauses - the people who had been faithful. Yet Amillennialists insist that the word “lived” in the phrase “lived and reigned” means that they were regenerated. It’s a huge problem, and they recognize it. The Amillennialist, Fowler White, says that putting the regeneration after their godly lifestyle should not be a conclusive argument against it. On his view the last sentence is simply explanatory of how the previous clauses were possible. But such an interpretation sure doesn’t flow from the text naturally. It seems to be forcing the text to fit a predetermined conclusion.

The resurrection seems to happen after their death (chronological use of “and”) and before the thousand years (“they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years”). On the regeneration view the first resurrection happens before they die and there are billions of resurrections all throughout the thousand years.

But even more embarrassing than the previous weakness is the fact that these souls were beheaded before they got regenerated. How could that be? Let’s substitute regenerated for “and they lived”, and I think you will see that. “I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded... And they [Who? The beheaded ones - “And they] were regenerated and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.” This embarrassing order in the text is what has made some Amils (like Meredith Kline) completely ditch this theory and say that the first resurrection is the soul leaving the body at the time of death and being taken to heaven. That definitely fits the order. He says that it is the soul being resurrected from earth to heaven. We will look at that theory in a

bit.

But R. Fowler White argues with Meredith Kline (it's two Amillennialists arguing with each other in this journal) and he tries to salvage the regeneration view by saying that the first resurrection "actually precedes and ironically leads the saints into martyrdom rather than delivering them from it."⁹ And Meredith Kline's response is, that is not what the text says. A straightforward reading of the text makes that interpretation extremely unlikely. And I agree.

Do the rest of the dead the same category of dead and do they receive the same regeneration? (v. 5)

An additional problem with this view is found in the next verse where it says that "the rest of the dead" do not come to life until the thousand years is finished. If the first coming to life is regeneration, then the rest of the dead refers to the rest of the spiritually dead. But since coming to life means coming to life from the deadness they share in common, that would imply that the non-elect get regenerated or saved at the end of the thousand years. Now, if you are a heretical universalist, that would fit, but obviously no orthodox Christians believe that. Do you see the problem? The phrase, "the rest of the dead" implies that both resurrections are referring to the same kind of coming to life from the same kind of death. With those two issues standing in the way, Matt Waymeyer is correct when he says, "John makes it clear that those who came to life in verse 4 were indeed physically dead when they experienced the first resurrection."¹⁰ That is the most natural reading of the text.

In 38 out of 39 uses of the the Greek word ἀνάστασις outside this book, it refers to a physical resurrection. The lone exception (Luke 2:34) doesn't refer to regeneration either.

The sixth problem with the regeneration view is that the word ἀνάστασις, the word for resurrection in verse 5, is not used of regeneration one single time anywhere else in the New Testament.¹¹

9 R. Fowler White, "Death and the First Resurrection in Revelation 20: A Response to Meredith G. Kline," unpublished paper presented at ETS, 1992, 2, 23.

10 Matt Waymeyer, "The First Resurrection in Revelation 20," in *The Master's Seminary Journal*, 27/1 (Spring 2016) 3–32

11 Of the thirty-nine other times it is used in the New Testament it clearly refers to a physical resurrection thirty-eight times and one time it might be metaphorical - it says that Jesus is destined for the "fall and rising of many in Israel." But that could be a reference to a physical resurrection as well.

The verses that describe regeneration as a spiritual resurrection have only spiritual death in the context. In contrast, the ones being resurrected in the first resurrection of Revelation 20:4-6 are described as beheaded.

The seventh problem is that even in the passages that I have already agreed describe regeneration as a resurrection (using synonymous terms), the context clearly indicates what kind of death they are being resurrected from. The context of those passages mentions spiritual death. In contrast, the ones being resurrected in the first resurrection of our passage have just been described as beheaded. It's not a spirit that gets beheaded; it's a body. That is a reference to a Roman penalty of using an ax to decapitate the body. It is a clear context of physical death. So the context itself dictates the interpretation of what kind of resurrection he is talking about. What is dead here? Their bodies are dead, not their souls. In fact, their souls are clearly not dead. There is not one word that describes their souls as being spiritually dead. They are faithful regenerate Christians before any mention of resurrection comes.

The word "soul" is often used to refer to the whole person, not simply to the disembodied spirit (Mark 3:4; Luke 6:9; 9:56; Acts 2:41, 43; 3:23; 7:14; 15:26; 27:37; Rom 2:9; 13:1; 1 Cor 15:45; 1 Pet 3:20)

But what about their argument that the word "soul" is used? While that may seem like a strong argument, it actually isn't. I've given you thirteen sample verses where soul clearly refers to a person in the body. For example, Acts 2:41 says that three thousand souls were baptized and added to the church. Those souls were not disembodied spirits. Acts 15:26 speaks of people risking their lives for the Gospel, and the word "lives" is the word for "souls." And if you look through the verses in your outline you will see that "soul" most frequently means "person." It could be an embodied person or a disembodied person. If it had said "spirit," they would have had a stronger case. But I am willing to grant them this point because it does say the souls of those who had been beheaded, so it does appear to refer to disembodied persons - disembodied souls. But the point is that it is after they are disembodied that they get resurrected, so it completely rules out the regeneration view, though not the second Amil view.

Since everyone agrees that the word "come to life" in 5a (ἐζήσαν) refers to a physical resurrection, it would be odd that the exact same form of the verb used to describe the first resurrection in verse 4 (ἐζήσαν) does not also refer to a physical resurrection. This is especially so since there is a comparison ("the rest of the dead")

But the ninth weakness is a pretty significant weakness. It is that the exact

same word (ζάω) and even the exact same form of the word (ἐζήσαν) occurs in both verses 4 and 5. Everyone agrees that the word describes a physical resurrection in verse 5a, so it would be very odd to use exactly the same verb to describe regeneration in verse 4 and fifteen words later to use it to describe a bodily resurrection.

