

## Amillennialism

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### Introduction

My discussion of the amillennial understanding of the millennium will include the following topics: the interpretation of the book of Revelation, the interpretation of Revelation 20:1-6, a look at two Old Testament passages commonly viewed as predicting an earthly millennial kingdom, a brief sketch of amillennial eschatology and a summarizing statement of some of the implications of amillennial eschatology.

A word should first be said about terminology. The term *amillennialism* is not a happy one. It suggests that amillennialists either do not believe in any millennium or that they simply ignore the first six verses of Revelation 20, which speak of a millennial reign. Neither of these two statements is true. Though it is true that amillennialists do not believe in a literal thousand-year earthly reign which will follow the return of Christ, the term *amillennialism* is not an accurate description of their view. Professor Jay E. Adams of Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia has suggested that the term *amillennialism* be replaced by the expression *realized millennialism*.<sup>1</sup> The latter term, to be sure, describes the “amillennial” position more accurately than the usual term, since “amillennialists” believe that the millennium of Revelation 20 is not exclusively future but is now in process of realization. The expression *realized millennialism*, however, is a rather clumsy one, replacing a simple prefix with a three-syllable word. Despite the disadvantages and limitations of the word, therefore, I shall continue to use the shorter

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<sup>1</sup> Jay E. Adams, *The Time Is at Hand* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 7-11.

and more common term, *amillennialism*.

### ***The Interpretation of the Book of Revelation***

To see the background for the amillennial view of the millennium, we should first of all concern ourselves with the question of the interpretation of the book of Revelation. Let us assume, for example, that the book of Revelation is to be interpreted in an exclusively futuristic sense, referring only to events that are to happen around or at the time of Christ's Second Coming. Let us further assume that what is presented in Revelation 20 must necessarily follow, in chronological order, what was described in chapter 19. We are then virtually compelled to believe that the thousand-year reign depicted in 20:4 must come after the return of Christ described in 19:11. But if we see Revelation 20:1-6 as describing what takes place during the entire history of the church, beginning with the first coming of Christ, we will have an understanding of the millennium of Revelation 20 which is quite different from the one just mentioned. For this reason it will be necessary first to say something about the way in which the book of Revelation should be interpreted.

The system of interpretation of the book of Revelation which seems most satisfactory to me (though it is not without its difficulties) is that known as *progressive parallelism*, ably defended by William Hendriksen in *More Than Conquerors*, his commentary on Revelation.<sup>2</sup> According to this view, the book of Revelation consists of seven sections which run parallel to each other, each of which depicts the church and the world from the time of Christ's first coming to the time of his second. The first of these seven sections is found in chapters 1-3.

John sees the risen and glorified Christ walking in the midst of seven golden lampstands. In obedience to Christ's command John now proceeds to write letters to each of the seven churches of Asia Minor. The vision of the glorified Christ together with the letters to the seven churches obviously form a unit. As we read these letters we are impressed with two things.

**First**, there are references to events, people and places of the time when the book of Revelation was written. Second, the principles, commendations and warnings contained in these letters have value for the church of all time. These two observations, in fact, provide a clue for the interpretation of the entire book. Since the book of Revelation was addressed to the church of the first century A.D., its message had reference to events occurring at that time and was therefore meaningful for the Christians of that day. But since the book was also intended for the church through the ages, its message is still relevant for us today.

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<sup>2</sup> William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1939). An exposition and defense of this method of interpretation, summarized in nine propositions, can be found on pp. 11-64.

The second of these seven sections is the vision of the seven seals found in chapters 4-7. John is caught up to heaven and sees God sitting on his radiant throne. He then sees the Lamb that had been slain taking the scroll sealed with seven seals from the hand of the one who was sitting on the throne. The various seals are broken, and various divine judgments on the world are described. In this vision we see the church suffering trial and persecution against the background of the victory of Christ.

The **third** section, found in chapters 8-11, describes the seven trumpets of judgment. In this vision we see the church avenged, protected and victorious.

