

The “First Resurrection” in Revelation 20

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Of primary concern in the exegesis of Revelation 20, and in the millennial debate that surrounds it, is interpretation of the “first resurrection” portrayed in verses 4-6. While premillennialists understand this to refer to the first stage of the general bodily resurrection, most amillennialists see this as representing believers who have died and have entered the intermediate state in heaven while they await the final consummation. This paper aims to show that the amillennial understanding of the “first resurrection” has strong support from both the immediate and the broader context of Revelation 20.

Methodological & Hermeneutical Considerations

Premillennialists contend that John’s use of the word ἀνάστασις (v. 5) requires the “first resurrection” to be a physical resurrection. They point out that ἀνάστασις appears forty-one times in the New Testament, and in thirty-nine instances it refers to a bodily resurrection. Jack Deere reasons directly from this observation to the conclusion, “So the resurrection in view in Revelation 20:5 is a literal resurrection” and that “the usage of ἀνάστασις precludes” the amillennial view.¹

However, this commits the linguistic fallacy of conflating *sense* and *reference*.² While the sense of this term brings to mind a physical raising to life, and it is even possible that what John saw in the context of the vision appeared to have a physical dimension, that does not entail that the *extra-visionary referent* must be the physical resurrection.³ Craig Blaising asserts,

¹ Jack S. Deere, “Premillennialism in Revelation 20:4-6,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135, no. 537 (January 1978), 71.

² D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 63.

³ For example, simply looking up a dictionary definition of the word “eagle” does not clarify what this symbol refers to, if anything, beyond the context of the vision (Rev. 8:13; 12:14). William Hendriksen also cautions against “pressing the details” of the visions, seeking to find a distinct referent for each symbol rather than taking the

“*Anastasis* never means a disembodied soul anywhere in the Scripture.”⁴ However, amillennialists do not contend that ἀνάστασις means “disembodied soul,” but that in 20:6 it refers to the experience of those who, despite their death, have come alive in God’s presence.⁵ Indeed, Blaising seems to undermine his own point when he comments, “This coming to life is bodily resurrection. The word ‘come to life’ [ζάω] is used... of the beast in Revelation 13. He supposedly ‘came to life’ after a mortal wound.”⁶ Since Blaising sees the beast as living after an apparent death-and-resurrection, it is not accurate to say that his “coming to life” (13:14) refers to a bodily resurrection (even at the visionary level), despite the fact that those marveling at the beast (13:3) would possibly use the term with this sense. Indeed, this example introduces additional distinctions to consider. If the beast’s death is only apparent (or, alternatively, his death was real, but his resurrection is apparent),⁷ then the deceived worshippers of the beast might describe him as “coming to life,” intending a bodily resurrection, while John in the context of the vision uses ζάω to refer to the beast’s seeming resurrection.⁸ Here is a distinction between sense and reference at the visionary level. However, there is also the level of *historical* or *extra-visionary* reference: what person(s) or institutions or events does the apparently-dying-and-rising

picture as a whole (*More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967], 39).

⁴ Craig A. Blaising, “Premillennialism: A Progressive Dispensational View,” *Criswell Theological Review* 11, no. 1 (September 2013), 69.

⁵ Gilbert Ryle gives the example that the phrases “the Morning Star” and “the Evening Star” are different in *meaning*, even though they refer to the same extralinguistic entity (Venus). See “The Theory of Meaning,” 133, cited in Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 107.

⁶ Blaising, 69, emphasis supplied.

⁷ “The beast has been dealt a fatal stroke and is said to have overcome it...but the beast’s continued existence is not a reversal of his actual defeat” (G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 689). This is reminiscent of Christ’s charge against the church in Sardis: “You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead” (3:1).

⁸ Which demonstrates that John is comfortable using ζάω for what *appears* to be a resurrection.

beast *denote*?⁹ Presumably, Blaising does not insist that a ten-horned and seven-headed monster will arise in history, despite the physical *connotations* of the words used to describe the beast. The correspondence between the visionary and historical levels is analogous rather than univocal. However, this is equally applicable to the vision in chapter 20, since “the words for resurrection and life in 20:1-6 are no less and no more ‘literal’ than are the words for beast and wound in 13:1-8.”¹⁰

Reference is indicated not merely by a term’s semantic range but by the context, and this is especially necessary when the literary context is a report of a visionary experience.¹¹ Is there evidence in the immediate context and in the rest of Revelation that the millennial experience in chapter 20 brought about by the “first resurrection” *refers to* the intermediate state?¹² It is this question that the rest of this essay seeks to answer.