And this is especially so when the comparison is made by John of some dead people and “the rest of the dead.” “The rest of” implies both groups belong to the same category of deadness, and therefore logic dictates that if one is physical, the other must be physical, or if one is spiritual, the other must be spiritual. Premillennialist, Alva McClain rightly says, “If the people involved were beheaded physically, and then lived again, common sense would suggest that they received back the same category of life that had been lost.”¹²

Their Objection 1: They claim that the Bible only speaks of one general resurrection (Matt. 22:30,32; Luke 14:14; 20:35-36; Acts 23:6; Acts 24:15; 24:21; Rom. 6:5; 1 Cor. 15:21,42; Phil. 3:10; 2 Tim. 2:18).

Now, those who hold to the regeneration theory do have answers. They are not idiots. But their answers tend to be, “Well, your view has problems too, so get over it.” They don’t say it that way, but that is really the effect of their argument.

Their first rebuttal is the claim that the Bible only speaks of one general resurrection in the future, and therefore, even if logic and exegesis might seem to dictate two physical resurrections in this passage, systematic theology would dictate otherwise. It’s kind of like saying, “My system demands it, and your system would too if you took the other passages on a general resurrection seriously.”

False: Acts speaks of a resurrection that was “about to happen” (Acts 24:14-15) immediately after the wrath which was about to happen (Matt. 3:7; Acts 17:31; 24:25; 2 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 10:26-27). See also 1 Cor. 15:20-26; Hos. 6:2; John 5:25; Rom. 8:23; Matt. 16:27-28 [Greek]; Acts 24:14-15,25 [Greek]; 2 Tim. 4:1 [Greek]

But that assertion (that all Scripture presents only one general resurrection in our future) is patently false, as I have already proved in this series on Revelation. 1 Corinthians 15 clearly says that there is an order to the resurrections and delineates a minimum of two resurrections, no matter how you interpret the passage. You can’t get less than two physical resurrections

¹² Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1959), p. 488.

in that passage, and many say that it is three. John 5:25 also distinguishes between a resurrection that is imminent and a resurrection that is future.

Listen to Matthew 16:27-28.

Matt. 16:27 For the Son of Man is about to [that's the Greek word μέλλω] come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. [Rewarding each according to his works is connected often with the resurrection in the Bible. And lest you think that can't possibly be a reference to AD 70, He goes on to clarify what He means in the very next verse by saying that this judgment is indeed about to happen. He says,] Matt. 16:28 Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."

And we have seen in previous sermons that there were several eyewitness accounts from the time of the Jewish war of people seeing the huge figure of Jesus in the sky, leading his angelic armies in judgment on Jerusalem. It was literally fulfilled. It wasn't the Second physical coming to earth, but it was a parousia or appearing in the sky. When God says something is about to happen, it isn't 2000 years later; it is truly about to happen.

In Acts 24:14-15 Paul used that Greek word μέλλω again and said,

Acts 24:14 But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets. Acts 24:15 I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there is about to be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust.

The New King James book of Acts was translated by Futurists, and they deliberately left out the translation of μέλλω even though it is in all Greek manuscripts. The Greek word μέλλω means "about to happen" or to be imminent. There was an imminent resurrection.

Acts 24:25 also speaks of an imminent judgment. 2 Timothy 4:1 says that God and the Lord Jesus Christ were about to judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom.

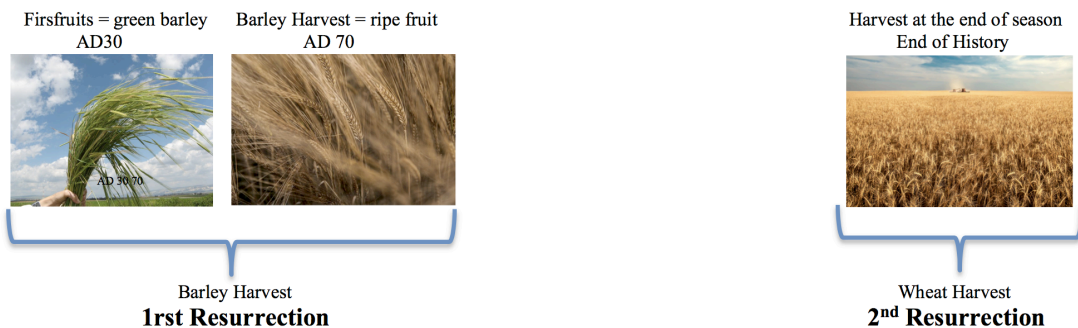
So it is flat out false when people claim that there are only references to a general resurrection at the end of history. And they should know better because liberals have been criticizing evangelicals for years on these precise verses. Liberals said that Jesus and the apostles clearly taught that a resurrection was about to happen, but it didn't turn out that way. My series on Revelation has shown that liberals are absolutely wrong. Every imminent passage came to pass within the lifetime of those disciples. And the passages that about Christ's physical coming to the earth that claim to be a long time away are still to be fulfilled in our future.

Their Objection 2: This is the only place where the word “first” is connected with a resurrection, so they claim that it clues us in to the fact that it must be referring to a unique resurrection.

But the regeneration view proponents give yet another objection to what we have said. They claim that this is the only place where the word “first” is used in connection with the resurrection, and because it is unique, it probably refers to “first” in importance, not first in sequence or series. Their logic is a bit strange, but they insist that because this is a one-and-only occurrence of this word “first” with the resurrection, it must be qualitatively first, not sequentially first.

False (Acts 3:26; 26:23; also see “firstfruits” in 1 Cor. 15:20,23; Rom. 8:23; see “Feast of Firstfruits” in Lev 23:9-1; Ex. 23:19; Ex. 34:26)

But is it true that the word “first” is never used in any other passage with the word resurrection? And the answer is clearly, “No.” Acts 3:26 refers to Jesus’ resurrection as the first ἀναστήσας that God gives. Likewise, Acts 26:23 says, “That the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead.” But I have also listed a bunch of verses that use the term “firstfruits” in connection with resurrection. In the festival connected with the barley harvest, firstfruits referred to the very beginning of the first grain harvest when the barley was still green. But the main barley harvest happened shortly after that once the grain fully ripened. All of that symbolizes the first resurrection. After the barley was pulled in (and that refers to the first century resurrection), the wheat harvest was next (and that symbolizes the second resurrection at the end of history. I gave an entire sermon in Revelation 11 showing how those two harvests were the symbols of two physical resurrections. I won’t repeat what I said back then.



