

THE FIRST RESURRECTION IN REVELATION 20

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Revelation 20 is often seen as the most significant biblical passage in the debate over the timing and nature of the millennium. In verses 4–6, John describes individuals who “came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years” (v. 4) and calls this coming to life “the first resurrection” (v. 5). According to premillennialism, this passage provides compelling evidence for two physical resurrections separated by a thousand years—a resurrection of the righteous at the Second Coming (vv. 4–6) and a resurrection of the wicked after the millennial reign of Christ (vv. 11–15). In contrast, amillennialists argue that the first resurrection is not physical but spiritual, referring to either (a) the regeneration of the believer or (b) the believer’s entrance into heaven at the point of death. But a careful evaluation of the amillennial arguments for these views demonstrates that the first resurrection cannot be spiritual in nature and therefore must refer to the first of two physical resurrections in Revelation 20, just as premillennialism teaches.

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Introduction

As noted in a previous article, Revelation 20 has long been considered the clearest and most convincing argument for the eschatology of premillennialism.¹ But in recent years, an increasing number of amillennial voices have insisted that Revelation 20 actually provides more compelling evidence for their own view. For example, Sam Storms cites Revelation 20 as “a strong and immovable support for the amillennial perspective;”² Kim Riddlebarger describes it as “the weak link in any form of premillennialism,”³ and Dean Davis argues that “the amillennial approach gives us a

¹ Matt Waymeyer, “The Binding of Satan in Revelation 20,” *MSJ* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 19.

² Sam Storms, *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2013), 137.

³ Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times*, expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 235. According to Riddlebarger, Revelation 20 is “the most important biblical passage dealing with the subject of the millennium” (223).

remarkably clear, consistent, and exegetically natural interpretation of this notoriously challenging text.”⁴

One of the most significant issues in Revelation 20 involves the nature of the “first resurrection” in verses 4–6.⁵ This resurrection has been described as one of the most hotly disputed issues in all of Scripture⁶ and “the focal point of the eschatological hostilities which divide premillennialists from amillennialists.”⁷ Because this resurrection is described as “first”—and because John depicts the rest of the dead coming to life after the thousand years (v. 5a)—premillennialists believe Revelation 20 foresees two physical resurrections separated by the millennial reign of Christ. These two resurrections are often considered not only a “major exegetical problem for amillennialism,”⁸ but also “the linchpin of the premillennial position.”⁹

In response, amillennialists reject this idea of two physical resurrections separated by a thousand years, insisting instead that the first resurrection is a *spiritual* resurrection that takes place throughout the present age. More specifically, amillennialists interpret the first resurrection as either (a) the regeneration of believers at the point of conversion or (b) the entrance of believers into life in heaven at the point of death. In doing so, amillennialists argue for a single, physical resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked when Jesus returns at the end of the age.

The purpose of this article is to reexamine this key passage in the millennial debate, with a focus on the amillennial interpretation of the first resurrection. After setting forth the premillennial argument from Revelation 20:4–6, this study will carefully evaluate the amillennial view that the first resurrection is spiritual in nature. It will then examine the two specific amillennial views on the identity of this spiritual resurrection. In the process, this article will demonstrate that the amillennial arguments for a spiritual resurrection in Revelation 20:4–6 fall short, and therefore that this passage provides compelling evidence for the eschatology of premillennialism.

⁴ Dean Davis, *The High King of Heaven: Discovering the Master Keys to the Great End Time Debate* (Enumclaw, WA: WinePress Publishing, 2014), 475. According to Davis, “Premillennial interpretations of Revelation 20 shatter the simplicity, vitiate the power, and becloud the glory of NT eschatology, thereby plunging Christ’s Church into needless confusion and controversy. Meanwhile, the amillennial interpretation achieves the exact opposite: It wonderfully opens up the meaning of the text itself, further illumines the structure and message of the book as a whole, harmonizes perfectly with the rest of NT theology...and prepares, strengthens, and encourages Christ’s pilgrim Church with a simple, powerful, and unspeakably majestic vision of the Consummation of all things at the end of the age” (501–2).

⁵ Other key exegetical issues include the timing of Satan’s binding in verses 1–3, the duration of the thousand years in verses 1–6, and the chronology of John’s visions in Revelation 19–20. For a brief discussion of these issues, see Matt Waymeyer, “What About Revelation 20?,” in *Christ’s Prophetic Plans: A Futuristic Premillennial Primer*, eds. John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 123–40. For an in-depth analysis of the binding of Satan, see Waymeyer, “The Binding of Satan in Revelation 20,” 19–46.

⁶ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 242.

⁷ Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 451.

⁸ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1985), 1214.

⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 97.

The Premillennial View of the First Resurrection

In Revelation 20:4–6, the apostle John continues his description of the thousand years, focusing on the resurrection and millennial reign of those who are martyred for their faith in Christ:

Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and 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 came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years (Rev 20:4–6).

The most highly debated part of this passage concerns the meaning of the phrase “they came to life” (ἐζήσαν) in verse 4¹⁰ and the nature of the “first resurrection” (ἡ ἀνάστασις ἡ πρώτη) in verse 5.¹¹ According to premillennialism, this “first resurrection” is the first of two physical resurrections in Revelation 20, which are separated by a thousand years. The first is a resurrection of the righteous, the faithful believers who are martyred during the Tribulation (v. 4), whereas the second is a resurrection of the wicked, “the rest of the dead” who “did not come to life until the thousand years were completed” (v. 5). Those raised in the first resurrection reign with Christ for a thousand years (v. 4), and those raised in the second resurrection come before the throne of final judgment after the millennium (vv. 11–15). As premillennialist John Walvoord writes:

The sharp contrast in the passage is between those who are raised at the beginning of the thousand years and those who are raised at the end. Both are physical resurrections, but those who are raised at the beginning of the Millennium, designated as the “first resurrection,” are contrasted to those who “come to life” at

¹⁰ The common translation “they came to life” in verse 4 interprets ἐζήσαν as an ingressive aorist. Hughes argues that the aorist tense of ζῶω (ἐζήσαν) is *constative* (“they lived”) rather than *ingressive* (“they came to life”) (James A. Hughes, “Revelation 20:4–6 and the Question of the Millennium,” *WTJ* 35, no. 3 [Spring 1973]: 290–92), but his arguments were sufficiently refuted by Jack S. Deere (“Premillennialism in Revelation 20:4–6,” *BSac* 135, no. 537 [Jan 1978]: 66–67). Most amillennialists now agree with Deere, including G. K. Beale who writes that “it is better to view it as ingressive on analogy with [Rev] 2:8 and 13:14, as well as Luke 15:32 and Rom. 14:9” (G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999], 1000).

¹¹ The first part of Rev 20:5 (“The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed”) is parenthetical. Therefore, when John refers to the “first resurrection” in the next part of verse 5, he is pointing back to the coming to life described at the end of verse 4. This appears to be the general consensus on both sides of the millennial debate.

the end of the Millennium, who face judgment according to Revelation 20:11–15.¹²

As Robert Saucy explains, this contrast between the two physical resurrections has significant implications for the millennial debate:

The mention of two resurrections separated by a period of a thousand years, along with the reference to the participants in the first resurrection as reigning with Christ, clearly points to a millennial period after the coming of Christ, when the first resurrection occurs.¹³

In this way, the physical nature of the “first resurrection” provides convincing support for the concept of a millennial kingdom between the present age and the eternal state and therefore presents a difficult problem for amillennialism.

The Premillennial Argument

The primary reason the “first resurrection” in Revelation 20 must refer to a physical resurrection concerns the terminology itself. The word “resurrection” (ἀνάστασις) is used almost exclusively in the New Testament to refer to “the elimination of the condition of physical death through bodily resurrection.”¹⁴ The word is used 41 times in the New Testament, and in 38 out of its 39 uses outside of Revelation 20, it refers to a physical resurrection. The lone exception is its metaphorical use in Luke 2:34 where it cannot refer to bodily resurrection because physical death is absent from the immediate context.¹⁵

This alone does not prove that ἀνάστασις refers to a physical resurrection in Revelation 20—for it is possible that John is using this word in a unique way—but it does place a heavy burden of proof on those who say otherwise. Physical resurrection is clearly the concept that would have immediately arisen in the minds of John’s

¹² John F. Walvoord, “The Theological Significance of Revelation 20:1–6,” in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, eds. Stanley D. Toussaint and Charles H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 236.

¹³ Robert L. Saucy, *Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1993), 276. The closest and most reasonable antecedent of “they” in the verb “they sat” (ἐκάθισαν) in Rev 20:4 is “the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean” from Rev 19:14, that is, the people of God who accompany Christ at His return (David J. MacLeod, “The Fourth ‘Last Thing’: The Millennial Kingdom of Christ (Rev. 20:4–6),” *BSac* 157, no. 625 [Jan 2000]: 55; Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1995], 414). But as Craig Blaising observes, “The identity of the occupants of these thrones is not crucial to resolving the millennial question” (Craig A. Blaising, “Premillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1999], 221).

¹⁴ Blaising, “Premillennialism,” 224.

¹⁵ *BDAG*, 71–72; Frederick William Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 28; Deere, “Premillennialism in Revelation 20:4–6,” 71; Blaising, “Premillennialism,” 224; William J. Webb, “Revelation 20: Exegetical Considerations,” *The Baptist Review of Theology* 4, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 36; A. J. Gordon, “The First Resurrection,” in *Premillennial Essays*, ed. Nathaniel West (Minneapolis: Bryant Baptist Publications, 1981), 82. In Luke 2:34, ἀνάστασις is used in its etymological sense of “rising” (MacLeod, “The Fourth ‘Last Thing,’” 59).

original readers upon seeing the word ἀνάστασις, and therefore, if it refers to anything else in Revelation 20, this must be obvious from the immediate context.

In contrast, the immediate context confirms that John is indeed describing a physical resurrection. Because the apostle describes the subjects of this resurrection as those who were *martyred*—and follows this with the statement that “they came to life and reigned” (Rev 20:4)—this strongly implies that this new life is physical.¹⁶ In other words, interpreting the first resurrection as a bodily resurrection fits the context in which John sees those who were killed in the physical realm coming back to life in the physical realm. As Alva J. McClain notes, “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.”¹⁷ This confirms the standard meaning of ἀνάστασις in Revelation 20:5 as a physical resurrection.

In addition, since the physical resurrection of “the rest of the dead” in verse 5a is described with the word ἔζησαν (“they came to life”), and the identical form of the same verb ἔζησαν (“they came to life”) is used to describe the resurrection of the saints at the end of verse 4, this resurrection must also be physical.¹⁸ The issue here is not merely the repetition of the same form of the same verb, but also the way in which these two verbs are connected. When John writes, in effect, “Some of the dead ἔζησαν (v. 4b), but the rest of the dead did not ἔζησαν until later (v. 5a),” he makes it clear that the verb refers to the same act or experience in both uses. Therefore, whatever happened to one group also happened to the other—if one resurrection is physical, the other must be physical as well.¹⁹

These two physical resurrections—believers prior to the thousand years and unbelievers afterward—could hardly be stated more clearly:

¹⁶ Saucy, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 275.

