

URGENCY AND FINALITY: THE ESSENCE OF MILLENNIAL BELIEF

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Introduction

The thousand-year period mentioned six times in Rev 20:1-10 (vv. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7), usually referred to as the millennium, has created a minefield of diverse opinions. There are three main viewpoints: Amillennialism, Premillennialism (Historic and Dispensational), and Postmillennialism. Postmillennialism was popular in early nineteenth-century North American religion.¹ This view looks for a thousand-year golden age of Christian renewal during this present era *before* the Lord returns. On the other hand, Dispensationalism, which presently dominates the eschatological outlook of conservative North American Christians, is premillennial and anticipates the setting up of a millennial kingdom on earth *after* the Second Advent. The third interpretation, Amillennialism, identifies the millennium with the reign of the saints during the whole of the Christian era. Traditionally this meant that the saints reigned spiritually on earth (e.g., Augustine), but most modern Amillennialists understand it as a heavenly reign of the souls of the saints during the intermediate state.² Since the Christian era is prior to the Parousia, from the perspective of the timing of the Advent, Amillennialism is a subset of Postmillennialism. Apart from some important exegetical concerns, Postmillennialism and Dispensationalism have between them two particularly serious practical flaws. It is to a discussion of these defects that we now turn.

Two Tragic Flaws

Stanley Grenz appropriately gave his book about the debate among evangelicals concerning the millennium the title *The Millennial Maze*.³

¹Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 42-58. Postmillennialism is still active in the American Christian right; see Anson Shupe, "Christian Reconstructionism and the Angry Rhetoric of Neo-postmillennialism," in *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem*, ed. Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer (New York: Routledge, 1997), 195-206.

²Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 151.

³Ibid.

Certainly the differences between the various systems, which are themselves extremely complex, become unbelievably convoluted and intricate. Yet beyond the legitimate questions concerning hermeneutics, the role of Israel *vis-à-vis* the church, and the like, two considerations are very worthy of discussion. These two items are the sense of urgency and the sense of finality that attach to the NT doctrine of the Parousia. Any understanding of the millennium that compromises either of these two factors must be judged suspect.

Postmillennialism, Amillennialism, and Urgency

Postmillennialism is optimistic. It sees the world as improving, the Christian mission as succeeding, and the number of the saved as increasing. This present age gradually improves and blends into the millennial age, which is not necessarily a literal one-thousand-year period.⁴ During this golden age "evil in all its many forms eventually will be reduced to negligible proportions," and Christian morality will dominate all aspects of society.⁵ According to Loraine Boettner, this world continues during the millennium in its fallen state, hence "sin will not be eliminated but will be reduced to a minimum as the moral and spiritual environment of the earth becomes predominantly Christian."⁶ Postmillennialism is triumphalistic. During the millennium the righteous live long and prosper materially, and Christians control the world both religiously and politically. But it is still a world where good and evil coexist.

Postmillennialism interprets Rev 19:11-21 not as the Parousia, but as "a description of the [Christian] spiritual warfare which rages through the centuries."⁷ On Postmillennialist principles, vv. 17-21 depict the present era of the triumph of the gospel. The problem with this is that despite the claims of Revelation that Jesus is coming soon (3:11; 22:7, 12, 20), the Postmillennial view leaves "no actual 'second coming' of Jesus anywhere in the book."⁸ This is surely a serious flaw in this approach, but it is not its most damaging inadequacy. The worst aspect of Postmillennialism is its loss of the NT's sense of urgency. To quote Boettner again:

[N]o time limit can be set as to how much longer the process [of binding Satan] may have to be continued before it is crowned with success, nor

⁴Loraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964), 14.

⁵*Ibid.*, 14, 56.

⁶"Postmillennialism," *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977), 120-121.

⁷Boettner, *Millennium*, 32-33.