Their Objection 3: See picture - two different kinds of death (physical in v. 4 and spiritual in v. 15) implies two different kinds of resurrection (spiritual in vv. 4b,5b) and physical (v. 5a). Second, they say that the word “first” refers to this world and the word “second” refers to the second world. Third, they say that “first” means “different in quality” from the second, not “first in sequence.”

But then the regeneration-of-the-soul advocates produce a beautiful chart showing a chiasm of two different kinds of death (the first death being physical and the second death being spiritual), and two different kinds of resurrection (the first being spiritual and the second being physical). The first time I saw this graphic I was very impressed with the symmetry. They say that unless the first resurrection is a spiritual resurrection, this beautiful symmetry is destroyed. They also insist that the first deals with this world (just like first Adam is in this world) and the second deals with eternity (just as second Adam is the eternal Adam). Thus the two seconds at the bottom of their chart (the second death and the second resurrection) usher people into eternity and out of this world. This chiastic teaching supposedly reinforces their assertion that the word “first” must be “different in quality” from the second, not “first in sequence of the same kind of things.” And I could have actually put this argument as one of the first strong arguments in their favor. It really is an impressive chart.

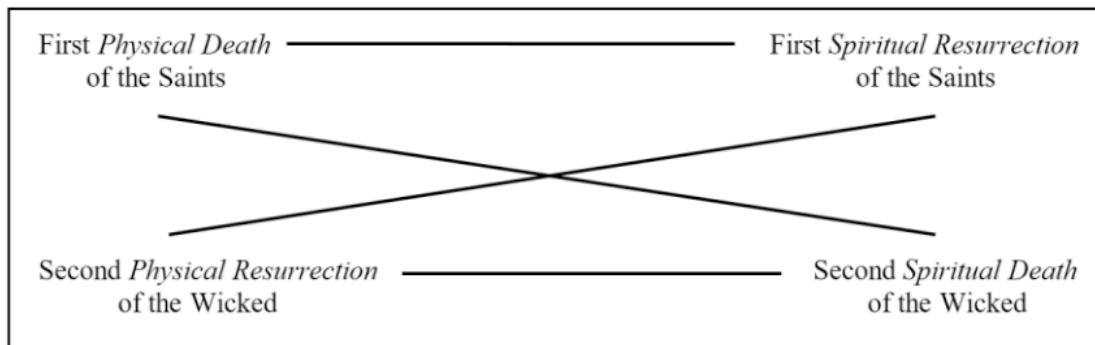


Figure 1. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1005.

Problem 1 - Their idea is chiastic, but the text is not constructed chiastically

But it only appears strong when you look at the chart and the paper describing the chart. You can see the chiasm clearly when you look at the paper. But when you try to chart out the chiasm from the text itself (putting phrases of the text together), it simply doesn't work. And it may be that God deliberately constructed the awkward word order here in order to clearly rule out any chiastic interpretation. They are using the term “chiasm” loosely. Hebrew chiasms always emerge from the structure of the text, not simply

from ideas that are in the text. There is a big difference. And the text here is not constructed the way their cool chart shows. It is quite different, actually. Their chiasm is not textual;¹³ it is artificial.

Problem 2 - In every other use of “first” in Revelation, it appears to be first in sequence. Adam was indeed sequentially before Christ. The old world is indeed sequentially before the new world.

Second, every other example of the word “first” in Revelation appears to be the first in a sequence. I don’t know of any examples where it means “different in quality” from some second thing or event. The Adam and Christ contrast does not contradict this sequential idea since Adam was indeed sequentially first before Christ. Neither does the Old World versus New World contradict this usage of “first.” And if you are going to argue chiasmic thought, our view of bodily death and bodily resurrections fits even better. So their idea that “first” is different in quality and not first in sequence does not naturally flow from the text. Waymeyer says, How can the new birth be considered the qualitative and polar opposite of the future resurrection? Is the believer’s regeneration antithetical to permanence? Will the new life received at conversion pass away and be replaced by his bodily resurrection? Can it really be said that the spiritual birth of believers belongs to the present, sin-cursed creation and therefore that the spiritual life of regeneration does not participate in the age to come?¹⁴ Now, obviously he is answering a lot of detailed Amil exegesis that I have not gotten into, but there are huge holes in their logic. When you begin analyzing all that they are importing into that word “first,” it falls apart. This is why Amils and Postmils have begun deserting this position in the last fifty or so years and either adopting the second interpretation or my interpretation.

Problem 3 - Second death is not simply spiritual separation from God, but also physical separation (vv. 13-15); it is not simply the soul that is thrown into hell, but also the body (vv. 13-15; cf. Matt. 5:29-30; 10:28).

The third problem I have with their complicated exegesis is that the Second Death is not simply spiritual separation from God. It is also physical separation, as verses 13-15 make clear. There are bodies that will be separated from God. As Matthew 10:28 words it, And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. So again, it highlights the fact that their supposedly rigid contrasts between spiritual and physical are somewhat artificial.

13 This can be charted this way: First death (v. 4a) First resurrection (v. 4b) Second resurrection (v. 5a) First resurrection (v. 5b) First resurrection (v. 6a) Second death (v. 6b)

14 Matt Waymeyer, “The First Resurrection in Revelation 20,” in *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, 27/1 (Spring 2016), 17-18.

Problem 4 - This explanation makes no sense of “the rest of the dead.”

The fourth problem is that this still makes no sense in explaining the meaning of the rest of the dead. If the first set of dead are spiritually dead, does the rest of the dead mean the spiritually dead at the end of history? But none of these theories restrict that resurrection to the spiritually dead.