¹⁷ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1959), 488. As Gordon explains, when Paul describes those who were made alive in Eph 2:4–7 as having previously been “dead in [their] trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1), one can “infer immediately and rightly that a spiritual revivification has taken place, because the condition on which the change took effect was spiritual. And so here [in Rev 20:4], the condition of literal death having been so unmistakably pointed out, the inference is immediate and inevitable that the quickening is a literal and corporeal quickening” (“The First Resurrection,” 80).

¹⁸ Harold W. Hoehner, “Evidence from Revelation 20,” in *A Case for Premillennialism: A New Consensus*, eds. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsend (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 254; Jeffrey L. Townsend, “Is the Present Age the Millennium?,” *BSac* 140, no. 559 (July 1983): 219; MacLeod, “The Fourth ‘Last Thing,’” 59; George Eldon Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1952), 148–49; C. Marvin Pate, “A Progressive Dispensationalist View of Revelation,” in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1998), 171. In addition, as Thomas notes, whenever the verb ζάω (“to live”) is used in the context of bodily death in the New Testament, it always speaks of bodily resurrection (e.g., John 11:25; Acts 1:3; 9:41) (*Revelation 8–22*, 417).

¹⁹ As Ladd writes, “The same experience overtook both groups: one at the beginning, one at the end of the millennial period” (George Eldon Ladd, “Revelation 20 and the Millennium,” *RevExp* 57, no. 2 [April 1960]: 169).

First Resurrection: “they *came to life* [ἐζήσαν] and reigned with Christ for a thousand years” (Rev 20:4)

Second Resurrection: “the rest of the dead did not *come to life* [ἐζήσαν] until the thousand years were completed” (Rev 20:5a)

Subsequently, in a vision of events taking place after the thousand years, the apostle John describes the resurrection of the wicked unto judgment: “And the sea *gave up the dead* which were in it, and death and Hades *gave up the dead* which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds” (Rev 20:13; emphasis added). This is John’s description of the rest of the dead coming to life after the thousand years, a clear reference to the second of two physical resurrections separated by the millennial reign of Christ. For this reason, the use of the word ἀνάστασις, in combination with these other clear indications in the immediate context, support the premillennial view that the first resurrection is physical in nature.

The Amillennial Objection

The most common objection to this view is that the Bible elsewhere teaches a single, general resurrection in which the righteous and the wicked will be raised at the same time (Dan 12:2; John 5:28–29; Acts 24:15).²⁰ As Kenneth Gentry explains:

Why should we believe that the New Testament everywhere teaches a general, singular resurrection on the last day, only to discover later in the most difficult book of the Bible that there are actually two specific, distantly separated resurrections for different classes of people?²¹

According to amillennialists, because both the righteous and the wicked will be raised at the same time when Jesus returns, Revelation 20 cannot teach two physical resurrections separated by a thousand years. As amillennialist Kim Riddlebarger writes, “Scripture clearly teaches that the resurrection and judgment of the righteous and unrighteous will occur at the same time, thus eliminating the possibility of an earthly millennial age to dawn after the Lord’s return.”²²

In response to this objection, Daniel 12:2, John 5:28–29, and Acts 24:15 do not actually preclude the possibility of two distinct resurrections separated by a period of time. In fact, all three passages speak of a resurrection of the righteous and a resurrection of the wicked—and always in that same order (the same as in Revelation

²⁰ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1939), 715; Floyd Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1942), 121; Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 232.

²¹ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., “A Postmillennial Response to Craig A. Blaising,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 243. Gentry is postmillennial, but this objection is raised by amillennialists and postmillennialists alike.

²² Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 166.

20)²³—and they neither state nor require that the two resurrections happen simultaneously. They simply do not specify one way or the other.²⁴ As Wayne Grudem explains:

All of these verses, in the absence of Revelation 20:5–6, might or might not be speaking of a single future time of resurrection. But with the explicit teaching of Revelation 20:5–6 about two resurrections, these verses must be understood to refer to the future certainty of a resurrection for each type of person, without specifying that those resurrections will be separated in time.²⁵

Even John 5:28–29, which speaks of “an hour” in which these two resurrections will occur, does not require that both resurrections take place at the same time. John frequently uses the word “hour” (ὥρα) in reference to an extended period of time (John 16:2), sometimes as long as the entire present age (John 4:21, 23; 1 John 2:18). In fact, this is how he uses the word “hour” just three verses earlier in John 5:25.²⁶ As Craig Blaising explains, “If the eschatological hour can be extended over two thousand years, it is not impossible that a thousand years might transpire between the resurrection of the just and the resurrection of the unjust.”²⁷

As most biblical interpreters recognize,²⁸ sometimes a given prophecy will predict two or more future events and present them in such a way that it appears they will occur simultaneously, and yet later revelation indicates a significant gap of time separating them.²⁹ Commonly referred to as “telescoping,” “prophetic perspective,” or “prophetic foreshortening,” this phenomenon is often compared to seeing two

²³ This is especially clear in John 5:29 where Jesus speaks of two different physical resurrections: “a resurrection of life” and “a resurrection of judgment.” According to McClain, this passage lays an exegetical foundation for the two resurrections in Revelation 20 (*The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 489).

²⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1994), 1119; Herman A. Hoyt, “A Dispensational Premillennial Response,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 195.

²⁵ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1120.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1119.

²⁷ Craig A. Blaising, “A Premillennial Response to Robert B. Strimple,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 150.

²⁸ See Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2003), 200; Walter C. Kaiser and Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1994), 143–44; Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2010), 210; William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1993), 304–5; Henry A. Virkler and Karelynn Gerber Ayayo, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 169–70; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1985), 63–68; J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2001), 370–71; Kenneth L. Barker, “The Scope and Center of Old and New Testament Theology,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, eds. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1992), 324–25; George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1974), 64–65.

²⁹ See, for example, Isa 9:6–7; 40:1–5; 61:1–2 (cf. Luke 4:16–21); Jer 29:10–14; Zech 9:9–10; and Joel 2:28–32.

mountain peaks off in the distance—initially they appear to be right next to each other, but a closer look reveals that they are separated by a valley.³⁰

Most amillennialists recognize this use of prophetic perspective.³¹ As Kim Riddlebarger explains: “There are specific instances in the Scriptures when a prophet foretold what appears to be a single future event, but as history unfolded it became clear that the original prophecy referred to multiple events.”³² According to Riddlebarger, the mountain peak analogy is a fitting way to illustrate this dynamic:

As I stand in the greater Los Angeles basin and look toward the mountains to the northeast, I see a single mountainous ridge on the horizon. Yet, if I were to drive directly toward the mountains, I would soon realize that what appeared to be a single ridge was actually a series of hills, valleys, and mountains separated by many miles. So it is with some Old Testament prophecies.³³

For example, there is no clear evidence in the Old Testament alone that there would be two distinct comings of the Messiah separated by a significant period of time. But once later revelation in the New Testament arrived, it became clear that what the Old Testament writers seemed to depict as a single event must now be recognized as two events with a gap of time separating the two.³⁴

In the same way, when it comes to the future resurrection, what the earlier writers of Scripture seemed to depict as a single resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked (Dan 12:2; John 5:28–29; Acts 24:15) must now be recognized as involving two resurrections, a resurrection of the righteous and a resurrection of the wicked a thousand years later (Rev 20:1–15). In other words, while these other passages do not specify the timing of the two resurrections, in Revelation 20:5 this time element

³⁰ Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 304; Kaiser and Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 144; Virkler and Ayayo, *Hermeneutics*, 169–70. As J. Barton Payne observes, “Biblical prophecy may leap from one prominent peak in predictive topography to another, without notice of the valley between, which may involve no inconsiderable lapse in chronology” (*The Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980], 137).

³¹ E.g., Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 71; Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 9, 12, 18, 21–22; Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 29; Donald Garlington, “Reigning with Christ: Revelation 20:1–6 and the Question of the Millennium,” *Reformation & Revival* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 60–61; cf. Davis, *The High King of Heaven*, 247–48.

³² Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 71.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 89. As a more specific example, the events prophesied in Isa 61:1–2 appear to take place at the same time, and yet later revelation in Luke 4:16–21 clarifies a gap of time between the first-century fulfillment of Isa 61:1–2a and the eschatological fulfillment of Isa 61:2b. Luke 4 does not reinterpret or distort the original meaning of Isa 61:1–2, but it does bring clarity to the timing of the events that were prophesied. Two additional examples can be found in Isa 9:6–7 and Zech 9:9–10. In Isa 9:6–7 alone, there is no clear evidence that a lengthy interval of time would separate the birth of Christ at His first coming (Isa 9:6a) from the reign of Christ at His second coming (Isa 9:6b–7), and yet later revelation clarifies the existence of this temporal gap between them. Likewise, the interval between the first coming in Zech 9:9 and the second coming in Zech 9:10 could not be perceived in that passage alone, and yet subsequent revelation clarified that what the prophet depicted as a single event must now be recognized as involving two.

is specified—one thousand years will separate these two physical resurrections. Recognizing this development in the progress of revelation is the only way to harmonize all of what Scripture teaches on the subject of the future resurrection.³⁵

The Amillennial View of the First Resurrection

Amillennialists reject the idea of two physical resurrections separated by a thousand years, claiming instead that the “first resurrection” is a *spiritual* resurrection that takes place throughout the present age, to be followed by a physical resurrection at the end of this age. More specifically, amillennialists interpret the first resurrection as either (a) the regeneration of believers at the point of conversion or (b) the entrance of believers into life in heaven at the point of death. But before these two specific views can be evaluated, the amillennial argument for the spiritual nature of the first resurrection in general must be considered.

The Case for a Spiritual Resurrection

In making the case for the spiritual nature of the first resurrection, most amillennialists appeal to an argument first articulated by Meredith G. Kline in 1975³⁶ and subsequently adopted and developed by several leading proponents of amillennialism.³⁷ It now appears to be the primary argument for the spiritual nature of the first resurrection in Revelation 20, but most premillennialists have largely ignored it in their critiques of the amillennial view.³⁸

³⁵ An additional argument against the premillennial view comes from Sydney Page, who points out that Rev 20:4–6 contains no explicit mention of Christ’s return, which “would be a surprising omission if the coming to life refers to the resurrection that occurs at that time” (Sydney H. T. Page, “Revelation 20 and Pauline Eschatology,” *JETS* 23, no. 1 [March 1980]: 36). But according to the premillennial view, the second coming is explicitly described in Rev 19:11–21, which takes place at the very beginning of the thousand years of Rev 20:1–6, so this objection carries no weight.

³⁶ Meredith G. Kline, “The First Resurrection,” *WTJ* 37, no. 3 (Spring 1975): 366–75; and Meredith G. Kline, “The First Resurrection: A Reaffirmation,” *WTJ* 39, no. 1 (Fall 1976): 110–19.