Chapter 20 within the Recapitulatory Structure of Revelation

⁹ Vern Poythress distinguishes between four levels of communication in Revelation: 1) the linguistic level, 2) the visionary level, 3) the referential / historical level, and 4) the symbolic level. See Vern S. Poythress, “Genre and Hermeneutics in Rev 20:1-6,” *Journal of The Evangelical Theological Society* 36, no. 1 (March 1993), 41-42. Premillennialist interpreters tend to collapse these levels. For example, Jack Deere observes concerning Rev. 20:3, “Satan is not only bound, but is also completely imprisoned and cut off from the earth,” concluding that it is “evident” that this “must be future” (61). This treats the vision as if it is a pre-recorded video of a future event.

¹⁰ Poythress, 47. It is also noteworthy that most non-dispensational premillennialists do not believe that Rev. 20:1-3 ultimately references a “literal” dragon or chain or key, although these are all manifestations in John’s vision. Performing a word study on the term “dragon” does not illuminate the matter.

¹¹ “The context as well as the exact language of the vision must provide us with clues. But mere appeal to an apparent literalness and vividness of the resurrection does not help. Such vividness is characteristic of the visionary form as such” (Poythress, 52).

¹² The “context” for determining reference extends beyond the immediate context to include the rest of the book, as well as the New Testament corpus and beyond. Robert Mounce claims that there is nothing “within the context” of Rev. 20:4 that provides reason to interpret ζάω as a spiritual resurrection, and he cautions against interpretations that rely on “collecting verses from other contexts in Scripture” out of a “larger concern to find a consistent millennial position” (*The Book of Revelation* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 356, 353). But Silva replies, “Contemporary biblical scholars, I fear, have too often overreacted against ‘dogmatism’ in exegesis and in doing so they have ignored a valid and indeed essential element in the hermeneutical process. ...I would therefore argue that ‘the larger concern to find a consistent millennial position’ is a legitimate and necessary step in the interpretive process, since it focuses on one of the contextual circles. Surely the author of Revelation himself sought to instruct his readers along lines *consistent* with those general Christian convictions that find expression in other parts of the New Testament” (159).

A central premillennialist objection to understanding the millennium as a description of believers in heaven during the inter-advent period is that Revelation 20 *follows* the return of Christ in chapter 19. The claim is that the binding of Satan in 20:1-3 introduces a *new reality* in the history of God's people, as does the first resurrection and the millennial reign of the saints (v. 4-6), and Christ's return inaugurates these realities. On this view, the "first resurrection" is the first installment of the bodily "General Resurrection" that occurs at the consummation, although this resurrection is divided by the intervening millennial age.

Providing a full defense of the amillennial position is beyond the scope of this paper, as is addressing matters such as the nature and purpose of the binding of Satan.¹³ At the same time, some preliminary comments about the structure of Revelation will serve the investigation that follows. There is good reason not to apply the order of the visions in chapters 19 and 20 with wooden chronology. This is true of the apocalyptic genre in general, in which dramatic progression does not necessitate temporal order. Once more, it is necessary for the interpreter to maintain the distinction between the visionary and historical levels, since at issue is not primarily the relationship between chapters 19 and 20 in the narrative of the visions, but the relationship between the *realities* they represent.

Nevertheless, there are strong indications that the literary structure itself presents recapitulation, in which chapter 20 introduces a new cycle that begins with the first advent of Christ.¹⁴ There are several lines of evidence for this within the context. For example, the dragon is bound so that he might not deceive the nations (20:3), and yet these nations "have just been

¹³ For these matters, see G K. Beale, "The Millennium in Revelation 20:1-10: An Amillennial Perspective." *Criswell Theological Review* 11, no. 1 (September 2013): 29-62; Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003); Sam Storms, *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2013).