Actually, Premils sometimes speak of the last resurrection as only being the resurrection of the non-elect, but when pushed, they admit that those who die during their future millennium have to be raised in that resurrection too.

Here’s the thing: the phrase, “the rest of,” implies that a part of a set gets raised in the first century and the rest of that entire set gets raised at the end of time. But it is the same set. It is the set of dead corpses. Spiritually dead makes no sense of the text, whereas physically dead does.

Problem 5 - It is a complex theory that does not seem to easily be read from the text even after understanding it.

My fifth problem is that it is a complex theory that does not seem to be easily read from the text even after understanding it. Always be suspicious of a theory if it makes sense while you are reading the book, but you still can’t see it clearly when you only read the text of Scripture. And you read the book again, and it seems clear, but you go back to the Scripture and read it without notes and it just doesn’t seem as clear.

Actually (I will confess) I had this happen to one of my interpretations at seminary. I wrote a paper on women’s roles in seminary that several professors wanted me to publish. They thought it was genius and would answer the debates revolving at that time. But I didn’t feel comfortable doing so, and I’m glad I didn’t. It was wrong. Over the next five years I would read my paper, and it would make sense, and then I would read the text of Scripture by itself and it was hard to see it there. I finally realized that what I had done was building a system onto the text rather than letting the text dictate my system. And I repented. But I see the same thing going on here. It is the system that demands that this be a regeneration, not the text. I have seen the same with Full Preterist interpretations of this text. Their system always seems to dictate their exegesis. If you always need to read the text through the lens of a theory, it is suspect.

Wrong view #2 says that it is the death of a believer and his soul’s ascension to heaven

It is because of many of these problems that modern Amils have often adopted a different view of the “first resurrection.” William Hendriksen says

that the first resurrection is “the translation of the soul from this sinful earth to God’s holy heaven” via death.¹⁵ Anthony Hoekema¹⁶ and James Hughes¹⁷ have presented the same paradigm. One of the most intriguing defenses of this view was given by Meredith Kline, who said, “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’... What for others is the first death is for the Christian a veritable resurrection!” So if we were to chart it for you like I did the previous theory, it would look similar, but it would be an even stronger chiasmic idea than the regeneration chart I gave to you.

When I was in seminary I was intrigued by this theory. It was stronger than the regeneration view, though it also shares some of the regeneration view’s strengths and weaknesses. I’ll start with its strong points.

Strong points

It comforts those facing martyrdom

Probably the strongest argument in favor of this view is that it would have brought tremendous comfort to the original audience that was being persecuted by Rome and who faced the threat of martyrdom. What is martyrdom but instant resurrection to heaven?! Look forward to it. There is nothing to be afraid of. As Sam Storms words it, what better, more appropriate, or even more biblical way could he have done so than by assuring them that though they may die physically at the hands of the beast they will live spiritually in the presence of the Lamb? I can think of no more vivid way of making this point than that of life beyond and in spite of death.¹⁸

So the first strong point is comfort. It makes sense of the original audience and the original context of their persecution.

The word “thrones” points to heaven in most other passages

The second strong point is that the word “thrones” often has a context of heaven. So if the thrones are set to judge from heaven, it can’t refer to their regeneration, which happens on earth. But if death is the resurrection, then these saints go from their martyrdom straight to their thrones. That’s kind of a cool thought. And I happen to agree that the thrones are in heaven. So this is much stronger than the regeneration view.

15 William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1967), 192

16 Anthony A. Hoekema “An Amillennial Response,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, 57.

17 (James A. Hughes, “Revelation 20:4–6 and the Question of the Millennium,” *WTJ* 35, no. 3 [Spring 1973] 291

18 Sam Storms, *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2013), 453

It is said to be the “souls” that are resurrected and reign with Christ, not bodies

The third strong point is that, like the regeneration theory, they point to the word “souls” as proving that it is souls that are resurrected, not bodies. But what makes it stronger than the regeneration view is that they take the order of the text more seriously than the regeneration view. The soul is resurrected after he is beheaded, or martyred. So it is much stronger than the regeneration view on that point.

They claim that this is consistent with Luke 20:38

Fourth, they claim that this interpretation is consistent with Luke 20:38, which says that God “is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all live to Him.” And in context he is referring to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who currently have God as their God. How did they have God as their God? They say that their souls were resurrected to heaven. Of course, that verse makes one wonder why there is a change in AD 70. Some Full Preterists who hold to this view have said that Sheol/Hades was emptied of souls and brought to heaven in AD 70. But in past sermons I have shown that Sheol/Hades was actually emptied in AD 30. But in any case, it is a fairly decent argument.

Other passages in Revelation show the blessedness of dying (Rev. 2:10-11; 14:13)

And finally, they point out that two other passages in Revelation show the blessedness of dying - that death brings even more life. Revelation 2:10 says, “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Verse 11 says, “He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.” This shows that our death is life. Revelation 14:13 says, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.”

Problems with this view

The Bible never speaks of death as the resurrection (ἀνάστασις) of the soul

I won't deal with every problem that this view has. It shares most of the problems we have already dealt with under regeneration. But let me point out three. First, the Bible never speaks of death as the resurrection. Cool as the thought is, it never speaks of death as a resurrection. And Amillennialists agree.¹⁹ At least the books that I have read by Amillennialists agree. But they say that once is enough. But is once enough when there are much more cogent interpretations? We must make sure that it is not our system dictating our exegesis. There is simply no evidence that the Bible calls our death a resurrection.

The word ἀνάστασις does not refer to life after death, but life from death.

Nor does the word ἀνάστασις ever refer to life after death. It is always a raising of the dead to life. Let me explain the difference. The regeneration view would say that if someone is spiritually dead and made alive, he could be said to be resurrected spiritually, but someone who is spiritually alive (in other words, his soul is already regenerate) cannot be said to be resurrected when he dies. The soul itself is not being resurrected from spiritual death. And I agree. Or if someone is physically dead and made alive, he could be said to be resurrected. But when someone who is spiritually alive continues to live even after physical death, no coming to life has happened. He already had eternal life. So even in terms of systematic theology, this interpretation doesn't work.