⁸J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation*, IVPNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 220.

how long the era of righteousness will prevail over the earth before the Lord returns. The nineteen centuries that have elapsed since the Christian era began may well indicate that several more centuries, perhaps even millenniums, may be required.⁹

The NT, not least the Apocalypse, certainly did not operate within this kind of time frame. The language of the NT is urgent and fraught with a sense of imminence: "He is near at the very gates" (Mark 13:29); "the night is far gone, the day is near" (Rom 13:12); "the appointed time has grown short . . . for the present form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor 7:29, 31); "the Lord is near" (Phil 4:5); "in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay" (Heb 10:37); "for the coming of the Lord is near" (Jas 5:8); "the Judge is standing at the door" (Jas 5:9); "the end of all things is near" (1 Pet 4:7); "for the time is near" (Rev 1:3); "surely I am coming soon" (Rev 3:11; 22:12, 20). Whatever the embarrassment such texts might provide for modern Christians, they cannot be ignored, nor can the Postmillennial picture of a gradual and lengthy process of a pre-Advent golden Christian age be harmonized with them.¹⁰

It was this consideration above all others that led early Seventh-day Adventist researchers to reject out of hand the then-popular Postmillennial interpretation. The first formal listing of Seventh-day Adventist beliefs in 1872 inveighs against Postmillennialism with the following credo: "We believe," the eighth statement intones, "that the doctrine of the world's conversion and temporal millennium is a fable of these last days, calculated to lull men into a state of carnal security, and cause them to be overtaken by the great day of the Lord as by a thief in the night; that the second coming of Christ is to precede, not follow, the millennium."¹¹ Postmillennialism clearly has difficulties in retaining any form of the urgency characteristic of the NT. This criticism also applies for Amillennialism in that its stress falls on the conversion and death of

⁹Boettner, *The Millennium*, 45.

¹⁰Modern scholarship has attempted to adjust these texts to the delay in their fulfillment: see T. F. Glasson, *The Second Advent: The Origin of the New Testament Doctrine*, 2d ed. (London: Epworth, 1947); Oscar Cullmann, "The Return of Jesus," in *The Early Church*, ed. A.J.B. Higgins, (London: SCM, 1956), 141-162; J.A.T. Robinson, *Jesus and His Coming*, 2d ed. (London: SCM, 1979); Anthony C. Thiselton, "The Parousia in Modern Theology: Some Questions and Comments," *TynBul* 27 (1976): 27-53; I. Howard Marshall, "The Parousia in the New Testament—and Today," in *Worship, Theology and Ministry in the Early Church: Essays in Honor of Ralph P. Martin*, ed. Michael J. Wilkins and Terence Paige (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), 194-211; James D. G. Dunn, "He Will Come Again," *Int* 51 (1997): 42-56.

¹¹*A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press, 1872).

believers and on the intermediate state. The return of Christ, let alone its imminence, is hardly necessary with this emphasis.

Dispensationalism and Finality

The Dispensational system of Premillennialism is complicated by its separation of the pretribulational rapture of the church from the Second Advent seven years later. At the time of the Advent, Jesus returns with his previously raptured saints and sets up his millennial kingdom on earth. The wicked do not survive Jesus' return, but Gentiles and Jews who were converted during the seven-year post-rapture tribulation do become subjects of the millennial kingdom along with a spiritually revived nation of Israel. Thus the millennial age contains a diverse constituency: first, there are resurrected and translated Christians who return to earth with Christ at the Second Advent seven years after their rapture to heaven; second, there are the OT saints who are resurrected at the Second Advent; third, there are those who were martyred during the tribulation whom Jesus raises at the Advent; fourth, there are the righteous Jews and Gentiles from the tribulation who simply cross over into the millennium while still in their mortal state.

Those who enter the millennial golden age while in their mortal state continue to have children. Despite the idyllic conditions of the millennial age, many of these children resist the gospel and form the final rebellion at the end of the thousand-year reign of Christ. It is this picture of immortal resurrected saints coexisting with righteous and wicked mortals that led Boettner to call the premillennial understanding of the millennium "a mongrel kingdom."¹² She finds this mingling of the mortal and immortal so "unreal and impossible" that she wonders "how anyone can take it seriously."¹³ Certainly the NT picture after the Advent of Jesus is not one of continuing mortal life: "and then the end will come" (Matt 24:14); "then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power" (1 Cor 15:24); "the end of all things is at hand" (1 Pet 4:7). The Advent does not introduce a modified version of this world, but a totally different world order.

Early Seventh-day Adventist expositors met Futurism in the form of a movement called "the Age to Come."¹⁴ Their major concern was that an earthly millennium provided a second chance of salvation. J. H. Waggoner's objection to "the Age to Come" is typical of early Adventists:

¹²"Postmillennialism," in *Meaning of the Millennium*, 121.