¹⁴ On the recapitulatory structure of Revelation as a whole, see Hendricksen, 16-50.

both deceived by Satan (16:13-16) and destroyed by Christ at his return in 19:11-21.”¹⁵ In fact, these nations were destroyed in the final climatic battle that attends the consummation, portrayed in both 19:11-21 and in the recapitulation in 20:7-10. Both sections allude to the battle in Ezekiel 38-39, suggesting they address the same event.¹⁶ Revelation 16:14 speaks of “*the* battle (τὸν πόλεμον) on the great day of God the Almighty.” While an anarthrous πόλεμος designates warfare in general, the articular πόλεμος in 19:19 seems to be anaphoric to 16:14. An articular πόλεμος appears again in 20:8, signaling that these episodes are both “*the* battle” on the last day.¹⁷ The presence of the article by itself is not decisive, but “the parallels in wording and plot in 16:14; 19:19; 20:8 point most naturally in the direction of identical settings and hence to an anaphoric usage of the article with *polemos* in 20:8.”¹⁸

In addition to the literary relationship between 19 and 20, there are linguistic and thematic parallels between chapters 12 and 20 that convey the presence of recapitulation. These strongly suggest that both chapter 12 and chapter 20 reference the inter-advent period:¹⁹

Revelation 12:7-12		Revelation 20:1-6	
v. 7	ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ	v. 1	ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ
v. 7	ἄγγελοι	v. 1	ἄγγελον
v. 9	ὁ δράκων ὁ μέγας, ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἀρχαῖος, ὁ καλούμενος Διάβολος καὶ ὁ Σατανᾶς	v. 2	τὸν δράκοντα, ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἀρχαῖος, ὅς ἐστιν Διάβολος καὶ ὁ Σατανᾶς
v. 9	ἐβλήθη	v. 3	ἔβαλεν
v. 9	ὁ πλανῶν τὴν οἰκουμένην ὅλην	v. 3	ἵνα μὴ πλανήσῃ ἔτι τὰ ἔθνη

¹⁵ R. F. White, “Reexamining the Evidence for Recapitulation in Rev 20:1-10,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 51, no. 2 (September 1989), 321. Space does not allow for answering premillennialist counter-arguments to this, which are addressed in the footnoted literature.

¹⁶ White, 326-328.

¹⁷ White, 329.

¹⁸ R. F. White, “Making Sense of Rev 20:1-10? Harold Hoehner versus Recapitulation,” *Journal of The Evangelical Theological Society* 37, no. 4 (December 1994), 547.

¹⁹ Similar parallels with chapter 6 are noted below, connecting the millennium, the inter-advent period, and the intermediate state.

v. 12	ὀλίγον καιρὸν	v. 3	μικρὸν χρόνον
v. 10	ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν καὶ ἡ ἐξουσία τοῦ Χριστοῦ αὐτοῦ	v. 6	ἱερεῖς τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοῦ Χριστοῦ, καὶ βασιλεύσουσιν
v. 11	διὰ τὸν λόγον τῆς μαρτυρίας αὐτῶν	v. 4	διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ καὶ διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ

These similarities add weight to the view that the two visions are synchronous, and therefore the “first resurrection” and the millennium reference preconsummational experiences.

Contextual Indications of the Setting for the Millennium

Are there indications in the immediate context that 20:4-6 represents the intermediate state? John does not explicitly mention the location for this scene. The previous vision begins with a heavenly setting (v. 1) and lands in the abyss (v. 3). This perspective provides a “behind the scenes view” of things that are not available from an earthly vantage point. The vision in verses 4-6 is coextensive with the one in verses 1-3, which suggests that they both convey facts that are invisible to those on earth.

John sees thrones (v. 4). The word *θρόνος* appears forty-seven times in this book. Excepting three references to the throne of Satan / the beast (symbolizing authority), every instance of *θρόνος* in Revelation is of a heavenly throne.²⁰ “Not once out of all these many uses does ‘throne’ refer to a throne on the old earth.”²¹

Commentators have noted the awkward structure of the phrase, “I saw thrones, and they sat upon them” (20:1).²² However, the order of the sentence builds dramatic suspense, and it

²⁰ Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 236. Storms also contends that this is true of *θρόνος* in the rest of the New Testament. “Thus, when we look at all other relevant occurrences of *θρόνος*, whether inside or outside the book of Revelation, they are without exception heavenly. There is nothing to suggest that they pertain to a millennial earth, either in location or character” (462).