The **fourth** section, chapters 12-14, begins with the vision of the woman giving birth to a son while the dragon waits to devour him as soon as he is born—an obvious reference to the birth of Christ. The rest of the section describes the continued opposition of the dragon (who stands for Satan) to the church. This section also introduces us to the two beasts who are the dragon's helpers: the beast out of the sea and the beast out of the earth.

The **fifth** section is found in chapters 15-16. It describes the seven bowls of wrath, thus depicting in a very graphic way the final visitation of God's wrath on those who remain impenitent.

The **sixth** section, chapters 17-19, describes the fall of Babylon and of the beasts. Babylon stands for the worldly city — the forces of secularism and godlessness which are in opposition to the kingdom of God. The end of chapter 19 depicts the fall and final punishment of the dragon's two helpers: the beast out of the sea, and the false prophet, who appears to be identified with the beast out of the earth (see 16:13).

The **seventh** section, chapters 20-22, narrates the doom of the dragon, thus completing the description of the overthrow of the enemies of Christ. In addition, it describes the final judgment, the final triumph of Christ and his church, and the renewed universe, here called the new heaven and the new earth.

Note that though these seven sections are parallel to each other, they also reveal a certain amount of eschatological progress. The last section, for example, takes us further into the future than the other sections. Although the final judgment has already been announced in 1:7 and has been briefly described in 6:12-17, it is not set forth in full detail until we come to 20:11-15. Though the final joy of the redeemed in the life to come has been hinted at in 7:15-17, it is not until we reach chapter 21 that we find a detailed and elaborate description of the blessedness of life on the new earth (21:1-22:5). Hence this method of interpretation is called *progressive parallelism*.

There is eschatological progression in these seven sections, not only regarding the individual sections but also regarding the book as a whole. If we grant that the book of Revelation depicts the struggle between Christ and his church on the one hand and the enemies of Christ and the church on the other, we may say that the first half of the book (chapters 1-11) describes the struggle on earth, picturing the church as it is persecuted

by the world. The second half of the book, however (chapters 12-22), gives us the deeper spiritual background of this struggle, describing the persecution of the church by the dragon (Satan) and his helpers. In the light of this analysis we see how the last section of the book (chapters 20-22) falls into place. This last section describes the judgment which falls on Satan, and his final doom. Since Satan is the supreme opponent of Christ, it stands to reason that his doom should be narrated last.

### ***The Interpretation of Revelation 20:1-6***

We are now ready to proceed to the interpretation of Revelation 20:1-6, the only passage in the Bible which speaks explicitly of a thousand-year reign. Note first that the passage obviously divides itself into two parts: verses 1-3, which describe the binding of Satan; and verses 4-6, which describe the thousand-year reign of souls with Christ.

The premillennial interpretation of these verses sees them as describing a millennial reign of Christ on earth which will occur after his Second Coming. And it is true that the Second Coming of Christ has been referred to in the previous chapter (see 19:11-16). If, then, one thinks of Revelation 20 as describing what follows chronologically after what is described in chapter 19, one would indeed conclude that the millennium of Revelation 20:1-6 will come after the return of Christ.

As has been indicated above, however, chapters 20-22 comprise the last of the seven sections of the book of Revelation and therefore do not describe what follows the return of Christ. Rather, Revelation 20:1 takes us back once again to the beginning of the New Testament era.

That this is the proper interpretation of these verses is clear not only from what has been developed above, but also from the fact that this chapter describes the defeat and final doom of Satan. Surely the defeat of Satan began with the first coming of Christ, as has already been clearly spelled out in chapter 12:7-9. That the millennial reign described in verses 4-6 occurs before the Second Coming of Christ is evident from the fact that the final judgment, described in verses 11-15 of this chapter, is pictured as coming after the thousand-year reign. Not only in the book of Revelation but elsewhere in the New Testament the final judgment is associated with the Second Coming of Christ. (See Revelation 22:12 and the following passages: Mt. 16:27; 25:31-32; Jude 14-15; and especially 2 Thess. 1:7-10.) This being the case, it is obvious that the thousand-year reign of Revelation 20:4-6 must occur **before** and **not after** the Second Coming of Christ.