¹³"Historic Premillennialism: A Postmillennial Response," in *Meaning of the Millennium*, 49.

¹⁴Futurism or Dispensational Premillennialism applies the restoration prophecies of the OT and most of the predictions of the NT to a literal Israel in the future millennium after the rapture of the church.

"I have never yet heard of any method by which *condemned probationers* of this age may be *shoved over* and given a new and different probation in another age."¹⁵ Of course this criticism does not altogether apply to modern Dispensationalism since only the righteous remnant of Jews and Gentiles from the tribulation transfer into the millennial age.

Be this as it may, the Second Advent in Dispensational thought is hardly, from a salvific perspective, a final event. Indeed, it is not, despite the disclaimers of adherents, a decisive event. Children born during the millennium are born into a fallen world; sin still occurs, and with some millennial denizens remaining in their mortal state, death still continues. The tribulation remnant of Israel dominates in millennial society, and even the temple system is restored in Jerusalem.¹⁶ The Advent, then, is not the end; and even though the author has walked onto the stage, contrary to C. S. Lewis's formula, the play is far from over.¹⁷ It is this lack of finality, the failure to see the Parousia as introducing a fundamental break with the past, that is Dispensationalism's greatest flaw. Any interpretation of the millennium that compromises the sense of urgency and finality inherent in the NT's teaching of the return of Jesus must be set aside. How then should we interpret the key passage of Rev 20? Obviously a valid interpretation will agree with the rest of the NT.

A major claim of Amillennialism is that its position harmonizes with the rest of the NT. Outside of Rev 20, the NT has the events of the Second Advent, resurrection, judgment, and new earth occurring in immediate succession without any intervening thousand years. In this Amillennialism is correct, but whether its interpretation of Rev 20 does justice to the text is another question. Furthermore, the rest of the NT may not be as far removed from a more straightforward reading of Rev 20 as Amillennialists infer. Certainly many of the elements of a millennial schema are found outside the Apocalypse.

Searching for the Millennial Pieces in Paul

Certain texts in the Pauline corpus provide some key elements in any millennial outline. Several of these are in his earliest writings.

¹⁵J. H. Waggoner, *Refutation of the Doctrine Called The Age to Come: Embracing a Critical Examination of the Temporal Millennium—the Return of the Jews—Time and Manner of the Establishment of the Kingdom of God—the Day of the Lord—and the Promises to Israel*, 2d rev. ed. (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press, 1872), 155.

¹⁶Ray E. Baughman, *The Kingdom of God Visualized* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 226-235.

¹⁷C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1952), 63.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

J. F. Walvoord considers 1 Thess 4:5 as "probably the most important passage dealing with the rapture in the New Testament."¹⁸ There is no denying that, but to dissociate the events here depicted by Paul from the Second Advent, as Walvoord's Dispensationalism attempts to do, is exegetically indefensible. In 1 Thess 4:13-18 Paul is allaying the fears of the Thessalonians concerning some of their number who had recently died. To achieve this he explains the timing and sequence of events at the return of Jesus. It is hard to believe that Paul had not conveyed some teaching about the resurrection, for it is so central to his theology. Nevertheless, the death of some members of the community would have brought forth a series of doubts and queries. It would appear that Paul had not previously clarified the temporal association between the Second Advent and the resurrection of the saints. Paul is now concerned to demonstrate that the deceased Christians will in no way be disadvantaged *vis-à-vis* the living on the day of the Lord's return. He does this by carefully stating four facts about the resurrection of believers at the Second Advent.

First, with an emphatic negative subjunctive (οὐ μὴ φθάσωμεν), he assures the Thessalonians that those who remain alive at the time of Jesus' return will certainly not meet the Lord ahead of those who have died in Christ (v. 15c). Second, he states how this is so by explaining that prior to the living meeting the Lord, the dead believers shall arise first (οἱ νεκροὶ ἐν Χριστῷ ἀναστήσονται πρῶτον, v. 16c).¹⁹ The neuter adjective (used adverbially) πρῶτον clarifies the sequence relative to those who remain alive at the Advent. The dead are raised before anything happens to the living. Third, this is clear from the associated adverb, ἔπειτα, that immediately follows (v. 17a). The order of events follows a strict succession (that is, "first . . . then").²⁰ Not until the dead are resurrected are the living caught up to meet the Lord in the air.²¹ Fourth, lest any get the impression that only the living are caught up while the recently raised believers watch from below, Paul qualifies his next

¹⁸John F. Walvoord, "Posttribulationism Today, Part VIII: The Comforting Hope of 1 Thessalonians 4," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 133 (1976): 299.