³⁷ E.g., Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1002–7; Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2000), 179–81; Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2001), 291–94; Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 244–49; Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 462–66.

³⁸ The most obvious exception is found in the immediate response to Kline’s original article by J. Ramsey Michaels (“The First Resurrection: A Response,” *WTJ* 39, no. 1 [Fall 1976]: 100–9). In subsequent years, however, most premillennialists have either ignored this argument altogether or addressed it only briefly. For example, Deere (“Premillennialism in Revelation 20:4–6,” 72) and Blaising (“Premillennialism,” 224) relegate their responses to a single footnote, and Hoehner (“Evidence from Revelation 20,” 255) summarizes the responses of Michaels and Deere in a single paragraph. Most others don’t even mention it.

The Amillennial Argument

As amillennialists observe, even though the word “resurrection” (ἀνάστασις) almost always refers to physical resurrection elsewhere in the New Testament, it occurs only here in the Apocalypse, and Revelation 20:5–6 is the only place in Scripture where ἀνάστασις is modified by the ordinal “first” (πρῶτος).³⁹ Amillennialists consider the uniqueness of this expression “first resurrection”—rather than simply the use of “resurrection” itself—to be the decisive factor in determining the intended meaning of John’s designation.⁴⁰

According to amillennialists, by calling it the “first” resurrection, the apostle was not simply designating it the first in a series of resurrections of the *same kind*—he was indicating that this resurrection was of a *different quality* than the resurrection that follows. In other words, the modifier “first” indicates a qualitative difference between two resurrections rather than merely establishing a numerical sequence between two events.⁴¹ According to this view, the qualitative difference is that the “first” resurrection is *spiritual* whereas the second resurrection is *physical*.

To justify this distinction, amillennialists point to the contrast between the first and second deaths in Revelation 20. The first death of believers is physical/temporal and therefore different in nature from the second death of unbelievers, which is spiritual/eternal (Rev 20:10, 14–15). As G. K. Beale reasons, “If there are thus two different kinds of deaths, it is plausible that the corresponding resurrections would also differ. The resurrection of believers is spiritual, whereas the resurrection of unbelievers is physical.”⁴² In this way, the passage is said to reflect the following chiasmic arrangement:

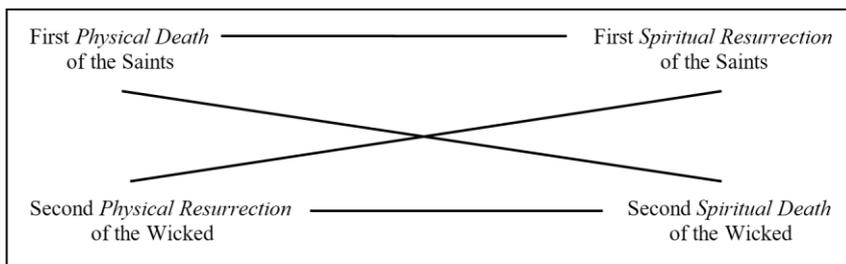


Figure 1. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1005.

³⁹ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1004; Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 243–44; Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 462; Jonathan Menn, *Biblical Eschatology* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2013), 359–60.

⁴⁰ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 243–44; Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 462; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1004; R. Fowler White, “Death and the First Resurrection in Revelation 20: A Response to Meredith G. Kline,” unpublished paper presented at ETS, 1992, 2, 19.

⁴¹ Kline, “The First Resurrection,” 366; Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 244–45; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1002–15; Menn, *Biblical Eschatology*, 359–63. As Riddlebarger summarizes, “The terms do not indicate sequence but contrast” (*A Case for Amillennialism*, 245).

⁴² Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1005.

According to amillennialist Sam Storms, this double binary pattern reflects a beautiful irony in John's language: the believer dies physically but experiences spiritual resurrection, whereas the unbeliever is resurrected physically but experiences spiritual death.⁴³

The key to understanding this expression "first resurrection" is said to be found in those New Testament passages which contain a similar antithesis between "first/old" and "second/new" (Rev 21:1; 1 Cor 15:22, 49–49; Heb 8:6–10:9). According to amillennialists, in these passages the modifier *πρῶτος* designates not that which is first in a sequence, but rather that which pertains to the present world order, in contrast to that which pertains to the world to come. In Revelation 21:1, for example, the modifier "first/old" refers to those pre-consummate and incomplete elements belonging to the present, sin-cursed creation order, whereas the modifier "second/new" refers to those consummate and complete elements belonging to the eternal state.⁴⁴ In Revelation 21:1, then, the adjective "first"

does not merely mark the present world as first in a series of worlds and certainly not as first in a series of worlds of the same kind. On the contrary, it characterizes this world as different in kind from the "new" world. It signifies that the present world stands in contrast to the new world order of the consummation which will abide forever.⁴⁵

This antithesis is said to be confirmed later in Revelation 21, where physical death in the present age in verse 4 is considered part of the "*first* things," and the "*second* death" in the lake of fire in verse 8 takes place in the age to come.⁴⁶

According to amillennialists, then, whatever is "first" in the Book of Revelation pertains to the present world and whatever is "second" or "new" pertains to the world to come.⁴⁷ For this reason, because the *second* resurrection is physical and pertains to the eternal order of the age to come, the *first* resurrection must be spiritual and pertain to the temporary order of the present age.⁴⁸ Therefore, the first resurrection must refer to a spiritual resurrection which takes place during the present age rather than a physical resurrection in the age to come.⁴⁹

⁴³ Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 465.

⁴⁴ Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 291; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1005–6.

⁴⁵ Kline, "The First Resurrection," 366–67. Later Kline writes, "To be called 'first' within that pattern is to be assigned a place in this present world with its transient order. That which is 'first' does not participate in the quality of consummate finality and permanence which is distinctive of the new kingdom order of the world to come" (369).

⁴⁶ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 245; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1006.

⁴⁷ Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 463.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 464. In other words, the first resurrection of Rev 20:5 is "first" in the sense that it belongs "to the order of the present world which is passing away" (Garlington, "Reigning with Christ," 75).

⁴⁹ As Dennis Johnson writes, "The 'first resurrection' granted to deceased saints in Revelation 20:4–6, since it belongs to the present, preconsummation order, is not their reception of the bodies made like Christ's glorious body, fitted for immortal residence in the curse-free new earth (Phil. 3:21)" (*Triumph of the Lamb*, 291–92).

This same distinction is also seen in the antithesis between the “first man” (Adam) and the “second man” (Jesus) in 1 Corinthians 15 and the “old/first covenant” vs. “new/second covenant” in Hebrews 8–10.⁵⁰ As Beale observes:

The first Adam had a perishable body and brought death, whereas the last Adam had an imperishable and glorious body and brought eternal life. The first covenant was temporary and led to death (e.g., Heb. 8:13), while the second was eternal and led to life.⁵¹

Therefore, in none of these passages—Revelation 21, 1 Corinthians 15, or Hebrews 8–10—“does ‘first’ (πρῶτος) function as an ordinal in a counting of things that are *identical in kind*.”⁵² Amillennialists believe that this supports the view that the “first resurrection” of Revelation 20 must be different in kind from the second resurrection (which is physical) and therefore that it must be spiritual in nature.

The Premillennial Response

In response, there are five significant problems with this argument. The initial difficulty with this view of the “first resurrection” is that the operative term in this designation is not the adjective “first” but rather the noun “resurrection.”⁵³ As previously noted, the noun ἀνάστασις is a well-attested technical term that almost always refers to bodily resurrection in the New Testament. In the very rare instances where this word means anything else, this is instantly clear from the immediate context (e.g., Luke 2:34). In addition, the chronological use of the adjective πρῶτος—in which it refers to the first in a sequence—is extremely common in the New Testament, and especially in the Apocalypse.⁵⁴ This, in combination with the clear contextual indicators of two physical resurrections in Revelation 20 (see discussion above), identifies the most obvious meaning of the “first resurrection” as *the first in a sequence of two bodily resurrections*. Put more simply, πρῶτος means “first” and ἀνάστασις means “resurrection.”

This does not mean that the two physical resurrections in Revelation 20 are identical in kind—for the first is “a resurrection of *life*” (John 5:29a) while the second

⁵⁰ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1007; Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 246.

⁵¹ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1007. According to Riddlebarger, “If two major redemptive covenants—the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant—can be contrasted with the same terms, [*first*] and *new*, this certainly strengthens the case that John did the same thing in Revelation 20 and 21, contrasting two kinds of resurrection” (*A Case for Amillennialism*, 246).

⁵² Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1007.

⁵³ Deere, “Premillennialism in Revelation 20:4–6,” 72. As Blaising writes, “It seems incredible that Meredith Kline could devote two articles attempting to defend a traditional amillennial view of ‘the first resurrection’ by means of an argument on the word ‘first,’ completely ignoring the operative term ‘resurrection’” (“Premillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 224).

⁵⁴ Steve Sullivan, “Premillennialism and an Exegesis of Revelation 20,” 35; accessed on July 20, 2014, <http://www.pre-trib.org/data/pdf/Sullivan-PremillennialismAndA.pdf>. The adjective πρῶτος is used in two basic ways in the New Testament: it can refer either to *that which is first in a sequence* or *that which is most prominent or important* (BDAG, 892–94; Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon*, 309). In all of its 19 uses in Revelation, πρῶτος appears to describe being first in a sequence.

is “a resurrection of *judgment*” (John 5:29b)—but it does mean that both are actual resurrections. This illustrates why the appeal to Revelation 21, 1 Corinthians 15, and Hebrews 8–10 actually undermines the case for a spiritual resurrection in Revelation 20. There is a qualitative distinction in Revelation 21 between the “first” heaven and earth and the “new” heaven and earth, *but both are physical creations*; there is a qualitative distinction in 1 Corinthians 15 between the “first man” (Adam) and the “second man” (Jesus), *but both are actual men*; and there is a qualitative distinction in Hebrews 8–10 between the “first” covenant and the “second” covenant, *but both are actual covenants*.⁵⁵ In contrast, the amillennialist emphasizes the qualitative distinction between the two resurrections in Revelation 20 in such a way that the “first resurrection” is *no longer an actual resurrection*, at least not in terms of what the word ἀνάστασις means in the New Testament.

Secondly, if the “first resurrection” does not consist of a physical resurrection, then Revelation 20 contains no explicit mention of the future resurrection as the consummation of the believer’s hope.⁵⁶ As J. Ramsey Michaels argues:

It would be strange indeed if a work emphasizing so strongly at the outset the resurrection of Jesus (1:5, 18), and with such a pervasive concern to offer consolation to Christians facing persecution and martyrdom, were to overlook the very heart of the church’s eschatological expectation.⁵⁷

Although some assert that the future resurrection of believers is described in Revelation 20:11–15, this passage describes only the resurrection of judgment which awaits unbelievers.⁵⁸

The third difficulty with this argument relates to the perspicuity of Scripture. Simply stated, it is difficult to imagine that any interpreter would have ever taken this approach to the “first resurrection” prior to its discovery in the second half of the 20th century.⁵⁹ How could even the most diligent of Bible students be expected to connect

⁵⁵ This qualitative distinction is indicated not by the terms “first/old” and “second/new” themselves but rather by the contexts in which they occur.