Many of the problems for the previous theory apply to this theory

Like I said, this has many of the same problems of the previous theory. I will just reiterate one more. Jack Deere says,

If ἔζησαν in both verses refers to a physical resurrection, there is no problem. But if ἔζησαν refers to a spiritual resurrection in both verses, then the exegete is confronted with an insurmountable problem. For this would imply that the unbelieving dead of verse 5 live spiritually in heaven like the martyrs of verse 4 after the thousand years is completed.²⁰

That to me is an insurmountable problem. As A. J. Gordon writes about the verb "they lived," "The meaning of the one [occurrence of this verb] fixes

19 For example, Sydney Page says, "Like all attempts to relate the first resurrection to the intermediate state, it faces the objection that the translation of the soul of the believer to heaven at death is not spoken of as a resurrection anywhere else in the NT." Sydney H. T. Page, "Revelation 20 and Pauline Eschatology," JETS 23, no. 1 [March 1980]: 37

20 Jack S. Deere ("Premillennialism in Revelation 20:4-6," BSac 135, no. 537 [Jan 1978] 68

the meaning of the other.”²¹ Back in the 1800s Henry Alford wrote his Greek New Testament commentary. In that he says,

As regards the text itself, no legitimate treatment of it will extort what is known as the spiritual interpretation now in fashion. If in passages where two resurrections are mentioned, where certain psuchai edzēsan (souls lived) at the first, and the rest of the nechroi edzēsan (dead lived) only at the end of a specified period after the first—if in such a passage the first resurrection may be understood to mean spiritual rising from the grave—then there is an end of all significance of language, and Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to anything.²²

I don't think this passage needs to be confusing if we will quit forcing our systems onto the text and simply follow the text where it leads us.

III. My view in a nutshell: the first resurrection is a literal resurrection of bodies at the beginning of the 1000 years (vv. 4b-5,6c) and the second resurrection is a literal resurrection at the end of the 1000 years. The two resurrections happen at the timing of the binding and loosing of Satan.

Let me give my view in a nutshell, and then we will quickly go through the passage phrase by phrase. My view is that a literal resurrection of bodies from the ground happened in AD 70 and the second resurrection will be at the end of history. Boom! It's easy.

Thus, the first resurrection happened when Satan was bound in the Abyss and the second resurrection will happen when Satan is loosed from the Abyss. Boom! Easy.

This overthrows the Premil view, which says that the first resurrection is still future. It also overthrows most Amil and Postmil interpretations. I hold to Postmillennialism - that Christ is coming back after the millennium or post-1000 years, but by adopting the Premillennial idea of two resurrections, we resolve the insuperable problems that Amils and Postmils have had in the past. It is the perfect Postmil interpretation. In fact, only the Postmil interpretation can do adequate justice to the idea of two physical resurrections. Premils have a minimum of four resurrections, and some have five.

21 A. J. Gordon, “The First Resurrection,” in Premillennial

22 Alford, Henry. Alford's Greek Testament, an Exegetical and Critical Commentary. Vol. 4. 1875. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980, p. 732.

IV. Others who held to my view

Now, because it is not as common of a view today (though there are modern scholars who hold to it), people are skeptical and think that it is novel and therefore to be rejected. But not only have some Amils and Postmils adopted this view that the first resurrection is a literal resurrection in the first century, there are ancient church fathers who did as well.

A. *Ignatius (AD 35-108)*

For example, Ignatius, who was born in AD 35 and who died in 108, was a church father who should have known of this massive resurrection. And he did. He said that Jesus came for his saints and “raised them from the dead.”²³ He speaks of this resurrection of saints as having occurred in the past.

But just as I see the firstfruits of this first resurrection as occurring the day Jesus rose from the dead, so too Ignatius says that the AD 30 resurrection of saints was a real resurrection - the firstfruits of the first harvest. He says, ... those under the earth, the multitude that arose along with the Lord. For says the Scripture, “Many bodies of the saints that slept arose,” their graves being opened. He descended, indeed, into Hades alone, but He arose accompanied by a multitude...²⁴

B. *Melito of Sardis (AD ?-180)*

Melito of Sardis was another very early church father whose writings have been mostly lost. But what has been retained shows a belief that the first resurrection is past. He says

[Jesus] rose up from the dead, and cried aloud with this voice: Who is he who contends with me? Let him stand in opposition to me. I set the condemned man free; I gave the dead man life; I raised up the one who had been entombed. Who is my opponent? I, he says, am the Christ. I am the one who destroyed death, and triumphed over the enemy, and trampled Hades under foot, and bound the strong one, and carried off man to the heights of heaven, I, he says, am the Christ.²⁵

C. *Early church hymnal (AD 70-125)*

In 1909, Rendel Harris discovered the church’s first hymn book, which has been called the Odes of Solomon. Scholars say that its final form was put

23 “[T]herefore endure, that we may be found the disciples of Jesus Christ, our only Master—how shall we be able to live apart from Him, whose disciples the prophets themselves in the Spirit did wait for Him as their Teacher? And therefore He who they rightly waited for, being come, raised them from the dead.” J. B. Lightfoot with S. Ignatius and S. Polycarp, *The Apostolic Fathers, Part II: S. Ignatius, S. Polycarp: Translations, Second Edition*, vol. II (London; New York: Macmillan and Co., 1889), 552–553.