¹⁹Ἀναστήσονται is a future middle used intransitively.

²⁰The sequence is definitely temporal, given the concerns of the Thessalonians that Paul is addressing. In support see C. A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 174; F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, WBC 45 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 101. To the contrary, see Ernest Best, *The 1st and 2nd Epistles to the Thessalonians*, Harper's New Testament Commentary Series (London: A & C Black, 1972), 197.

²¹This is contrary to the Jewish belief that those who survive to the end are more blessed than the deceased (see 2 Esdr. 13:24).

preposition with an important adverb, namely, ἅμα σὺν (17a).²² As F. F. Bruce notes, the seemingly redundant ἅμα strengthens the following σὺν.²³ The resurrected meet the Lord in the air “simultaneously with” the living.²⁴ The saints’ meeting of the Lord is thus a communal event. The deceased are neither disadvantaged nor advantaged at the Advent as regards the living—it is a corporate and equitable experience.

Once all the saints (resurrected dead and transformed living) are caught up to meet the Lord, where do they go? One suggestion is that ἀπάντησις (v. 17b) is a technical Hellenistic term for a group going out to meet a visiting dignitary and then accompanying him to the city. From this it is suggested that the raptured saints meet the Lord in the air and then escort him to earth.²⁵ Bruce is reserved about this interpretation, seeing nothing in the context that “demands” it.²⁶ C. A. Wanamaker goes further and feels this interpretation is “unlikely.”²⁷ The rest of the imagery (clouds, being caught up), Wanamaker argues “are indicative of an assumption to heaven of the people who belong to Christ.”²⁸

Furthermore, in Wanamaker’s opinion, Paul’s added assurance, καὶ οὕτως πάντοτε σὺν κυρίῳ ἐσόμεθα (17c), “suggests that both dead and living Christians will return to heaven with the Lord.”²⁹ A further clue that this is so is provided by the seeming odd choice of verb in v. 14. After ἀνέστη at the beginning of the sentence, one would expect the following balancing clause to use the same verb, that is, “since we believe that Jesus died and *arose* [from the dead], so God will also *raise*.” Instead, what we have is “so God will also *bring* (ἄξει).” The future of ἄγω seems at first sight an unusual verb in this context; it is certainly unexpected. Why did Paul use it?

It surely does not mean that God will bring the souls of departed Christians with Jesus at the Advent.³⁰ That is totally contrary to the context,

²² Ἄμα is an improper preposition. It is used here adverbially (see C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953], 82).

²³Bruce, 102.

²⁴Best, 198.

²⁵I. Howard Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 131.

²⁶Bruce, 103.

²⁷Wanamaker, 175.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰C. J. Ellicott, *Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* (reprinted from the edition of 1861; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 62; D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles: A Call to Readiness* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), 194.

which is about the resurrection of the dead, not the reuniting of the body with an immortal soul. Many have suggested that it refers to God bringing Christians from the grave or bringing them in associated glory with Jesus at the Advent.³¹ The *σὺν αὐτῷ*, which clearly goes with *ἄξει*, does not encourage either of these options, since the clause *ἄξει σὺν αὐτῷ* conveys the idea of accompanying Jesus as he transfers from one place to another.³² Wanamaker is one commentator who is sensitive to this and retains the natural meaning of the words *ἄξει σὺν αὐτῷ*. He comments, "To the extent that the place of Christ is with God in heaven, the people of God are to be brought to the place of God, namely, heaven. Thus, *ἄξει* ("will bring") does not refer to the dead in Christ being brought with him from the grave, but to their being brought with him to heaven at the Parousia. They will be assumed to heaven like those who remain alive until the coming of Jesus."³³ Thus Paul comforts the Thessalonians that God will bring those who died as Christians *to* (not *from*) heaven with Jesus.³⁴

Our study of 1 Thess 4:13-18 has established two crucial elements in the sequence of events associated with the Advent. First, that the dead in Christ are resurrected at the Advent (cf. 1 Cor 15:23, 50-58). And second, that the resurrected saints and the living believers are taken together to heaven at the Second Advent. This latter conclusion is echoed in John's Gospel, where Jesus assures his disciples that where he is they will be also (John 12:26; 13:36; 14:3-4); and where he is going is heaven (7:34, 36; 8:14, 21). If this is Paul's understanding of the hope of those who die in Christ, what of those outside of Christ? To answer this we turn to 2 Thessalonians.