⁵⁶ Michaels, “The First Resurrection,” 105.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ That only unbelievers are in view in Rev 20:11–15 is clear for a number of reasons: (1) “The rest of the dead” in Rev 20:5—which refers to unbelievers as those who do not take part in the “first resurrection”—is the obvious antecedent of “the dead” in verse 12. (2) The resurrection of “the dead” in Rev 20:11–13 is the second resurrection implied in verse 5b, and this resurrection leads to the “second death” in verse 6a, of which believers are said to have no part (Thomas, *Revelation 8–22*, 431). (3) The only stated outcome of this judgment is the lake of fire (Rev 20:15). (4) “The Book of Life comes into the discussion only to show that the names of these dead are not written there” (Thomas, *Revelation 8–22*, 431). (5) This fits the broader context of Revelation 19–20, which sets forth God’s ultimate victory over everything corrupted by sin—the beast, the false prophet, Satan, heaven and earth, and now His unbelieving human enemies. At the very least one would have to agree with the observation of Michaels that “in these verses there is no emphasis at all upon this future resurrection as positive object of Christian hope” (Michaels, “The First Resurrection,” 105).

⁵⁹ Even though this argument was first articulated in 1975 by Meredith Kline, the chiasmic relationship between the two deaths and two resurrections was identified in 1960 by Summers (Ray Summers, “Revelation 20: An Interpretation,” *RevExp* 57, no. 2 [April 1960]: 182). Jonathan Menn appears to trace Kline’s view/argument back to Alexander Fraser’s *Key to the Prophecies of the Old and New Testaments*

all the dots necessary to arrive at this conclusion? Why would the apostle John use such obscure language, demanding such a convoluted interpretive process? How could John be sure his readers would identify this double binary pattern, much less think to consult these other three passages, to determine the meaning of the “first resurrection”? And why would the fact that “first” never modifies “resurrection” outside of Revelation 20 send his readers on this complicated interpretive journey in the first place?⁶⁰ Isn’t it more likely that “first resurrection” simply means “first resurrection”? As Harold Hoehner observes, “The complexity of this view makes it suspect.”⁶¹

Fourthly, the technical meaning ascribed to the adjective *πρῶτος* is highly questionable. Apart from the fact that this use of the adjective has gone almost completely unnoticed by the major lexicons,⁶² it does not appear to be demanded by its use in 1 Corinthians 15, Hebrews 8–10, or Revelation 21. In each of these passages, the sequential use of *πρῶτος*—in reference to the first of two Adams, the first of two covenants, and the first of two heavens/earths—is sufficient to communicate the intended meaning of the biblical writers. Even though the first Adam, first covenant, and first creation all possess other qualities in addition to being first in a sequence—even some qualities common to all three—this does not mean that these additional qualities are inherent in the meaning of the adjective itself.⁶³ The amillennial argument uses a questionable meaning of the adjective “first” to reinterpret the well-attested meaning of “resurrection” and thereby ascribes to *ἀνάστασις* a meaning in Revelation 20 which it possesses nowhere else in the New Testament.⁶⁴

Fifthly, and most importantly, even if the amillennial view of *πρῶτος* is granted for the sake of argument, an insurmountable problem arises because of the definitions

which are Not Yet Accomplished in 1802 (Menn, *Biblical Eschatology*, 360–61), but a comparison shows that the similarities between Fraser and Kline have been exaggerated.

⁶⁰ The fact that a given adjective modifies a given noun only once in the entire New Testament should not lead the interpreter to expect a specialized meaning of the adjective-noun combination which ascribes an unprecedented meaning to the noun. But the amillennial approach does just that.

⁶¹ Hoehner, “Evidence from Revelation 20,” in *A Case for Premillennialism*, 255.

⁶² *BDAG*, 892–94; Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon*, 309; G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 389–90; J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1995), 557; Wilhelm Michaelis, “*πρῶτος*,” in *TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1964), 6:865–68; Karl Heinz Bartels, “*πρῶτος*,” in *NIDNTT*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1986), 1:664–67; Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 2:214. One possible exception is *EDNT*, which states that John’s use of *πρῶτος* in Rev 21:1 refers to “what was and is transitory” (Hugolinus Langkammer, “*πρῶτος*,” in *EDNT*, 3:189). It is not clear, however, whether Langkammer believes that the concept of transitoriness is communicated by the greater context of Rev 21:1, or by the word in and of itself.

⁶³ Put another way, the adjective *πρῶτος* can be used to describe several things which are first in a series without communicating other attributes which are also true of the nouns it modifies. To illustrate, if someone were to use the adjective “blue” to describe a chair, a table, and a cabinet, the fact that all three are also made of wood does not prove that the adjective “blue” is a technical term for something consisting of wood.

⁶⁴ Both amillennial views of the “first resurrection” require a meaning for *ἀνάστασις* which is unprecedented in the New Testament, a point to be discussed more fully when these views are considered below.

given to *πρῶτος* and *ἀνάστασις*. To review, in light of the perceived antithesis between “first/old” and “second/new,” amillennialists insist that *πρῶτος* in Revelation 20 means “to belong to the present state of affairs which is passing away.”⁶⁵ As the qualitative and polar opposite of “new,”⁶⁶ *πρῶτος* is said to describe that which is merely provisional, transient, and temporary, in contrast to what is consummate, final, and enduring.⁶⁷ In other words, whatever is “first” is antithetical to permanence⁶⁸ and will eventually be superseded and replaced by what is “new” when it passes away.⁶⁹ For this reason, amillennialists believe the adjective *πρῶτος* “is used to designate elements that belong... to the present, sin-cursed creation order, in contrast to the new heaven and new earth.”⁷⁰ As the diametrical opposite of that which characterizes eternity and resurrection life,⁷¹ “Whatever is *first* does not participate in the quality of finality and permanence which is distinctive of the age to come.”⁷²

The difficulty arises when the amillennialist takes this definition of *πρῶτος* and applies it to *ἀνάστασις* in Revelation 20 as a reference to a spiritual resurrection. For those amillennialists who believe that the “first resurrection” refers to *regeneration*,⁷³ the contradiction is obvious. In what way does the believer’s regeneration belong to the present state of affairs which is passing away? How can the new life received at conversion be described as provisional, transient, and temporary, in contrast to what endures? 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

⁶⁵ Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 462; also see Kline, “The First Resurrection,” 366–67, 369–71; Garlington, “Reigning with Christ,” 75.

⁶⁶ Kline, “The First Resurrection,” 366, 368–70; Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 245.

⁶⁷ Kline, “The First Resurrection,” 368; Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 463–64.

⁶⁸ Kline, “The First Resurrection,” 370.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 366, 368; Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 245–46; Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 462. In explaining the antithesis between the two adjectives, Kline describes the first Adam in 1 Corinthians 15 as “earthy and physical” and the second Adam as “heavenly and spiritual” (“The First Resurrection,” 368). Likewise, Riddlebarger explains, “Adam was from earth; Christ is from heaven. Adam stands at the head of the human race; Christ stands at the head of the redeemed. Death, sin, and weakness characterize Adam and his descendants, while Christ stands at the head of those raised from the dead” (*A Case for Amillennialism*, 246). Beale makes similar observations, applying them also to the antithesis between the “first/old” covenant and the “second/new” covenant in Hebrews 8–10: “The first Adam had a perishable, inglorious body and brought death, whereas the last Adam had an imperishable and glorious body and brought eternal life. The first covenant was temporary and led to death (e.g., Heb. 8:13), while the second was eternal and led to life” (*The Book of Revelation*, 1007).

⁷⁰ Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 291.

⁷¹ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 246–47.

⁷² Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 463. As Kline writes, “That which is ‘first’ does not participate in the quality of consummate finality and permanence which is distinctive of the new kingdom order of the world to come” (“The First Resurrection,” 369).

⁷³ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 240–49; Sam Hamstra Jr., “An Idealist View of Revelation,” in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, 120–21; Page, “Revelation 20 and Pauline Eschatology,” 37–40; Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith*, 119–23; William E. Cox, *Amillennialism Today* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1966), 4–5. This view was held by postmillennialist Norman Shepherd (“Resurrections of Revelation 20,” *WTJ* 37, no. 1 [Fall 1974]: 34–43).

present, sin-cursed creation and therefore that the spiritual life of regeneration does not participate in the age to come?⁷⁴ As Michaels observes:

The point of the few New Testament passages that speak of Christians as already in some sense resurrected (e.g., Rom. 6:4, 11; Eph. 2:5f; Col. 3:1ff.) is that, to the extent that this resurrection is a present reality, the believer is set free from the transitory present world and ushered into the age to come.⁷⁵

For amillennialists who believe the “first resurrection” refers to the believer being ushered into the presence of Christ at the point of death,⁷⁶ the dilemma is similar. In what sense does the believer’s entrance into the blessings of heaven belong to the present state of affairs which is passing away? How can being ushered into the presence of Christ be described as transitory or diametrically opposed to the future resurrection?⁷⁷ How can a “resurrection to heavenly glories”⁷⁸—including the blessings it brings to those who are resurrected—be considered part of the present, sin-cursed creation order?⁷⁹ As Michaels explains:

⁷⁴ Most amillennialists would likely affirm that regeneration is the means by which believers *partake* of the age to come, even now in the present age. In contrast, they see the “first man” (1 Cor 15:47) and the “first covenant” (Heb 8–10) as that which leads to death (Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 246; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1007). This alone demonstrates the inconsistency of the amillennial position, at least for those who see the “first resurrection” as regeneration.

⁷⁵ Michaels, “The First Resurrection,” 104–5. As Michaels explains, “It is hard to deny that [the new birth] partakes of the very nature of consummation” (105).

⁷⁶ Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 451, 462–65; Kline, “The First Resurrection,” 366–75; Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 232–37; William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1967), 191–93; Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 291–94; Poythress, *The Returning King*, 182; Vern Sheridan Poythress, “Genre and Hermeneutics in Rev 20:1–6,” *JETS* 36, no. 1 (March 1993): 41–54; Robert B. Strimple, “Amillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 127; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 991–1011; Davis, *The High King of Heaven*, 475–82.

⁷⁷ Beale responds to this argument by insisting that the inconsistency is resolved “by understanding that the intermediate state of the soul’s resurrection is, indeed, an incomplete state, since these souls await the final, consummated physical resurrection in the new heavens and earth” (*The Book of Revelation*, 1007; also see Kline, “The First Resurrection,” 371). But as demonstrated above, the amillennialist ascribes far more to the meaning of *πρῶτος* than simply “incomplete.” The amillennial antithesis between “first/old” and “second/new” presents the two as polar opposites in which *πρῶτος* describes that which belongs to the order of this sin-cursed world, being transitory and destined to pass away when it is replaced by what is “new.” So the inconsistency remains.