24 Ignatius of Antioch, “The Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 70.

25 Melito of Sardis, “On the Passover,” homily posted at <http://www.kerux.com/doc/0401A1.asp>

together in AD 125, though the hymns themselves appear to have been composed between AD 70 and 125. I want to read the entire hymn #22 because it is almost a commentary on this AD 70 binding of the dragon and resurrection of the saints. Scholars say the “I” and “me” is Jesus speaking. It says,

He who caused me to descend from on high, and to ascend from the regions below; And He who gathers what is in the Middle, and throws them to me; He who scattered my enemies, and my adversaries; He who gave me authority over bonds, so that I might unbind them; He who overthrew by my hands the dragon with seven heads, and set me at his roots that I might destroy his seed; You were there and helped me, and in every place Your name surrounded me. Your right hand destroyed his evil venom, and Your hand leveled the Way for those who believe in You. And It chose them from the graves, and separated them from the dead ones. It took dead bones and covered them with flesh. But they were motionless, so It gave them energy for life. Incorruptible was Your way and Your face; You have brought Your world to corruption, that everything might be resolved and renewed. And the foundation of everything is Your rock. And upon it You have built Your kingdom, and it became the dwelling-place of the holy ones. Hallelujah.²⁶

In connection with destroying the seven-headed dragon, Satan, it speaks of a literal resurrection of bodies from the graves, and the expansion of the kingdom after that. And all of that is in the past tense. Ode 17 also speaks of a past resurrection.

D. Irenaeus, Cyril of Jerusalem, Clement of Alexandria, Hillary of Poitiers, Remigius, etc.

Not all fathers believed in an AD 70 resurrection. Some believed the first resurrection was in AD 30 in its entirety, where there was a literal resurrection of Old Testament saints. Irenaeus²⁷, Cyril of Jerusalem²⁸,

26 A free version can be found here:

http://www.preteristarchive.com/ChurchHistory/0100_solomon_odes.html. Commentary can be found in Michael Lattke, *Odes of Solomon* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009)

27 “[Jesus] who can lead those souls aloft that follow His ascension. This event was also an indication of the fact, that when the holy soul of Christ descended [to Hades], many souls ascended and were seen in their bodies.” Irenaeus of Lyons, “Fragments from the Lost Writings of Irenæus,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 572–573.

28 “But it is impossible, some one will say, that the dead should rise; and yet Eliseus twice raised the dead, —when he was alive, and also when dead. Do we then believe, that when Eliseus was dead, a dead man who was cast upon him and touched him, arose; and is Christ not risen? But in that case, the dead man who touched Eliseus, arose, yet he who raised him continued nevertheless dead: but in this case both the Dead of whom we speak Himself arose, and many dead were raised without having even touched Him. For many bodies of the Saints which slept arose, and they came out of the graves after His Resurrection, and went into the Holy City, (evidently this city, in which we now are,) and appeared unto many. Eliseus then raised a dead man, but he conquered not the world; Elias raised a dead man, but devils are not driven away in the name of Elias. We are not speaking evil of the Prophets, but we are celebrating their Master more highly; for we do not exalt our own wonders by disparaging theirs; for theirs also are ours; but by what happened among them, we win credence for our own. . . . And He went down of His own accord, that death might cast up those whom he had devoured, according to that which is written, I

Clement of Alexandria,²⁹ Hillary of Poitiers,³⁰ Remigius,³¹ and others spoke of a massive resurrection into glorified bodies. So even on their interpretation of the first resurrection being only in AD 30, the first resurrection had already happened. In any case, there is clear precedent for my interpretation, and it definitely resolves the impasse that people find themselves in on this passage.

V. Exegesis of verses 4-6

Having disposed of the wrong interpretations, let me very very quickly go through the passage phrase by phrase and apply it.

A. *The thrones (v. 4a)*

Verse 4 says, “And I saw thrones...” Of the 47 times that John uses the word “throne,” all refer to thrones in heaven except for two, one of which is the throne of Satan and the other is the throne of the beast. So just based on word usage, the likelihood is that these are thrones set in heaven.

But it becomes certain that these are thrones in heaven when you realize that Daniel 7 is the background for this whole paragraph. And virtually all commentators agree that Daniel 7 stands behind this. Daniel 7:9-10 says,

will ransom them from the power of the grave; and from the hand of death I will redeem them... who descended into hell alone, but ascended thence with a great company; for He went down to death, and many bodies of the saints which slept arose through Him... All the Just were ransomed, whom death had swallowed; for it behoved the King whom they had proclaimed, to become the redeemer of His noble heralds. Then each of the Just said, O death, where is thy victory? O grave, where is thy sting? For the Conqueror hath redeemed us.” etc. Cyril of Jerusalem, “The Catechetical Lectures of S. Cyril, Archbishop of Jerusalem,” in S. Cyril of Jerusalem, S. Gregory Nazianzen, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. R. W. Church and Edwin Hamilton Gifford, vol. 7, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1894), 98.

- 29 “Further, the Gospel says, “that many bodies of those that slept arose,”—plainly as having been translated to a better state.” Clement of Alexandria, “The Stromata, or Miscellanies,” in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 2, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 491.
- 30 Quoted by Aquinas: “the graves were opened, for the bands of death were loosed. And many bodies of the saints which slept arose, for illumining the darkness of death, and shedding light upon the gloom of Hades, He robbed the spirits of death.” Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers: St. Matthew*, ed. John Henry Newman, vol. 1 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1841), 963.
- 31 Quoted by Aquinas: “But some one will ask, what became of those who rose again when the Lord rose. We must believe that they rose again to be witnesses of the Lord’s resurrection. Some have said that they died again, and were turned to dust, as Lazarus and the rest whom the Lord raised. But we must by no means give credit to these men’s sayings, since if they were to die again, it would be greater torment to them, than if they had not risen again. We ought therefore to believe without hesitation that they who rose from the dead at the Lord’s resurrection, ascended also into heaven together with Him.” Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers: St. Matthew*, ed. John Henry Newman, vol. 1 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1841), 964.

“As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat... The court was seated, and the books were opened” (Dan. 7:9–10). That is clearly in heaven.

Timing is connected to binding of beast (Rev. 19:20) and Satan (Rev. 20:1-3)

When does this happen? Well, both Daniel and Revelation point to AD 70. We looked last week at the timing indicators and we saw that chapter 20 comes immediately after chapter 19. So the order was the three and a half year war against Jerusalem, the binding of the Beast and False Prophet in the last verses of chapter 19, the binding of Satan in Revelation 20:1-3, then thrones and a resurrection.