2 Thessalonians 1:5-10

Paul assures a suffering (*πάσχετε*, v. 5b) community that the tribulations they are enduring will be turned back onto their persecutors at the coming of the Lord Jesus—since, as he says, it is a righteous act for God to repay the afflictors with the same afflictions with which they brutalize others (*εἰπερ δίκαιον παρὰ θεῷ ἀνταποδοῦναι τοῖς θλιβουσιν ὑμᾶς θλίψιν*, v. 6). The agent of the vengeance, however, is Jesus at his coming (*ἐν τῇ ἀποκαλύψει*

³¹Marshall, 123; Bruce, 97.

³²Paul Ellingworth, "Which Way Are We Going? A Verb Movement, Especially in 1 Thess. 4:14b," *BT* 25, (1974): 426-431.

³³Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 170. B. Rigaux comments, "Paul does not mean that God will bring the dead back from heaven with Jesus, but that God will lead them to heaven with him" (quoted in Ellingworth, "Which Way Are We Going?" 428).

³⁴The qualification *διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ* goes with the participle *τοὺς κοιμηθέντας* and not with the finite verb *ἄξει* (*pace* NRSV and Best, 189). Accordingly, we conclude that Paul is referring specifically to the Christian dead.

τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ . . . διδόντος ἐκδίκησιν, vv. 7b, 8a).³⁵ Those punished are described as not knowing God and not obeying the gospel. The penalty is eternal destruction (ὄλεθρον αἰώνιον, v. 9a) from the presence of the Lord, which occurs when he comes (ὅταν ἔλθῃ, v. 10a). There is, as Bruce observes, “a strong implication of finality” about this penalty.³⁶ On that day (ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ) of Jesus’ return the picture is one of equitable recompense: the persecuted saints are glorified (ἐνδοξασθῆναι ἐν τοῖς ἁγίοις αὐτοῦ, v. 10a), and the disobedient persecutors are destroyed.

From 2 Thess 1:5-10 certain important pieces about the Advent come together. First, when the Lord returns, his people are suffering abuse. Second, he returns to bring them relief (ἄνεσιν v. 7a) and to be glorified in them (v. 10a). Third, at the Second Advent the saints are ushered into the kingdom of God (v. 5b), that is, into the resurrection age.³⁷ Fourth, at this time the Lord Jesus wreaks destructive vengeance on those who oppress the saints and reject the message of the gospel (vv. 6-9).³⁸ When these four conclusions are added to the two we gained from our analysis of 1 Thess 4:13-18, we have considerable background data to assist us in our examination of Rev 20:1-10.

The Millennial Text: Revelation 20:1-10

The analysis of the Thessalonian texts gives strong support to a major contention of J. Webb Mealy in his monograph on this passage. Mealy maintains “that John had clearly, repeatedly and emphatically prophesied to his readers that no one [i.e. of the unbelievers] on earth would be exempt from this fatal judgment which was to attend the parousia of Christ.”³⁹ The language of Rev 19:17-21 (as well as 2 Thess 1:5-10) endorses this, as the list of those whose flesh becomes carrion for birds at the Advent is exhaustive. In addition, the statement that “the rest were slain by the sword” (καὶ οἱ λοιποὶ ἀπεκτάνθησαν ἐν τῇ ρομφαίᾳ, v. 21) is inclusive.⁴⁰

³⁵The genitive διδόντος clearly goes back to τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ.

³⁶Bruce, 152.

³⁷“The Kingdom of God here, as in 1 Thess 2:12 . . . , is identical with ‘that age,’ in which the children of God will enjoy resurrection life” (Bruce, 149).

³⁸There is no reason for taking this destruction in a metaphorical rather than in a literal sense (*pace* Wanamaker, 228-229).

³⁹J. Webb Mealy, *After the Thousand Years: Resurrection and Judgment in Revelation 20*, Journal for the Study of New Testament Supplement Series 70 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 237, cf. 160.