Kline seeks to resolve the tension in a similar way, noting that this resurrection “is still not the ultimate glory of the Christian” because it “stands on this side of the consummation” (“The First Resurrection,” 371). But this too significantly dilutes the amillennial view of the antithesis between the two terms. According to amillennialists, “first” does not mean pre-consummative in the chronological sense of existing or taking place prior to the consummation. (If it did, the New Covenant itself could not be considered “new” since it was inaugurated and became operative prior to the consummation.) Amillennialists present *πρῶτος* not as a *chronological* modifier describing what exists (or takes place) during the present world, but as a *qualitative* modifier describing what *belongs* to the present world order. For this reason, Kline’s appeal to the timing of the “first resurrection”—as that which “stands on this side of the consummation”—fails to offer any substantial response to the objection.

⁷⁸ Kline, “The First Resurrection,” 371.

⁷⁹ One amillennialist who takes this view of the “first resurrection” defines it as “the deliverance of their souls from all that threatened them on earth” (Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 294), and another

the first resurrection *as resurrection* can hardly be described as temporary or transitory. It does not “pass away,” like death or the sea or the old heaven and earth. The Christian who dies...begins to participate then and there in the blessings of the age to come. His death as death is indeed transitory, but his death *as resurrection*...belongs to the new age. Is that not the whole point in referring to it as a resurrection?⁸⁰

For these five reasons, even though the amillennial argument is certainly sophisticated, it fails to provide any convincing evidence that the “first resurrection” in Revelation 20 is spiritual in nature.

Amillennial Views of the First Resurrection

Although amillennialists all agree that the first resurrection is spiritual in nature, they disagree regarding the specific kind of spiritual resurrection portrayed in Revelation 20. Some amillennialists interpret the first resurrection as the regeneration of believers at the point of conversion, while others view it as the entrance of believers into life in heaven at the point of death. Both of these amillennial views must be considered.

View 1: The Regeneration of the Believer

The first amillennial view is that the first resurrection of Revelation 20 refers to the regeneration of believers at the point of conversion.⁸¹ This spiritual resurrection is said to take place throughout the current age as those who were previously dead in their sins are made alive in Christ and live to reign with Him in the present millennial

describes it as an “extension” and “intensification” of the blessedness of regeneration (Garlington, “Reigning with Christ,” 96). Again, how can this understanding of the first resurrection in Revelation 20 be reconciled with the amillennialist’s definition of the modifier “first”?

⁸⁰ Michaels, “The First Resurrection,” 104. As Michaels continues, “The strangeness of [Kline’s] proposal becomes clear as soon as we press interpretation of ‘first’ so as to speak of the ‘old’ resurrection. The difficulty is not so much that Kline includes the intermediate state in the present passing order of existence, but that he does so while at the same time calling it a resurrection.” Kline dismisses this objection as Kantian and Barthian rather than biblical, and he faults Michaels for denying “that there is a difference in kind between the ‘resurrection’ which the Christian experiences when he passes into the intermediate state at death...and the resurrection he experiences at the day of redemption of his body and glorification” (“A Reaffirmation,” 114–15). But Kline’s argument is not simply that the two resurrections are *different in kind*—something Michaels does not deny, despite Kline’s claim to the contrary—but rather that they are *qualitatively antithetical to each other*. It is this qualitative antithesis, in which “first” belongs to this present world order and “new” belongs to the age to come, that presents such a problem for Kline’s view. Kline’s failure to address this dilemma leaves Michaels’ objection unanswered.

⁸¹ This view was held by Augustine and Calvin and has been defended more recently by Riddlebarger (*A Case for Amillennialism*, 240–49), Shepherd (“Resurrections of Revelation 20,” 34–43), Hamstra (“An Idealist View of Revelation,” 120–21), Page (“Revelation 20 and Pauline Eschatology,” 37–40), Hamilton (*The Basis of Millennial Faith*, 117–21), Cox (*Amillennialism Today*, 4–5), and White (“Death and the First Resurrection,” 17–23).

kingdom.⁸² As William Cox writes, “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.”⁸³ This view is common among amillennialists. Riddlebarger identifies the first resurrection as “the believers’ regeneration;”⁸⁴ Hamstra calls it “the first resurrection of regeneration;”⁸⁵ Hamilton refers to it as “the new birth of the believer;”⁸⁶ Page describes it as “initiation into the Christian life in the present age;”⁸⁷ and Shepherd simply labels it “conversion.”⁸⁸

To support this view, amillennialists note that the new birth is depicted throughout the New Testament as a rising from the dead in the spiritual realm (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).⁸⁹ Those regenerated by the Holy Spirit are described as having “passed out of death into life” (1 John 3:14), having been “made... alive together with Christ” (Eph 2:5). This abundant use of resurrection terminology in reference to the new birth is said to provide clear evidence that the first resurrection of Revelation 20 is spiritual regeneration.⁹⁰

A second argument for the regeneration view is that the apostle John describes the first resurrection as “souls” coming to life (Rev 20:4). As Floyd Hamilton writes:

The deliberate choice of the word “soul,” which almost universally means soul as distinct from body, as applying to the believers now reigning with Christ in glory, seems to make it perfectly plain that the first resurrection is [the new birth]. If it were a literal resurrection of the body, why should the author choose a word which almost always does *not* mean body?⁹¹

⁸² As Hamstra clarifies, “This reign begins for the believer while on earth but continues in heaven, since the believer’s soul, on his or her death, is raised to heaven while the body waits for Christ’s return” (“An Idealist View of Revelation,” 121).

⁸³ Cox, *Amillennialism Today*, 4.

⁸⁴ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 249.

⁸⁵ Hamstra, “An Idealist View of Revelation,” 120.

⁸⁶ Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith*, 117.

⁸⁷ Page, “Revelation 20 and Pauline Eschatology,” 37.

⁸⁸ Shepherd, “The Resurrections of Revelation 20,” 36. As previously noted, Shepherd was post-millennial, but his view and argumentation here coincides with that of many amillennialists.

⁸⁹ Cox, *Amillennialism Today*, 4; Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith*, 118–20; Page, “Revelation 20 and Pauline Eschatology,” 37–39; Shepherd, “The Resurrections of Revelation 20,” 36; Hamstra, “An Idealist View of Revelation,” 120; Menn, *Biblical Eschatology*, 367.

⁹⁰ Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith*, 117–20. According to Cox, this view is based on the many places in the New Testament where the new birth is referred to as a resurrection (*Amillennialism Today*, 4), and Page states that “there is excellent NT precedent for describing Christian initiation as a resurrection” (“Revelation 20 and Pauline Eschatology,” 37). After examining several Pauline passages, Page concludes: “If the original readers of Revelation 20 were familiar with the sort of resurrection theology that we find in Paul, they might well have interpreted ‘they came to life’ in v 4, and ‘the first resurrection’ in v 5, as referring to regeneration” (“Revelation 20 and Pauline Eschatology,” 39).

⁹¹ Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith*, 132. Amillennialist Dennis Johnson cites the use of “souls” as an argument *against* the regeneration view, but he does not explain why he thinks it presents a problem for this interpretation (*Triumph of the Lamb*, 293).

A third argument for this view is found in John 5:25–29.⁹² In this passage, when Jesus refers to a spiritual resurrection of believers in the present (vv. 25–27)—in contrast to a physical resurrection of believers in the future (vv. 28–29)—the spiritual resurrection in view is the new birth of the one who believes in Christ. Because of the parallel between this passage and Revelation 20, John 5:25–29 is said to support the idea not merely that the “first resurrection” is spiritual in general, but that it is the regeneration of the believer in particular.

In response, there are several significant difficulties with this view of the first resurrection in Revelation 20. First, the word “resurrection” (ἀνάστασις) is used 39 times in the New Testament outside of Revelation 20 and never is it used to refer to regeneration.⁹³ This objection is not conclusive, because it is possible that Revelation 20 uses this word in a unique way, especially since a metaphorical use of ἀνάστασις would be a fitting way to signify being “made alive” in the spiritual realm. But nonetheless, the lack of precedent for this use of ἀνάστασις places the burden of proof on those who claim that the “first resurrection” is the believer’s regeneration.

A second problem concerns the coming to life of “the rest of the dead” at the beginning of verse 5. When John says that these individuals “came to life” (ἐζήσαν), most interpreters agree that this verb refers to a physical resurrection. Because John uses the same form of the same Greek word (ἐζήσαν) to refer to the coming to life of the individuals in verse 4, it stands to reason that this “first resurrection” must be a physical resurrection as well. Otherwise, “we are faced with the problem of the same word being used in the same context with two entirely different meanings, with no indication whatsoever as to the change of meaning.”⁹⁴ The premillennial view does not have this problem, because it sees the verb ἐζήσαν as referring to a physical resurrection in both verses—a resurrection of the righteous in verse 4 and a resurrection of the wicked in verse 5.

Regarding the amillennial argument that John’s use of the word “souls” in Revelation 20:4 supports this view, ψυχή is often used as a reference to the whole person (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)⁹⁵ and therefore it need not refer to the resurrection of merely

⁹² Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 247–48; Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith*, 118; Page, “Revelation 20 and Pauline Eschatology,” 37–38; White, “Death and the First Resurrection,” 22, 25–27.

⁹³ Gordon, “The First Resurrection,” 82.

⁹⁴ George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1972), 265–66; Gordon, “The First Resurrection,” 82–83. The common amillennial response to this argument cites John 5:25–29 as an example where the very same passage refers to both the spiritual resurrection of regeneration (vv. 25–27) and the physical resurrection of the righteous and the wicked at the end of the age (vv. 28–29) (Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 247–48; Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith*, 118; Page, “Revelation 20 and Pauline Eschatology,” 37–38; White, “Death and the First Resurrection,” 22, 25–27). But as discussed earlier, the way the two uses of ἐζήσαν are connected to each other in Revelation 20—“Some of the dead ἐζήσαν (v. 4b), but the rest of the dead did not ἐζήσαν until later (v. 5a)” —makes it clear that they refer to the same kind of coming to life.

⁹⁵ BDAG, 1099–1100; Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon*, 388; Deere, “Premillennialism in Revelation 20:4–6,” 67. Furthermore, as Deere notes, “John has previously used ψυχή with a qualifying genitive to refer to the whole person (ψυχὰς ἀνθρώπων in 18:13).” Amillennialist G. K. Beale makes the

the spiritual component of man. In fact, as amillennialist G. C. Berkouwer recognizes, there seems to be no soul-body dichotomy in view in Revelation 20:4–6, for John simply sees that those who had been beheaded come to life again and sit on thrones.⁹⁶ For this reason, the use of ψυχή in Revelation 20:4 is compatible with the premillennial view of the “first resurrection” and therefore fails to provide compelling evidence that it refers to the regeneration of believers.