These thrones were prophesied in Daniel 7:9 and came in connection with the binding of the beast (Daniel 7:8-12). These thrones are set up after the first three and a half years of war (Daniel 7:25-26) and before the expansion of the kingdom for a long period of time (Daniel 7:27).

And that is the same thing that we see in Daniel 7. The thrones were prophesied after the three and a half year war, and in close connection with the binding of the beast, and just prior to the glorious expansion of Christ’s kingdom, which was said to extend for an Olam (*אָלָם*), the Hebrew word often translated forever, but which means for a long indefinite time. Olam is frequently put into parallel with the number 1000 in the Old Testament. So we have confirmation from the context and from Daniel that this takes place in AD 70.

B. seated with Christ in the heavenlies (v. 4b)

Verse 4 continues, “And I saw thrones, and they sat on them...” Commentators wonder who the “they” might be.³² Whoever it is, “judgment was committed to them” and the “them” is masculine. In Greek, every word is either masculine, feminine, or neuter, and the pronoun always has the same gender as the noun that it refers to. You might think that the “them” refers only to the “souls” in the next clause, but souls is a different gender.

³² Easley says, “John is vague about who these people were, who they judged, and what the resulting verdicts were. If Daniel 7 is taken into account, a heavenly court of angelic beings are the judges, accounting the martyrs worthy to receive their special reward (Dan. 7:22). Other interpreters think that the martyrs are themselves the judges. Still others suppose that the twelve apostles or all overcoming saints are the judges (Matt. 19:28; 1 Cor. 6:2–3; Rev. 3:21). The information here is insufficient for a conclusion.” Kendell H. Easley, *Revelation*, vol. 12, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 371–372.

So that tends to rule out the “martyr-only” theory. And besides, it puts things out of order.

Another problem with the martyr-only theory is that chapter 3:21 says that all overcomers reign with Christ.

What are other options? The “them” can’t refer to the “nations” in the previous three verses, since that is the neuter gender. Well, the only other alternative in context is the angels and saints of chapter 19, both of which have the masculine gender. That’s what I believe.

And this is confirmed by Daniel 7. John had Daniel 7 strongly in his mind when he wrote this, and Daniel 7 says that it is the saints - all believers who sit on these thrones as those who are united with Christ. So all saints, whether they are on earth or in heaven are seated with Christ in the heavenlies from AD 30 and on. That’s why the thrones are already present before the martyrdoms. In Daniel 7 the saints were persecuted for three and a half years (vv. 1-8,25). But verse 9 says, “I watched till thrones were put in place, and the Ancient of Days was seated.” And it goes on to describe myriads of God’s saints who sit in this court room and are involved in the judgment. It goes on to say, “But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom forever, even forever and ever” (v. 18). “... the court shall be seated. Then the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey Him” (vv. 26-27). So both the antecedent noun in chapter 19 and the background in Daniel 7 define the “them” as the saints - either those who were already in heaven, or all saints.

This is what Paul was referring to when he scolded the church in Corinth for not knowing how to judge cases. He said,

1Cor. 6:2 Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? 3 Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life?

C. judgment given to saints (v. 4c)

And that is what the third part of verse 4 affirms. It says, “and judgment was committed to them.” What was being judged? Daniel 7 says that the saints judged the beast and other demons (vv. 11-14), so Paul’s time for judging angels has finally come. And by the way, the saints will continue to judge fallen angels and bind them.

But it is more than just angels. The rest of Daniel 7 indicates that judgment

against ungodly governments was committed to them as well. I find it quite interesting that saints who are seated with Christ in the heavenlies render judgment on how long ungodly civil governments will be allowed to rule. To me this says something about the need for a united church. So Daniel 7 verse 26 says that the seated court was involved in taking away authority from the demonic kingdoms of this world and turning them into the kingdom of Christ. And verse 12 indicates that demons would be allowed to remain for an epoch and a time.

That's what saints in the Old Testament had been looking forward to. They thought it would be a tremendous privilege to live after He came and be part of turning the world to the Lord. Who wouldn't be privileged to fight in Messiah's armies?

D. The faithful saints killed before AD 70 (v. 4d-e) do not miss out on the kingdom era since:

But they all died before AD 70 came, so the rest of our paragraph examines why the faithful saints of old did not miss out on the kingdom era after all. Indeed, the New Testament martyrs who didn't quite make it to AD 70 did not miss out either. Where we are privileged to be on the front lines of Christ's army, they had several privileges as well.

they are resurrected (v. 4f) in the first resurrection (v. 5b)

The first privilege is that they got to get resurrected before we do. Verse 4 goes on to say,

I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded on account of the testimony of Jesus and on account of the Word of God, even those who had not worshiped the Beast or his image and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.

There is a lot of debate about whether there is one group here (martyrs) or two groups (martyrs and other saints), or whether there is one group made up of both martyrs and faithful ones. That's the way I tend to take it.

But how many got resurrected? Daniel 12:1 describes the war against Jerusalem that ended in AD 70, and says "At that time... many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake..." "Many" means that not all get raised then. That is another strong argument that there must be two resurrections. But which ones get raised in that "many"? Matthew Henry would say, only martyrs. That is possible. And that would mean that all the rest of the Old Testament dead would have to be raised when we are raised at the end of history. That is possible.

But “many” could also be a distinction from the smaller group that were raised in AD 30 in the firstfruits of that same resurrection. Firstfruits is few, the main harvest is many.

Or “many” could be in contrast to those raised at the end of history. There will be many in AD 70 and many at the end of history. I’m not dogmatic on which interpretation is true, though I tend to believe that 100% of all who were left over from the AD 30 resurrection were raised in AD 70, and the resurrection probably included all who died before AD 70. There is evidence in Paul’s epistles that seems to lean in that direction, and Matthew 24:31 sure seems to indicate that all the elect who died were gathered by the angels in AD 70 - all. So that is my tentative view.

they too (along with us) reign with Christ for the full millennium

But what would have been very encouraging to anyone risking martyrdom before AD 70 was that they would not lose out on experiencing the kingdom. Once raised, they would reign with Christ from heaven. So verse 10 says, “And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.” The regenerate reign from earth because they are seated with Christ in the heavenlies and therefore have real authority to advance the kingdom. But the resurrected saints also reign with Christ in the heavenlies for the full duration of the millennium.

those dying after AD 70 (whether elect or non-elect) must wait till after the millennium to get resurrected (v. 5a).