⁴⁰A contrary view is taken by G. B. Caird, who says v. 3 “plainly implies that throughout the *thousand years* there will be a considerable world population which would otherwise be susceptible to the attacks of Satan” (*The Revelation of St John the Divine*, 2d ed., Harper’s New Testament Commentary Series [London: A & C Black, 1984], 251).

As we have seen, Postmillennialists interpret Rev 19:17-21 as the present era of the triumph of the gospel. Amillennialists, on the other hand, see 19:17-21 as the Second Advent, climaxing in judgment the sixth of seven parallel sequences in the book of Revelation. In this view Rev 20 does not follow chapter 19 chronologically, but "with Revelation 20 [:1-10] we return to the beginning of our present dispensation."⁴¹ However, as elsewhere in Revelation, the repeated εἶδον in 19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4, 11, 12; 21:1, 2, 22 appears to telegraph sequential events.⁴² From this we conclude that 19:17-21 is referring to the Second Advent, and that 20:1-6 follows chronologically. If this is the case, then the binding and incarceration of Satan occurs as a result of the Advent of Christ. This is not a relative binding, but a total confinement that renders the hallmark activity of the devil—the deception of the nations (12:9; 13:14; 18:23; 19:20)—absolutely impossible.⁴³

At the Parousia the rejectors of grace are destroyed and the forces of evil and their leader are confined to their subterranean barracks. This is an important point that John is making, namely, that the Parousia brings a distinct break with the present age. Both Postmillennialism and Dispensationalism fail here. Dispensationalism, though placing the millennium after the Parousia, is guilty of the same mingling of good and evil as Postmillennialism.

If the followers of the beast are destroyed at the Advent, what of the faithful who resisted the beast's power? They are raised to life (Rev 20:4). That this is the same resurrection that Paul defended (1 Thess 4:13-18; 1 Cor 15:51-53) is clear from the language of the text. Since bodily resurrection is what is denied to the rest of the dead in Rev 20:5 (ἐζήσαν), obviously what is granted to those who overcame the beast must also be bodily resurrection (v.4b, ἐζήσαν).⁴⁴ But if this is the first resurrection,

⁴¹William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation*, British ed. (London: Tyndale, 1940), 184; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 972, 980-981.

⁴²Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 361.

⁴³There is no "incongruity" between the destruction of the nations (19:17-21) and the binding of Satan so that he can no longer deceive the nations. It is both acts—the destruction of the nations and the binding of Satan—that make continued deception impossible (*pace* Beale, 983).

⁴⁴The argument is Mealy's (*After the Thousand Years*, 22). Amillennialists, unconvincingly to my mind, are obliged to interpret the first resurrection as referring to the believer's baptism and/or conversion, or even the resurrection of Christ. The *Westminster Theological Journal* has been a persistent defender of the Amillennial view. See Norman Shepherd, "The Resurrections of Revelation 20," *WTJ* 37 (1974-75): 34-43; Meredith G. Kline, "The First Resurrection," *WTJ* 37 (1974-75): 366-375; idem, "The First Resurrection: A

it falls short of the inclusive language of Paul—those who had been beheaded and had not worshiped the beast hardly embraces all those included in Paul's "the dead in Christ." G. E. Ladd suggests that those seated on the thrones (v. 4a) refer to the larger Christian community who died naturally.⁴⁵ It is more likely that the two descriptions refer to the same group.⁴⁶ Rather than attempting to find two groups depicted here, it is better to understand that what is said of the Christian martyrs is true for every persevering and faithful Christian (cf. Rev 2:7).⁴⁷

Those included in this resurrection to immortal life, over whom the second death has no power (Rev 20:6), reign with Christ for a thousand years. There is no reason to think that this reign is anywhere other than in the same domain we concluded from our study of 1 Thess 4:13-18, namely, in heaven. Michel Gourgues has argued persuasively for such an interpretation: "It is then quite conceivable that, after reporting what is happening on earth (20:1-3: chaining of the dragon for a thousand years), the author relates afterwards what is going on in heaven (20:4-6: the thousand-year reign) of the ones who remained faithful."⁴⁸