A third problem with this view concerns the duration of the reign of the saints. In Revelation 20:4 and 6, the apostle John describes the saints reigning “for a thousand years” (χίλια ἔτη). In doing so, he uses an *accusative of time*, which indicates that the saints will reign for the entire thousand-year period.⁹⁷ This can be illustrated by John’s use of the same accusative of time in Revelation 20:2—“for a thousand years” (χίλια ἔτη)—where Satan is bound and incarcerated for the entirety of the thousand years. According to John’s portrayal of the vision, then, the individuals who come to life in the first resurrection will begin their reign at the same time—at the very beginning of the thousand years—and they will reign together with Christ for the entirety of that time period (Rev 20:4–6).⁹⁸

In contrast, according to the amillennial view that the first resurrection equals regeneration, believers are regenerated *throughout* the thousand years (i.e., the present age) so that the entrance of these saints into this millennial reign is distributed throughout the millennium.⁹⁹ In this scenario, those saints who are saved during the church age do not reign for the entirety of the thousand years—as John says they will—and some of them do not begin their reign until the millennium is almost over.

If John had intended to communicate that the saints would reign *during* the thousand years (which would correspond to the amillennial view) instead of *throughout the extent* of the thousand years, a *genitive* of time would have been more appropriate.¹⁰⁰ As it stands, the apostle’s use of the accusative χίλια ἔτη (“for a thousand years”) not only presents a problem for the amillennial regeneration view, but it also fits perfectly with the premillennial view of believers coming to life in the first resurrection and reigning with Christ for the entirety of the thousand years.¹⁰¹

same observation, noting that ψυχή is used as a substitute for “living body” elsewhere in Revelation (8:9; 12:11; 16:3; cf. 18:13) (*The Book of Revelation*, 998).

⁹⁶ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ: Studies in Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1972), 304.

⁹⁷ 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.

⁹⁸ Charles E. Powell, “Progression versus Recapitulation in Revelation 20:1–6,” *BSac* 163, no. 649 (Jan 2006): 109.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ See Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 122–24.

¹⁰¹ The amillennialist cannot escape this difficulty by appealing to the symbolic nature of the Book of Revelation, for John’s use of the accusative of time is not imagery but rather a grammatically precise explanation of the significance of what he saw in his vision. If the first resurrection refers to the regeneration of believers throughout the thousand years, why would John portray them as coming to life at the

Fourthly, and most significantly, according to the view that the “first resurrection” in Revelation 20 is regeneration, the people in verse 4 are not regenerated by the Holy Spirit *until after they are martyred for their faith in Christ*. In the second part of John’s vision in Revelation 20:4, the apostle John writes:

And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and 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 came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years (Rev 20:4).

According to the straightforward reading of Revelation 20:4, this view introduces “the absurdity of having souls being regenerated *after* they’ve been beheaded for their faithfulness to Christ!”¹⁰² Because this is theologically impossible, this view of the first resurrection must be rejected.¹⁰³

View 2: The Death of the Believer

Other amillennialists interpret the “first resurrection” of Revelation 20 as the believer’s entrance into the intermediate state at the point of death and the blessings

beginning of the millennium and reigning together with Christ throughout the entirety of the millennium? No satisfactory answer to this question has been proposed by proponents of amillennialism.

¹⁰² McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 488; emphasis original; also see MacLeod, “The Fourth ‘Last Thing,’” 57; Walvoord, “Theological Significance,” 235; Hoehner, “Evidence from Revelation 20,” 253; Blaising, “Premillennialism,” 223.

¹⁰³ Most amillennialists who interpret the “first resurrection” as regeneration neither acknowledge nor respond to this argument. A rare exception is R. Fowler White, who argues that the apostle John does not recount the martyrs’ experiences in chronological order in Rev 20:4. According to White: “He speaks first of beheading, then of refusal to worship or bear the name of the beast, then of resurrection and reign. Whatever our understanding of the first resurrection, we must all concede that, though refusal to worship or bear the name of the beast *follows* beheading *in John’s presentation*, that refusal actually *preceded* beheading *in history*” (“Death and the First Resurrection,” 18; emphasis original). This allows White to argue that the first resurrection “actually precedes and ironically leads the saints into martyrdom rather than delivering them from it” (23). But White has subtly misrepresented John’s presentation and thereby complicated an otherwise simple progression of events in Rev 20:4. In the second part of verse 4, the apostle uses only three independent clauses (each connected by καὶ) to describe the unfolding of his vision—“I saw the souls [(εἶδον) τὰς ψυχὰς]...they came to life [ἐζήσαν]...they reigned with Christ [ἔβασιλευσαν μετὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ]”—and these events are presented in chronological order. When White describes John’s presentation as departing from chronological order, he is referring to the clauses which are subordinate to the first independent clause. Rather than advancing the action of the actual vision, however, these subordinate clauses supply background information by explaining how and why the souls seen by John were killed in the first place. Condensing this subordinate description into a concise paraphrase results in the following rendering of verse 4: “I saw the souls of those [who were martyred] and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.” The fact that John does not relay this background information in sequential order does not undermine the simplicity of the chronology of events portrayed by the three main clauses. Contrary to White’s claim, the first resurrection does indeed remedy the death of the martyrs described in Rev 20:4 and it is therefore a physical resurrection. An additional problem with White’s view (that the saints’ resurrection preceded their martyrdom) is found in the very next verse. By referring to “the *rest* of the dead” (οἱ λοιποὶ τῶν νεκρῶν) not coming to life until after the thousand years (v. 5a), John makes it clear that those who came to life in verse 4 were indeed physically dead when they experienced the first resurrection.

of life that it brings.¹⁰⁴ William Hendriksen describes the first resurrection as “the translation of the soul from this sinful earth to God’s holy heaven,”¹⁰⁵ Anthony Hoekema calls it “the transition from physical death to life in heaven with Christ during the time between death and the resurrection,”¹⁰⁶ and James Hughes defines it as “the soul’s being raised from earth to heaven.”¹⁰⁷

According to this view, when the believer dies physically, his soul is raised and it ascends from earth to heaven, “the effect of which is the living and reigning Christ a thousand years.”¹⁰⁸ This ascension—in which the soul enters the intermediate state of life with Christ—is called the “first resurrection.”¹⁰⁹ In the words of Robert Strimple, “The first resurrection occurs when [the believer] departs this life and is immediately ushered into the presence of Christ to reign with him.”¹¹⁰

According to this view, the first resurrection of Revelation 20 is considered a paradoxical reference to the physical death of the believer.¹¹¹ As Meredith Kline explains, “Just as the resurrection of the unjust is paradoxically identified as ‘the second

¹⁰⁴ Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 451. This view is defended by Kline (“The First Resurrection,” 366–75), Hoekema (*The Bible and the Future*, 232–37), Hendriksen (*More than Conquerors*, 191–93), Johnson (*Triumph of the Lamb*, 291–94), Poythress (*The Returning King*, 182, and “Genre and Hermeneutics in Rev 20:1–6,” 53), Strimple (“Amillennialism,” 127), Beale (*The Book of Revelation*, 991–1011), Storms (*Kingdom Come*, 462–65), and Davis (*The High King of Heaven*, 475–82). According to Riddlebarger (*A Case for Amillennialism*, 249) and Beale (*The Book of Revelation*, 1011–12), the two amillennial views of the “first resurrection” are not necessarily incompatible with each other, because believers are both raised spiritually from death to life at the moment of regeneration and raised spiritually from earth to heaven at the time of death.

¹⁰⁵ Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 192.

¹⁰⁶ Anthony A. Hoekema “An Amillennial Response,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, 57.

¹⁰⁷ Hughes, “The Question of the Millennium,” 291.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 290–91. According to Hughes, this is an example of metonymy in which the “first resurrection” is “the entrance of the soul into a glorified state of life with Christ at physical death” even though “John uses the term to refer to the soul’s living with Christ a thousand years (in heaven)” (291).

¹⁰⁹ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 237; Hughes, “The Question of the Millennium,” 291. For this reason, Johnson refers to the martyrs’ first resurrection as “the deliverance of their souls from all that threatened them on earth” (*Triumph of the Lamb*, 294).

¹¹⁰ Strimple, “Amillennialism,” 127.

¹¹¹ Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 293; Garlington, “Reigning with Christ,” 77. As Garlington explains: “To the non-Christian onlooker, the death of the believer is the end of existence, which compels him to draw the conclusion that there is no difference between the Christian and himself. John, however, comforts his readers by informing them that instead of being the termination of life, physical death is the portal through which the believing person enters into a new phase of that resurrection which began when he first heard the voice of the Son of Man” (74). According to Johnson: “Paradox is no stranger to those familiar with John’s visions. The lion who has conquered is the lamb who has been slain. The carefully counted Israelite army of 144,000 celibate males is an innumerable multitude from every nation and people. The church is safe from destruction, yet exposed to persecution, even to the death. The beast overcomes Jesus’s witnesses and kills them, yet in so doing the beast inadvertently forfeits to them the real victory, for in their fidelity to the death they overcome the dragon-accuser who animates the beast (Rev. 12:11). From one perspective the martyrs of heaven can be viewed as sacrificial victims, awaiting just vindication; but from another—even now, while the ‘first things’ (death, mourning, pain) exist—they have experienced a ‘first resurrection,’ the deliverance of their souls from all that threatened them on earth (cf. 7:15–17)” (*Triumph of the Lamb*, 293–94).

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!"¹¹² In other words, even though these believers have died, "John sees them as alive, not in the bodily sense, but in the sense that they are enjoying life in heaven in fellowship with Christ."¹¹³

According to amillennialist Sam Storms, if the apostle John's purpose in Revelation 20:4–6 was to encourage believers who were facing persecution and possible martyrdom,

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*.¹¹⁴

In fact, Storms argues that the terminology John uses to describe his vision fits perfectly with the view that the first resurrection refers to entrance into the intermediate state:

If John were attempting to describe the blessings of the intermediate state for those facing martyrdom, what terminology could he possibly have used, other than what he does use, and still maintain the desired emphasis? There simply is no other Greek noun besides *anastasis* ["resurrection"] that would adequately make the point.¹¹⁵

As evidence that Revelation 20:4–6 refers to the experience of martyrs in the intermediate state—and therefore that the first resurrection must refer to entrance *into* the intermediate state—amillennialists point to John's use of the word "thrones" in verse 4.¹¹⁶ According to Storms, because the Greek word for "throne" (*θρόνος*) consistently refers to heavenly thrones throughout the book of Revelation, it must refer to thrones in heaven in Revelation 20:4 as well.¹¹⁷ For this reason, because the resurrected martyrs are described as sitting upon these heavenly thrones, the millennial reign of these saints must refer to life in heaven in the intermediate state.

¹¹² Kline, "The First Resurrection," 371.

¹¹³ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 233; cf. Leon Morris, *Revelation*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 231.