²¹ Beale, “The Millennium,” 46.

²² For example, R. H. Charles contends that this line is ungrammatical and likely a marginal gloss (*Revelation* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920], 2:182).

parallels the opening vision of the heavenly throne room, which itself appears to allude to Daniel's vision of the court in heaven (Dan. 7:9-10, 13):²³

²³ Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Philisburg: P&R Publishing, 2001), 125 n.16, 290. Deere responds to Charles by noting the similarity of the construction in 4:2-3 (62), although he apparently does not recognize the significance this has for the setting of 20:4.

Revelation 4:1-2	Revelation 20:4	Daniel 7:9-11, 22 LXX
v. 1 εἶδον, καὶ ἰδοὺ	v. 4 Καὶ εἶδον	v. 7 ἐθεώρουν
v. 2 θρόνος ἔκειτο ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ	v. 4 θρόνους	v. 7 θρόνοι ἐτέθησαν
v.2 καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν θρόνον καθήμενος	v. 4 καὶ ἐκάθισαν ἐπ’ αὐτούς	v. 7 ἐκάθητο
	v. 4 τὸ θηρίον	v. 11 τὸ θηρίον
	v. 4 καὶ κρίμα ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς	v. 22 καὶ τὴν κρίσιν ἔδωκε τοῖς ἁγίοις
	v. 4 καὶ ἐβασίλευσαν	v. 22 καὶ τὸ βασίλειον κατέσχον οἱ ἅγιοι

These similarities make a heavenly setting very likely. Premillennialists contend that the promise that believers “shall reign on the earth” (5:10) necessitates an earthly reign in the millennium. However, in the unfolding narrative of Revelation, that promise is not explicitly fulfilled until 22:5; it is an eschatological promise for the *new* earth.

The individuals who sat on the thrones were the “souls (τὰς ψυχὰς) of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus” (20:4). While ψυχή does not necessitate a disembodied condition, the description of *beheaded* souls and the parallel with 6:6 (addressed below) imply that these are saints in the intermediate state. It is possible that John sees immaterial souls that are bodily raised and who subsequently sit on the thrones, but the presentation in text—mentioning the vision of those seated on the thrones first—conveys that John saw *souls* who were reigning in heaven.

The Intermediate State in Revelation and Its Theological Significance

A survey of the passages in Revelation that more clearly address the intermediate state confirms that this is the referent for the vision in 20:4-9. A pattern of themes also arises that supports understanding the “first resurrection” as entrance into life before God in heaven.

2:10-11. Jesus promises the church in Smyrna, “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (2:10). Their faithfulness in the midst of persecution extends as far as (ἄχρι) death, at which point they are awarded life.²⁴ He elaborates, “The one who conquers

²⁴ Beale cites intertestamental and early Christ usages of this and similar phrases, concluding that the crown is a reward given at death (*Revelation*, 245).

(νικῶν) will not be hurt by the second death” (v. 11). This conquering is a counterintuitive victory, since it happens by means of their witness unto death. This is the only place in Revelation outside of 20-21 in which the phrase “the second death” appears.

This text is programmatic for the ones that follow. The paradoxical theme of conquering and experiencing life *by means of death*—and in doing so escaping the second death—characterizes nearly all of the passages in Revelation that address the intermediate state.²⁵

6:9-11. When the Lamb opens the fifth seal, John sees “the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne” (v. 9). These souls are conscious before God and bring their appeal to him (v. 10). They are given white robes and told to rest a little longer (v. 11). The white robes are symbolic of conquering through justice and purity (3:4-5).²⁶ The vision of “souls” awaiting the consummation recalls the scene in chapter 20. Here are the parallels:²⁷

	Revelation 6:6-11		Revelation 20:3-6
v. 6	Καὶ ... εἶδον	v. 4	Καὶ εἶδον
v. 6	τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν ἐσφαγμένων	v. 4	τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν πεπελεκισμένων
v.6	διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ	v. 4	διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ
v.6	διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἣν εἶχον	v. 4	διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ
v. 10	ἅγιος	v. 6	ἅγιος
v. 10	κρίνεις	v. 4	κρίμα
v. 11	ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς	v. 4	ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς
v. 11	χρόνον μικρόν	v. 3	μικρὸν χρόνον

In 2:10, those in the intermediate state are given crowns; in 6:11 they are given white robes as they appeal for judgment; and in 20:4 they are given thrones and authority to *judge*

²⁵ The nature of paradox is that words often *refer* to conditions that seem to be the opposite of what they *mean* (their *sense*). For example, the lion who has conquered and the lamb who has been slain have the same referent (Jesus), even though these images of victory and death seem to clash.