The relating of Rev 20:4-6 to 1 Thess 4:13-18 unites what Dispensational exegetes separate.⁴⁹ That is, Dispensationalists relate 1 Thess 4:13-18 to the rapture of the church before a seven-year tribulation, but limit Rev 20:4-6 to the Advent of Christ after this tribulation for the resurrection of OT and tribulation saints. The NT gives little or no warrant for detaching the translation of the living believers, the resurrection of *all* the dead saints, and the commencement of the millennium from the Second Advent. The case for

Reaffirmation," *WJT* 39 (1976-77): 110-119 [Replying to J. Ramsey Michaels, "The First Resurrection: A Response," *WJT* 39 (1976-77): 100-109]; P. E. Hughes, "The First Resurrection: Another Interpretation," *WJT* 39 (1976-77): 315-318; Paul A. Rainbow, "Millennium as Metaphor in John's Apocalypse," *WTJ* 58 (1996): 209-221.

⁴⁵G. E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 83.

⁴⁶Caird, 252. Aune limits the first resurrection to the martyrs, 1104.

⁴⁷See J. M. Sweet, *Revelation*, Pelican Commentary Series (London: SCM, 1979), 288.

⁴⁸Michel Gourgues, "The Thousand-Year Reign (Rev 20:16): Terrestrial or Celestial?" *CBQ* 47 (1985): 681. His reasons for this interpretation have varying force: (i) "throne(s)" in Revelation refers to heavenly thrones; (ii) those who reign with Christ (20:4) are the same group as is seen in heaven (15:1-2); (iii) Rev 3:21 depicts the same group in heaven; (iv) Rev 6:9 parallels 20:4 and places the victorious in heaven; (v) alternation between earth (20:1-3) and heaven (20:4) is typical of Revelation.

⁴⁹"[T]ribulation saints are mentioned in Revelation 20:4, the church, the body of Christ, is not included in these resurrections" (John F. Walvoord, "Posttribulationism Today, Part III: Semiclassic Posttribulationist Interpretation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132 [1975]: 215).

this has been persuasively presented by G. E. Ladd.⁵⁰ He concludes “that the Rapture of the church and the Resurrection of the dead in Christ will take place at His glorious coming.”⁵¹ Though Ladd argues against Dispensationalism, preferring the Historical Premillennial position, he still has a physical millennium on earth.⁵² Indeed, the one element that Historic Premillennialism, Postmillennialism, Amillennialism, and Dispensationalism have in common is that the millennium occurs on earth—a position we have challenged.⁵³

Dispensationalism argues for a pretribulational rapture of the Christians to heaven seven years before the Second Advent and the commencement of the millennium, on the basis of John 14:1-3; 1 Cor 15:51-52; and 1 Thess 4:13-18. Historic Premillennialism, on the other hand, on the basis that παρουσία, ἐπιφάνεια, and ἀποκάλυψις are synonymous terms, defends the concurrence of the rapture/resurrection, the Second Advent and the start of the millennium—that is, posttribulation. Both Dispensationalism’s arguments for the rapture of translated and resurrected saints (though excluding OT saints) to heaven, and Historic Premillennialism’s insistence that the Advent is a single event have persuasive arguments in their favor, but the two positions are irreconcilable as they stand.

A resolution is to accept that the saints do go to heaven at the rapture (as Dispensationalism argues), and that the Second Advent is a single event with no seven-year intervening period between the rapture and the first resurrection (as Historic Premillennialism maintains). This would then mean the millennium is centered in heaven. What is the advantage of taking such a view? It avoids making the Advent either a far-off event as per Postmillennialism, or an anticlimax as per Dispensationalism. By accepting the two stresses—a rapture to heaven and a unified Advent—that Dispensationalism and Historic Premillennialism affirm, we conclude that the millennium is in heaven. This position preserves the urgency and the finality of the Advent.

One objection to this view is that “it creates a pointless anticlimax to imagine the resurrected saints (=the New Jerusalem) hovering in the stratosphere for a thousand years after the dramatic appearance of Christ and his heavenly armies in 19.11-14, and his equally dramatic victory over the

⁵⁰Ladd, *Blessed Hope*, 61-88.

⁵¹Ibid., 71.

⁵²G. E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 161-183.