¹¹⁴ Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 453; emphasis original.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 291; Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 232–33; Strimple, "Amillennialism," 125; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 998; Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 191.

¹¹⁷ According to Storms, "The word *thronos* appears sixty-two times in the New Testament, forty-seven of which are in the book of Revelation. Twice (2:13; 13:2) it refers to Satan's throne (being synonymous with his authority or power) and once to the throne of the beast (16:10). On four occasions it refers to God's throne on the *new earth* in consequence of its having *come down from heaven* (21:3, 5; 22:1, 3). In every other instance (forty times) *thronos* refers to a throne in *heaven*, either that of God the Father, of

As further evidence for this view, it is also noted that John specifically refers to “souls” (ψυχή) being resurrected and reigning with Christ (Rev 20:4).¹¹⁸ According to this argument, the reason John refers to the experience of disembodied *souls* who are martyred is because he is describing the blessedness of the intermediate state of those who are now living and reigning with Christ during the thousand years.¹¹⁹ Amillennialists also point to other uses of the verb “to live” (ζῶω) in the New Testament.¹²⁰ According to this argument, because ζῶω is used to describe the life and existence of souls after the death of the body in passages such as Matthew 22:32,¹²¹ Luke 20:38,¹²² and 1 Peter 4:6,¹²³ there is a clear precedent of this word being used to describe life in the intermediate state. This argument is said to support this specific use of the verb in Revelation 20:4.

As a final argument for this view, amillennialists point to other passages in the Book of Revelation which highlight spiritual life in the intermediate state after physical death. For example, Revelation 2:10–11 promises “the crown of life” to those believers who are faithful until death;¹²⁴ Revelation 6:9–11 “is a vision of the heavenly bliss of those who have suffered martyrdom for Christ;”¹²⁵ and Revelation 14:13 emphasizes “the blessedness of Christian death.”¹²⁶ These parallels are said to confirm that Revelation 20:4–6 “is concerned with the bliss of the intermediate state”¹²⁷ and therefore that the “first resurrection” refers to entrance into the intermediate state.

In response, the primary difficulty with this view concerns the term ἀνάστασις. As even amillennialist Sydney Page observes, “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.”¹²⁸ But not only does this view insist on a use of ἀνάστασις which is unprecedented in the New Testament, it also argues for an interpretation of the “first

Christ, of the twenty-four elders, etc.” (*Kingdom Come*, 461; cf. Cornelis P. Venema, *The Promise of the Future* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2000], 328).

¹¹⁸ Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 293; Strimple, “Amillennialism,” 125; Venema, *The Promise of the Future*, 329; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 998; Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 191–92.

¹¹⁹ Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 458.

¹²⁰ According to Beale, “In the Apocalypse [ζῶω] sometimes refers to physical resurrection (1:18; 2:8) or more generally to some form of physical existence (16:3; 19:20), but more often it has figurative connotation of spiritual existence, especially with respect to God’s attribute of timeless existence (six occurrences). In 3:1 the verb refers to spiritual life (and the uses in 7:17 and 13:14 are probably also figurative)” (*The Book of Revelation*, 1004).

¹²¹ Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 455.

¹²² Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 233–34; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1008–9.

¹²³ Garlington, “Reigning with Christ,” 74, 94; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1009.

¹²⁴ Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 455. According to Storms, the parallels between Rev 2:10–11 and Rev 20:4–6 are “unmistakable.”

¹²⁵ Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 457; also see Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 234–35; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 998, 1010; Poythress, *The Returning King*, 180; Menn, *Biblical Eschatology*, 294.

¹²⁶ Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 458; also see Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 235; Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 294.

¹²⁷ Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 458.

¹²⁸ Page, “Revelation 20 and Pauline Eschatology,” 37.

resurrection” that is inconsistent with the very concept of a “resurrection.”¹²⁹ According to this view, the word “resurrection” refers to those who *live spiritually* even though they have *died physically*. In this way, the term “resurrection” refers to “the Christian’s entrance into non-bodily life after bodily death” or “the Christian’s passage from bodily death into non-bodily life.”¹³⁰ The problem is that “resurrection” does not imply life *after* death but rather life *from* death.¹³¹ In other words, “When the Bible and its interpreters invoke resurrection as a term or concept, life and death are understood to be either *both spiritual* (non-bodily) or *both physical* (bodily).”¹³²

Therefore, when someone who is physically dead is made alive in the physical realm, this is often referred to as a “resurrection.” Likewise, when someone who is spiritually dead is made alive in the spiritual realm, this could also be described as a “resurrection.”¹³³ But when someone who is already spiritually alive continues to live spiritually even after his physical death, no coming to life—and therefore no “resurrection”—has actually taken place. For this reason, “We may rightly call such life ‘the intermediate state’ or ‘the Christian’s afterlife,’ but not ‘resurrection.’”¹³⁴ The word ἀνάστασις is completely ill-suited to convey the believer’s entrance into the intermediate state at death, and therefore this view should be rejected.¹³⁵

A second problem with this view concerns the repetition of the identical form of the same verb ἐζήσαν (“they came to life”) in verses 4 and 5. If one resurrection is spiritual, then the other must also be spiritual, and if one is physical, the other must

¹²⁹ In the words of N.T. Wright, “to use the word ‘resurrection’ to *refer to* death in an attempt to invest it with a new meaning seems...to strain usage well beyond the breaking point” (N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003], 474; emphasis original). The amillennial view that the first resurrection equals regeneration does not have this problem, because being made alive in the spiritual realm certainly fits the concept of a “resurrection,” even though ἀνάστασις never refers to the new birth in the New Testament.

¹³⁰ These definitions are provided by White (“Death and the First Resurrection,” 8–9), who is critiquing this view rather than defending it, but they summarize it accurately.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ This is acknowledged even though the New Testament itself does not use the term ἀνάστασις as a reference to regeneration (see above for discussion).

¹³⁴ White, “Death and the First Resurrection,” 8. White states, “I do not see that such notions are consistent with the meaning of resurrection as a term or concept in the Bible or elsewhere” (9). Along these same lines, White objects that while the Bible clearly teaches two categories of resurrection outside of Revelation 20 (e.g., in John 5), this view creates a third category of resurrection otherwise unknown in the Bible.

¹³⁵ According to Storms, “If John wished to describe entrance into the intermediate state in terms of a resurrection...with what Greek noun other than *anastasis* [‘resurrection’] could he have done it?” (*Kingdom Come*, 453). The problem with this argument is that it assumes what Storms is trying to prove: that John does indeed intend to describe the believer’s entrance into the immediate state as a *resurrection*. Nobody disputes that the word ἀνάστασις is the best word to express the idea of a *resurrection*—what is disputed is whether John is describing *entrance into the intermediate state* as a resurrection. One could equally argue, “If John wished to describe prayers to God in terms of a *resurrection*, with what Greek noun other than ἀνάστασις could he have done it?” but this does not prove that the word “resurrection” refers to prayers.

be physical as well. As A. J. Gordon writes, “The meaning of the one fixes the meaning of the other.”¹³⁶ This has significant implications:

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.¹³⁷

This is a theological and exegetical impossibility, and for this reason the use of the word ἔζησαν as a description of the “first resurrection” weighs heavily against this view.

A third problem with this view concerns the designation χίλια ἔτη (“for a thousand years”) at the end of Revelation 20:4. As explained above, John’s use of the

¹³⁶ Gordon, “The First Resurrection,” 83.

¹³⁷ Deere, “Premillennialism in Revelation 20:4–6,” 68. Because the same word ἔζησαν is used, amillennialist Anthony Hoekema agrees that both resurrections must be of the same nature, but he argues that neither of them are bodily resurrections. According to Hoekema, when John says “they came to life [ἔζησαν] and reigned with Christ for a thousand years” (v. 4), this refers to a spiritual resurrection of the saints during the present age. But when John continues by writing that “the rest of the dead did not come to life [ἔζησαν] until the thousand years were completed” (v. 5a), he means that the wicked never did come to life spiritually (*The Bible and the Future*, 235–36; also Augustine, *City of God*, 20.9; Strimple, “Amillennialism,” 126; Hughes, “The Question of the Millennium,” 301–2). Hoekema defends this interpretation by arguing that the conjunction ἄχρι in verse 5—“until [ἄχρι] the thousand years were completed”—means “up to a certain point” but does not indicate a change in the state of affairs after the time period has ended. For this reason, says Hoekema, “The use of the word *until* does not imply that these unbelieving dead will live and reign with Christ after this period has ended,” for they will *never* live and reign with Christ (*The Bible and the Future*, 236). But this interpretation is highly unlikely for several reasons: (1) Every time that ἄχρι is used in the New Testament as a conjunction (as in Rev 20:5) rather than a preposition, it refers to a period of time that will come to an end and be followed by a reversal of the condition just described (e.g., Rev 7:3; 15:18: 20:3) (Deere, “Premillennialism in Revelation 20:4–6,” 68–69; Blaising, “Premillennialism,” 225–26; MacLeod, “The Fourth ‘Last Thing,’” 58). Therefore, the use of the conjunction ἄχρι in Rev 20:5 implies that the “rest of the dead” will indeed “come to life” (ἔζησαν) and experience a physical resurrection like the saints in verse 4. (2) The exact same expression is used in Rev 20:3 (“until the thousand years were completed”—ἄχρι τελεσθῆ τὰ χίλια ἔτη) where it clearly contemplates a change after the thousand years (since Satan will be released once the millennium is completed) (Rev 20:7–8). This implies that the rest of the dead will indeed “come to life” (ἔζησαν) after the thousand-year period. (3) If John wanted to deny the resurrection and reign to the others, he could have simply written, “The rest of the dead did not come to life.” The addition of “until the thousand years were ended” clearly suggests subsequent action, whereas the clause is entirely superfluous if subsequent action is not intended (Saucy, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 276). (4) If neither use of ἔζησαν refers to a bodily resurrection, then there is no mention of the future resurrection of the believer in Revelation 20. (5) This interpretation raises the question of why John would have deemed it necessary to inform or assure his readers that unbelievers will not experience the spiritual resurrection promised only to believers. (6) A “first resurrection” simply implies a second one. As Saucy states, “The immediate identification of the coming to life of the first group as the ‘first’ resurrection seems clearly to suggest a second resurrection involving those remaining” (Saucy, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 276). Amillennialists G. K. Beale (*The Book of Revelation*, 1015–16) and Sam Storms (*Kingdom Come*, 468–69) argue against Hoekema’s view, insisting that Rev 20:5 refers to the physical resurrection of unbelievers after the thousand years, which leaves them with no adequate response to the premillennial objection of the two uses of ἔζησαν having different meanings.

accusative of time indicates that the individuals who come to life in the first resurrection will begin their reign at the same time—at the very beginning of the thousand years—and they will reign together with Christ for the entirety of the millennium (Rev 20:4–6).¹³⁸ In contrast, according to the view that the first resurrection refers to believers entering the intermediate state at the point of death, the entrance of these saints into their reign is distributed throughout the millennial period as they die.¹³⁹ In this scenario, believers do not live in heaven and reign with Christ for the entirety of the thousand years—as John says they will—and some of them do not begin their reign until the millennium is almost over. A genitive of time would have been compatible with this view, but the accusative of time is not.