²⁶ Johnson, 126.

²⁷ Several of these are observed by Storms, 458, as well as Anthony Hoekema, “Amillennialism,” *The Meaning of the Millennium: Five Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1977), 58.

(robes) and *reign* (crowns). Kline notes that “the ‘crown of life’ [2:10] promised to the Christian dead is precisely in the nominal equivalent of the verbal ‘they lived and reigned’ in the account of the experience that attends the ‘first resurrection’ in Revelation 20:4ff.”²⁸ Taking 2:10-11 with 6:9-11, it is evident that the *purpose* and *character* of the intermediate state coordinates with the millennium. As Bauckham describes it, “Life and rule—the two issues on which the contest between the martyrs and the beast had focused—are the sole themes of 20:4-6.”²⁹

Paradoxically, the death of the martyrs ushers in the return of Christ, since the inter-advent period extends “until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been would be competed also” (6:11). Their death, then, brings about not only their life before God but ultimately the consummation. This is a radical transformation of the typical perspective on death.

7:13-17. The next chapter further portrays this same group, in the interlude between the sixth and seventh seal (7:13-17).³⁰ In the millennium, the saints will serve as priests of God and of Christ (20:6). Here the saints who are coming out of the tribulation, having their garments consecrated with the blood of the sacrificial Lamb (7:14, cf. 12:11), “perform service night and day in the temple” (7:14), and so function as priests.³¹ John applies restoration language from Isaiah 49:10 to these believers in the intermediate state, that “they will not hunger or thirst...and by fountains of waters he will lead them”—although John adds that these are “fountains of the

²⁸ Meredith G. Kline, “First Resurrection,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 37, no. 3 (1975), 374.

²⁹ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 107.

³⁰ The interlude “dramatizes the delay of the final judgment,” creating “suspense in the unfolding drama” (Johnson, 129). This also places the scene in the preconsummational period.

³¹ Beale, *Revelation*, 440. Beale cites Lev. 8:30 and Exod. 29:10-21 as background material on consecrating priests by sprinkling them with sacrificial blood.

waters of life [ζωή]” (v. 17).³² This again applies the concept of *life* to those who have died and entered heaven.

12:10-12. Those who dwell in heaven, who have escaped the earth where the devil rages (v. 12), are told to rejoice in the kingdom of God that has come through the death of Christ (v. 10). These saints are in heaven because they have been martyred (v. 11). Despite their death, they are the true victors, having “conquered” (ἐνίκησαν) by “the blood of the Lamb.” The “accuser” (v.10) has been overruled by the cross, and so as a result these conquerors cannot be threatened by the second death (“the one who conquers [ὁ νικῶν] will not be hurt by the second death,” 2:11; cf. 20:6).³³ They have also conquered “by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death” (v. 11). Paradoxically, Christ’s death accomplishes his glorious kingdom reign, and the deaths of these saints result in their victory.

14:13. This text expresses a paradoxical blessing on “those who die in the Lord from now on.” The phrase “from now on,” the identity of the dead as “firstfruits” (v. 4), and the fact that this precedes the return of the Son of Man to harvest the earth (v. 14-20) locate this passage in the inter-advent age. The benediction includes the pronouncement “that they may rest from their labors” (cf. 6:11, “rest for a little while longer”). This sabbath blessing is coreferential with the millennial blessing, since “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).”³⁴

³² Ibid., 442. Beale also notes the Old Testament references for the Lamb’s “shepherding” and “wiping away every tear” from these saints. John’s application of promises of the restoration of Israel (Is. 25; 49; Ezek. 37) to believers in the intermediate state poses problems for those who insist that these Old Testament passages necessitate a future earthly millennium. Obviously, these promises find ultimate fulfillment in the final consummate state of the New Earth, but John sees them as providing a provisional experience for those saints “who are coming (οἱ ἐρχόμενοι) out of the great tribulation” (v. 14). These victors “already taste the joy of the new Jerusalem” (Johnson, 135).