⁵³Amillennialists, though identifying the millennium with the Christian age, do have the souls of the deceased Christians reigning with Christ in heaven during the so-called “intermediate state.” See Beale, 998-999.

pretended possessors of the earth in 19.15-21."⁵⁴ Why the placing of the millennium on earth—even if the non-Christians are annihilated at the Parousia as Mealy reasonably proposes—is less of an anticlimax is not immediately obvious. On either view, whether the saints live a thousand years on earth or in heaven, the final cleansing and renewal come at the end of the millennium. Location is not the major consideration here. What is crucial is that the Second Advent ends the gospel era and does not usher in a motley society of saved and unsaved citizens.

Where then do the persons who rebel against the people of God at the end of the millennium come from (Rev 20:7-10)? The view of Mealy again provides a reasonable solution. He argues that these are the rest of the dead; the unfaithful resurrected at the end of the millennium.⁵⁵ In G. K. Beale's opinion this is "the most unusual and striking part of the thesis."⁵⁶ If the unbelievers were destroyed at the Advent (2 Thess 1:5-10; Rev 19:17-21), why are they resurrected to undergo the same fate again? Mealy suggests it is to demonstrate that the unfaithful remain unrepentant; the passage of time has not influenced the heart. The unrepentant are judged at the Parousia (Rev 20:4-5, 11-12), and then again at the second resurrection (20:7-10, 13-15).⁵⁷ The millennium is, so to speak, their jail sentence, and on release they quickly reoffend. In the final analysis it may simply be like Luke 16:19-31—a dramatic way of asserting that there is one of two possible destinies awaiting all of earth's inhabitants.

Conclusion

In our view the sequence of events at the end according to Rev 20 is as follows:

1. Jesus returns to resurrect the dead saints of all ages and to take them back with the transformed living to be with him in heaven (1 Thess 4:13-18; Rev 20:4b).
2. The world is in its usual state of turmoil at the time of the Advent (2 Thess 1:5-10; Rev 20:4b).
3. At the Advent the unrepentant are destroyed and the forces of evil are confined to their abode (2 Thess 1:5-10; Rev 19:11-20:1-3).
4. Following the millennium, Jesus with the saints returns to restore

⁵⁴Mealy, 25.

⁵⁵Ibid., 125; Cf. Aune, 1090.

⁵⁶Greg K. Beale, "Review Article: J. W. Mealy, *After the Thousand Years*," *EvQ* 66 (1994): 233.

⁵⁷Mealy, 240-241; 247-248.

the earth. The unrepentant dead are raised at this time, but they continue their revolt against God and his Christ (Rev 20:7-10).

5. The forces of evil are now irreversibly destroyed (Rev 20:10, 14-15).

Obviously this is a form of Premillennialism, but it is not the same as Historic Premillennialism, and it is also quite distinct from Dispensationalism. This present version of Premillennialism is not one against which the charge can be made that believers are raised to live on an earth "which is still groaning because of the presence of sin, rebellion and death."⁵⁸ A sense of imminence or urgency is preserved, but not in the extreme form of Dispensationalism's immediacy of an any-moment sudden rapture of the church. Properly nuanced, Premillennialism gives no warrant for the accusation of being indifferent to mission.⁵⁹ Premillennial imminence should give an urgent timbre to the Epistle to the Hebrews' frequent call, "Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion" (3:7-8, 15; 4:7).

Furthermore, even though this form of Premillennialism also looks for God's restored earth in the future, it does not support the attitude that humans can trash the present one. Eschatology acts like a reference point lining up how Christians should behave now. It would be hypocritical to claim to be looking for God's future righteous reign, and be indifferent to justice now. The Advent hope joins the past Christ event to form the two polarities within which Christians pursue their journey. Premillennialism, as set forth here, does not repeat the folly of the men in Tolkien's *Hobbit*, who sang of the return of the dwarf-kings, Thrór and Thráin, and the restoration of their previous prosperity, "but this pleasant legend did not much affect their daily business."⁶⁰ The view that at the Advent all the unrepentant are destroyed, and that all the believers are raised or translated to be with their Lord maintains the twin NT pillars of urgency and finality. These two elements are the litmus test for the cogency of any millennial belief.

⁵⁸Anthony A. Hoekema, "Historic Premillennialism: An Amillennial Response," in *Meaning of the Millennium*, 59.

⁵⁹Hoekema, "Amillennialism," in *Meaning of the Millennium*, 179.

⁶⁰J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit or There and Back Again*, 4th ed. (London: HarperCollins, 1978), 186.