Furthermore, the various arguments in favor of this view are less than compelling. First, the claim of a clear precedent of the word ζῶω (“to live”) being used as a reference to life in the intermediate state is true, but also a bit misleading. The verb is used 139 times in the New Testament, but only three times is it used in this way (Matt 22:32; Luke 20:38; 1 Pet 4:6). Therefore, a clear precedent does exist, but the rarity of its use undermines the strength of this argument, especially in the absence of clear contextual indicators for this uncommon usage.¹⁴⁰ The verb can certainly be used to describe life in the intermediate state, but John’s use of this specific word in Revelation 20:4 provides no compelling evidence that it does.

Second, John’s use of the word “throne” (θρόνος) in verse 4 is not a decisive argument in favor of this view either. According to some amillennialists, because θρόνος refers to heavenly thrones throughout Revelation, it must refer to heavenly thrones in Revelation 20:4 as well. This is said to place the scene of Revelation 20:4–6 in heaven and therefore during the intermediate state. But the word θρόνος simply refers to a *throne*, without specifying the actual location of the throne. Instead, the location of the throne mentioned in any given passage must be determined from the immediate context of its use. In Revelation 20, the context indicates that the saints who reign from these thrones are “on the broad plain of the earth” (Rev 20:9). Furthermore, the promise in Revelation 5:10 that the saints “will reign upon the earth” also argues for earthly thrones in Revelation 20:4–6 since the former is fulfilled in the latter. This amillennial argument is less than compelling, for *if John had intended to refer to thrones on earth, what other word was available to him to do so?*

Thirdly, John’s reference to “souls” (ψυχή) being resurrected and reigning with Christ (Rev 20:4) fails to provide compelling evidence for this view either. As noted previously, the use of ψυχή to refer to the whole person is well attested in the New Testament (e.g., 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).¹⁴¹ In addition, there seems to be no soul-

¹³⁸ Powell, “Progression versus Recapitulation,” 109.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ In addition, the verb ζῶω is used elsewhere in Revelation to refer to bodily resurrection (Rev 1:18; 2:8; 13:14; cf. Rom 14:9). Furthermore, as Thomas notes, whenever ζῶω is used in the context of bodily death in the New Testament, it always speaks of bodily resurrection (e.g., John 11:25; Acts 1:3; 9:41) (*Revelation* 8–22, 417).

¹⁴¹ BDAG, 1099–1100; Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon*, 388; Deere, “Premillennialism in Revelation 20:4–6,” 67.

body dichotomy in view in Revelation 20:4–6, for John sees simply that those who had been beheaded come to life again and sit on thrones.¹⁴² For this reason, the use of *ψυχή* in Revelation 20:4 is compatible with the premillennial view of the “first resurrection” and therefore fails to prove the amillennial view.

In addition, the amillennial argument for interpreting *ψυχή* in Revelation 20:4 as a reference to man’s soul (as distinguished from his physical body) actually highlights the primary problem with this view, for in what sense does the believer’s soul experience a “resurrection” at the point of physical death? Again, when someone who is already spiritually alive continues to live spiritually even after his physical death, no *coming to life* has actually taken place.

Fourthly, none of the parallel passages cited by amillennialists confirm that Revelation 20:4–6 describes life in the intermediate state and therefore that the “first resurrection” refers to entrance into the intermediate state. The strongest amillennial argument in this regard is the appeal to Revelation 6:9–11.¹⁴³ According to amillennialist Sam Storms, a careful comparison between Revelation 6:9–11 and Revelation 20:4 reveals that they are clearly describing the same experience of martyred saints in the intermediate state.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, 304.

¹⁴³ Amillennialists also cite Rev 2:10–11 and 13:14 as evidence that Rev 20:4–6 portrays life in the intermediate state. According to Storms, Rev 2:10–11 is parallel to Rev 20:4–6 in three specific ways: (1) “it speaks of *martyrdom* as the result of steadfast faith;” (2) “the faithful are promised ‘the crown of *life*;’” and (3) “the faithful martyrs are exempt from the *second death*” (*Kingdom Come*, 459; emphasis original). But these parallels do not prove that Rev 20:4–6 describes life in the intermediate state. To use Rev 2:10–11 as a compelling argument, the amillennialist must be able to demonstrate (a) that receiving the crown of life takes place during the intermediate state rather than in the eternal state and (b) that it can be equated with the millennial reign portrayed in Rev 20:4–6. But this cannot be done. According to Kline, the “crown of life” in Rev 2:10 “might...be the royal crown,” in which case it should be considered “the nominal equivalent of the verbal ‘they lived and reign’...in Revelation 20:4ff” (“The First Resurrection,” 374), but this has merely been asserted rather than proven.

Regarding Rev 14:13, Kline argues that the blessing of “rest from their labors” promised in this verse “is very much the same as the millennial blessings of Revelation 20:6” (“The First Resurrection,” 373). According to Kline, “the biblical concept of sabbath rest includes enthronement after the completion of labors by which royal dominion is manifested or secured (cf., e.g., Isa. 66:1)... To live and reign with Christ is to participate in his royal sabbath rest.” For this reason, Kline cites Rev 14:13 as evidence that Rev 20:4–6 describes life in the intermediate state. The simple problem with this argument is its inability to demonstrate that the rest of Rev 14:13 can indeed be equated with the reign of Rev 20:6. If a case can be made from Isa 66:1 that the two verses describe the same experience, then this needs to be demonstrated clearly. Until then, interpreters not already inclined to connect these dots may have a difficult time seeing the connection.

¹⁴⁴ Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 457.

Revelation 6:9	Revelation 20:4a
“And... I saw”	“And I saw”
“the souls of those who had been slain”	“the souls of those who had been beheaded”
“because of the word of God”	“because of the word of God”
“and because of the testimony which they had maintained”	“because of the testimony of Jesus”

Figure 2. Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 458.¹⁴⁵

Because of these parallels, Storms says it “seems beyond reasonable doubt” that these two visions are describing the same experience of the martyrs and therefore that Revelation 20:4–6 must portray life in the intermediate state.¹⁴⁶

But the problem with this argument is that the similarities listed by Storms merely prove that both visions refer to the same group of individuals, not that both visions describe the same *experience* of those individuals. In fact, John identifies the martyrs and what led to their deaths in Revelation 6:9 and 20:4a, but he does not describe the *experience* of these martyrs until Revelation 6:10–11 and 20:4b. For this reason, if Storms wants to demonstrate that Revelation 6:9–11 and 20:4 describe the same experience of these martyrs in the intermediate state, he must show clear parallels between Revelation 6:10–11 and 20:4b.¹⁴⁷ But these are the very parts of the passages he ignores in his comparison.

The two visions are obviously related to one another, but their relationship is one of progression rather than simple identity.¹⁴⁸ More specifically, the progression from Revelation 6:9–11 to 20:4–6 is such that if the former refers to the intermediate state (as it clearly does), then the latter must refer to a subsequent stage in the experience of the martyred saints.¹⁴⁹ In Revelation 6:10–11 the martyrs cry out to the Lord to avenge their blood because of the ongoing martyrdom of the saints (v. 10). In response to their anguished pleas, they are given a white robe and told to wait until the full number of martyrs has been slain (v. 11), with the implied promise that vindication will come when this number has been reached. This is indeed the intermediate state.

¹⁴⁵ Storms appears to have borrowed his chart from Michel Gourgues, “The Thousand-Year Reign (Rev. 20:1–6): Terrestrial or Celestial?,” *CBQ* 47, no. 4 (Oct 1985): 680.

¹⁴⁶ Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 458.

¹⁴⁷ The only similarity in experience noted by Hoekema is that in both passages “the souls of deceased believers are said to be living between death and resurrection” (*The Bible and the Future*, 235). But this simply assumes that Rev 20:4–6 describes the intermediate state (i.e., the experience of saints between death and resurrection), which is precisely what Hoekema is trying to prove.

¹⁴⁸ Michaels, “The First Resurrection,” 107; also see Blaising, “Premillennialism,” 221–22.

¹⁴⁹ Michaels, “The First Resurrection,” 107–8.

In Revelation 20:4b, however, their number is now complete (cf. Rev 13:15; 18:24) and their prayers for vindication have been answered, for the Lord has returned in judgment (Rev 19:11–21).¹⁵⁰ The wait for divine vengeance is over, and the entire group of martyrs comes to life and reigns with Christ for a thousand years (Rev 20:4). This distinction between the two is reflected in the fact that the experience of the martyred saints in Revelation 6:9–11 lasts for a short time (“a little while longer” in v. 11), whereas the experience of the martyred saints in Revelation 20:4–6 lasts for a long time (“a thousand years” in v. 4).¹⁵¹ The two passages are clearly not describing the same experience or period of time.

Storms and other amillennialists may disagree with this reading of the Book of Revelation, but the consistency of this progression between the two passages demonstrates the compatibility of Revelation 6:9–11 with the premillennial view of Revelation 20:4–6. In doing so, it also demonstrates that Revelation 6:9–11 fails to provide compelling evidence that Revelation 20:4–6 describes life in the intermediate state.¹⁵²

Conclusion

In the words of George Eldon Ladd, “It is difficult to see how this ‘first resurrection’ can be anything but literal bodily resurrection.”¹⁵³ For this reason, the first resurrection in Revelation 20 must be the first of two physical resurrections which are separated by a thousand years. The first is a resurrection of the righteous, who will be raised at the Second Coming of Christ (Rev 20:4–6), and the second is a resurrection of the wicked (Rev 20:5a), who will be raised after the millennium to stand before the judgment of the great white throne (Rev 20:11–15). And between these two physical resurrections, King Jesus will reign upon the earth for a thousand years, just as premillennialism teaches.

¹⁵⁰ As Michaels states, the prayer of Rev 6:9–11 is answered in Rev 20:4–6 (“The First Resurrection,” 108).

¹⁵¹ Webb, “Revelation 20,” 32. Revelation 6:9–11 takes place during the intermediate state, but it does not cover the entirety of the present age. In fact, the event described in this passage is yet future, not yet having taken place. More specifically, it will take place during the seven-year tribulation and it describes the pleas of those who will be martyred earlier in that period. So the “little while longer” in verse 11 is less than seven years in length, in contrast to the millennial reign of Christ, which will last a thousand years.

¹⁵² In response to Michaels’ argument, Kline insists that Rev 20:4–6 views the entire period of the church in the intermediate state as a whole, whereas Rev 6:9–11 sees it at a particular point early on (“A Reaffirmation,” 116–17). But in his argument, Kline simply assumes that Rev 20:4–6 describes the intermediate state without actually proving it through a comparison of the two passages.

¹⁵³ Ladd, “Revelation 20 and the Millennium,” 169.