In contrast, those dying after AD 70 (whether elect or non-elect) must wait till after the millennium to get resurrected. The parenthetical part of verse 5 says, “(Now the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were finished.)” Again, it is emphasizing the fact that pre-70 people are not disadvantaged. God has equalized the benefits of people on each side of the cross. We have some things they didn’t have, and they had some things we don’t have, but both groups share in the kingdom.

so there is a special honor (“first”) accorded to pre-kingdom saints (v. 5b-6a)

Thus, the word “first” in “first resurrection” highlights the special honor accorded to pre-kingdom saints. They precede us in being glorified.

contrary to the claims of cults like Sadduceeism and Hymenaeism (cf. 2 Tim. 2:17-19), they too will live eternally (v. 6b)

And most importantly, they will be conscious and very active after death. There was a heresy circulating that claimed that once you are dead, that is the end of your existence. The Sadducees taught that. So if the kingdom didn't arrive before your death, you lost out completely. Paul wrote an entire chapter of 1 Corinthians in order to combat this error, saying in chapter 15, "...how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ... If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable" (vv. 12,15). Paul's teaching on heaven and on the resurrection assured people that even those who died prior to the full ushering in of the kingdom would still share in the kingdom. It's cool how God did this.

"Blessed and holy is the one having a part in the first resurrection; upon such the second death has no power." In other words, they are no less blessed than we are. They are no less the recipients of grace and eternal life than we are. That would have been a comfort. This paragraph would be a devastating apologetic against the Sadducees.

they too will be able to act as priests of God and of Christ from heaven (v. 6c)

And verse 6 assures people that death does not stop the ministry of those saints. It says, "but they will be priests of God and of Christ." Even in heaven "they will be priests of God and of Christ." We already saw some priestly ministry of saints in heaven in chapter 6, where the same souls who had been beheaded are praying on behalf of the earthly church. They weep and share in the earthly church's sorrows, but they also rejoice in the earthly churches triumphs. Everyone from Adam to the end of history will have the privilege of in some way advancing Christ's glorious kingdom. It is true that people near the end of the millennium will be enjoying earthly peace and prosperity and holiness that no generation prior to them had experienced on earth, but they won't experience aspects of the glorious fight that we experience. There is an equalizing of what every saint throughout history enjoys, and the whole body of Christ will actively share in the glories of Christ's victory.

They too will reign with Christ for a thousand years

And that includes reigning with Christ. Verse 6 ends, "and will reign with Him a thousand years." It's not just living saints who are seated with Christ

in the heavenlies. Dead saints reign with Him too. In fact, they will be reigning longer than we will. They have had a 2000 year head start on us. So you don't need to feel sorry for Old Testament saints and what they missed out on. They too share in the kingdom.

All of this would have brought great comfort to those who were looking forward to the coming of the kingdom

And all of this would have brought great comfort to the saints who had relatives who had died earlier. Like Moses, they may have been saddened that they couldn't enter Canaan but had to look at it from afar. But this passage says, "No. They are a part of the conquest."

So whether you take the thousand years as future to us and literal (which is one possibility that many Postmils hold to), or whether you take the thousand years as symbolic of the whole time from AD 70 to the end of history, it is an inescapable fact that the first resurrection happened in the first century. To say otherwise is a denial of the resurrection of Christ and the saints who rose with him. But it is also a denial of Acts 24:14-15 where Paul said this: "there is about to be a resurrection of the dead." If you hold to a future 1000 years, then this resurrection still preceded it and verse 5 is clear that "the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were finished." So this teaches a Postmillennial resurrection, not a Premillennial one.

VI. Conclusion - Four more applications

What difference does all this make? Let me make four applications. First, this passage makes us treat the physical realm as being extremely important to God. It was important enough for Jesus to receive a resurrected body. It was important enough to make the two barley harvest periods represent the first resurrection. It was important enough to guarantee a bodily resurrection at the end of history. It was important enough that even dead saints are very interested in continuing to pray for planet earth. It was important enough for them to desire to reign over the earth and to be involved in judgments on nations and be very interested in the course of history. They haven't escaped from the battles on earth. This planet has not been abandoned by God. Every square inch of this world is important to Jesus, will be redeemed by Jesus, and will one day glorify the Father. So that is the first application - the physical world is important to God and should be important to us. The resurrection proves it.

Second, this passage demonstrates the importance of the Old Testament

church. They were not simply an unimportant prelude to the real thing, but prepared the way and continue to be involved in the real thing. They are currently ministering as priests on your behalf. Their prayers are integral to the advancement of the kingdom, and as more and more millions of souls are added to heaven, the larger the army interceding for earth. Hebrews 12 makes clear that “you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect” (vv. 22-23). And by the way, “made perfect” means resurrected. That passage makes clear that there were already some resurrected saints in heaven. The saints resurrected in AD 30 were fully glorified. But in any case, Hebrews tells us not to disparage the church of the Old Testament times. We are one with them and they are one with us.

Third, the doctrine of heaven and of the resurrection gives Christians great boldness in the face of persecution. There is nothing unbelievers or demons can do to rob us of the kingdom.

Fourth, this passage shows the difference between true Christians and false Christians. Verse 4 defines Christians as willing to face martyrdom rather than deny Jesus. They are willing to face social pressures rather than worship the Beast. They are willing to forgo economic benefits by refusing to take the mark of the beast. True Christians are faithful to Christ against great risks. And the reason is that their Christianity is not merely an outward show, but is the power of God Himself working in us and through us. May we exhibit the same characteristics they did. Amen.