³³ Ibid., 664.

³⁴ Kline, 373.

Jesus experiences his Sabbath rest as he is risen and reigning at God's right hand, and for believers to live and reign with Christ (20:4) is to experience his royal sabbath rest.³⁵

This contrasts with those who will experience the eternal fire (the second death), who “have no rest day and night” (v. 11). In pronouncing blessing on those who, through death, experience the rest of the intermediate state—in distinction from those who face the second death—the content of this benediction mirrors the blessing pronounced over those who participate in the first resurrection: “Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power” (20:6).

15:2-4. In this vision, the saints who “have conquered the beast and its image” stand by a sea of glass with harps in their hands, singing the song of the Lamb (v. 2). This is not an image of the New Earth but of heaven (v. 5), since this scene precedes the completion of the wrath of God in judgment (v. 1). This is once again the intermediate state in the inter-advent period. Nevertheless, this “new song” (cf. 14:3) expresses an inaugurated eschatological reality. Their song celebrates the *justice* of the Lord and addresses him as the “King of the nations” (v. 3), themes reminiscent of the millennium.

These passages taken together reveal that there is strong thematic and theological congruence between Revelation's portrayal of the intermediate state and the millennium. Bauckham observes that the point of the millennium is “to demonstrate the triumph of the martyrs: that those whom the beast put to death are those who will truly live—eschatologically, and that those who contested his right to rule and suffered for it are those who will in the end rule as universally as he—and for much longer: a thousand years!”³⁶ The passages explored above show that the *theological design* of the millennium is equivalent to that of the intermediate state, and that this theological import is expressed in terms of victory through death and reigning in

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Bauckham, 107.

life. The linguistic parallels between these passages and chapter 20 provide additional corroboration that the millennium vision recapitulates these texts.

“First” and “Second” Categories in Revelation

Revelation applies the imagery of life and resurrection to believers in the intermediate state. However, outside of chapter 20, it does not use the term ἀνάστασις for this experience. Nevertheless, proper methodology requires studying the term ἀνάστασις, not in isolation, but in connection with its modifying ordinal adjective (“*first* resurrection,” a phrase that appears nowhere else in Scripture). The usage of “first” and “second” categories in Revelation confirms that the “first” resurrection describes a preconsummational state.

The first / second and first / new framework is employed in the book to indicate qualitatively different intermediate and consummate conditions. The “new heaven and new earth” are distinguished from the “first heaven and first earth” in 21:1. As Meredith Kline argues, “*Protos* (‘first’) does not merely mark the present world as the first in a series of worlds and certainly not as the first in a series of worlds all of the same kind. On the contrary, it characterizes this world as different in kind from the ‘new’ world.”³⁷

Within this pattern, “first” things do not have the quality of finality and permanence but belong to the order that will ultimately “pass away” (21:4).³⁸ This is problematic for the premillennial insistence that the “first resurrection” describes a consummate condition for believers (resurrection to glorified bodies). This must be an intermediate rather than a final state. In fact, this confirms the entire amillennial scheme, since the “millennium as such is virtually called a ‘first’ age. It falls within the days of this present passing world characterized by ‘the first things.’ The Parousia with its concomitant consummative events of resurrection and judgment

³⁷ Kline, 367. This corresponds to the “first / old” vs. “second / new” pattern found elsewhere in the New Testament: the first and last Adam (1 Cor. 15:22, 42-49), the old / first and new / second covenant (Heb. 8:6-10:9), etc.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 369.

must then follow these ‘thousand years.’”³⁹ In other worlds, the millennium is preconsummational.

John does not describe the bodily raising of unbelievers as a “second resurrection”; instead, the graves deliver them up (v. 13) only so that they are cast into the lake of fire (v. 15) and experience the “second death” (v. 14).⁴⁰ This is a paradoxical metaphor: for the unjust, being raised to physical life results in ultimate death.⁴¹ Since John uses the phrase “second death” to *refer* to what results from a bodily resurrection, it is not unlikely that he would use the phrase “first resurrection” to *refer* to a state brought about by death. That he employs the terms to denote the opposite of what they connote reflects the nature of paradox.

Broader Context for *Resurrection and Life* in Johannine Thought

This interpretation is consistent with the broader context for John’s writings. Space allows for addressing only two passages briefly.

As noted above, Revelation 19-21 alludes to Ezekiel 37-48,⁴² which supplies the background for Johannine concepts. The parallels are striking:⁴³

Rev. 20:4	<i>Resurrection of the saints</i>	Ezek. 37:1-14
Rev. 20:4-6	<i>Messianic kingdom</i>	Ezek. 37:15-28
Rev. 20:7-10	<i>Final battle against Gog & Magog</i>	Ezek. 38-39
Rev. 21:1-22:5	<i>New temple and New Jerusalem</i>	Ezek. 40-48

³⁹ Ibid., 374.

⁴⁰ As Beale (*Revelation*, 1005) and many others have observed, this scheme has the “first resurrection” and “second death” corresponding to each other as “spiritual” realities, while the implicit “second resurrection” and “first death” are bodily realities. While the postmillennial view that the “first resurrection” is spiritual regeneration would also work within this structure, it does not fit the order of Rev. 20, in which the saint’s coming to life *follows* their physical death. As Kline comments, “Those who participate in the ‘first resurrection’ are not those who are dead in sins but those who are righteous in Christ. Their martyrdom is not the kind of death for which spiritual regeneration would be the remedy, but it is itself a consequence and seal of a spiritual regeneration” (372).

⁴¹ Kline, 371.

⁴² White, ‘Reexamining the Evidence,’ 326-28.

⁴³ Beale, ‘The Millennium,’ 53.

Ezekiel 37 contains the vision of the valley of dry bones. In verse 10, Ezekiel reports, “So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived (ἐζήσαν, LXX) and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.” The Septuagint of Ezekiel uses the same Greek verb and tense-form as Rev. 20:4.⁴⁴ This resurrection “is not physical but symbolic or spiritual in nature and focuses upon the spiritual renewal of Israel when restored from captivity.”⁴⁵ Another way to describe it is that this is a *visionary* resurrection. In the vision, Ezekiel saw bones joining together and receiving flesh, and after the impartation of the breath of God, being raised to life. The extra-visionary referent, however, was Israel’s spiritual restoration.

In John 5, Jesus teaches that those who believe his word have his life (ζωή, v. 24). This life is described in terms of resurrection (the *dead* hearing Christ’s voice and *living*—ζάω), and this life is already available “now” (v. 25). Because the believer has this spiritual resurrection life, “he does not come into judgment [the second death] but has passed from death to life.” (v. 24). But Jesus adds that the hour is coming “when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life (ἀνάστασιν ζωῆς), and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (v. 28-29). Jesus presents the General Resurrection as one event, described as a single “hour.” It is difficult to fit an intervening thousand-year reign into Jesus’ statement. Even more remarkable, however, is that in this passage ἀνάστασις and ζάω “are used interchangeably of both spiritual and physical resurrection.”⁴⁶

The immediate context, the book context, and the broader canonical context all support understanding the “first resurrection” as a reference to regenerate saints passing through

⁴⁴ Ibid. Beale observes that the third person plural aorist active indicative of ζάω occurs elsewhere in the Greek Old Testament only in Num. 14:38 (which is not about resurrection). “This makes Ezek. 37:10 uniquely parallel in all of the OT to the same verb form in Rev. 20:4.”

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Beale, *Revelation*, 1004.

physical death into life before God in the intermediate state, as they await their final bodily resurrection at the return of Christ.

Conclusion

Concerning Revelation 20:4, Leon Morris comments, “The martyrs only appear to have died. They are alive (the first resurrection).”⁴⁷ The martyr’s experience in reality what the beast counterfeits in his faux resurrection. The beast seemed to have a mortal wound, yet lived (13:3). The martyrs have died, and yet things are not as they appear. They have “passed from death to life.” They receive this life principally in the new birth, experientially in the intermediate state, and fully in the consummation.

⁴⁷ Morris, 235.

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