Let us now look closely at Revelation 20:1-6 itself. We begin with verses 1-3, reproduced here from the New International Version:

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand

years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations any more until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.

In these verses we have a description of the binding of Satan. The dragon, here clearly identified as “the devil, Or Satan,” is said to be bound for a thousand years and then cast into a place called “the Abyss.” The purpose of this binding is “to keep him from deceiving the nations any more until the thousand years were ended.”

The book of Revelation is full of symbolic numbers. Obviously the number “thousand” which is used here must not be interpreted in a literal sense. Since the number ten signifies completeness, and since a thousand is ten to the third power, we may think of the expression “a thousand years” as standing for a complete period, a very long period of indeterminate length. In agreement with what was said above about the structure of the book and in the light of verses 7-15 of this very chapter (which describe Satan’s “little season,” the final battle and the final judgment), we may conclude that this thousand-year period extends from Christ’s first coming to just before his Second Coming.

Since the “lake of fire” mentioned in verses 10, 14 and 15 is obviously a description of the place of final punishment, the “Abyss” mentioned in verses 1 and 3 must not be the place of final punishment. The word *Abyss* should rather be thought of as a figurative description of the way in which Satan’s activities will be curbed during the thousand-year period.

What is meant, then, by the binding of Satan? In Old Testament times, at least in the post-Abrahamic era, all the nations of the world except Israel were, so to speak, under Satan’s rule. At that time the people of Israel were the recipients of God’s special revelation, so that they knew God’s truth about themselves, about their sinfulness, and about the way they could obtain forgiveness and salvation. During this same time, however, the other nations of the world did not know that truth, and were therefore in ignorance and error (see Acts 17:30) — except for an occasional person, family or city which came into contact with God’s special revelation. One could say that during this time these nations were deceived by Satan, as our first parents had been deceived by Satan when they fell into sin in the Garden of Eden.

Just before his ascension, however, Christ gave his disciples his Great Commission: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:19, NIV). At this point one can well imagine the disciples raising a disturbing question: How can we possibly do this if Satan continues to deceive the nations the way he has in the past? In Revelation 20:1-3 John gives a reassuring answer to this question. Paraphrased, his answer goes something like this: “During the gospel era which has now been ushered in, Satan will not be able to continue deceiving the nations the way he did in the past, for he has been bound. During this entire period, therefore, you, Christ’s disciples, will be able to preach the gospel and make disciples of all nations.”

This does not imply that Satan can do no harm whatever while he is bound. It means only what John says here: While Satan is bound he cannot deceive the nations in such a way as to keep them from learning about the truth of God. Later in the chapter we are told that when the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations of the world to gather them together to fight against and, if possible, to destroy the people of God (verses 7-9). This, however, he cannot do while he is bound. We conclude, then, that the binding of Satan during the gospel age means that, first, he cannot prevent the spread of the gospel, and second, he cannot gather all the enemies of Christ together to attack the church.

Is there any indication in the New Testament that Satan was bound at the time of the first coming of Christ? Indeed there is. When the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Satan, Jesus replied, "How can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man?" (Mt. 12:29). Interestingly enough, the word used by Matthew to describe the binding of the strong man is the same word used in Revelation 20 to describe the binding of Satan. One could say that Jesus bound the devil when he triumphed over him in the wilderness, refusing to give in to his temptations. Jesus' casting out of demons, so he teaches us in this passage, was evidence of this triumph. One could counter that the binding of Satan mentioned here is reported in connection with the casting out of demons rather than in connection with the preaching of the gospel. But I would reply that the casting out of demons is an evidence of the presence of the kingdom of God (Mt. 12:28) and that it is precisely because the kingdom of God has come that the gospel can now be preached to all the nations (see Mt. 13:24-30, 47-50).

When the seventy returned from their preaching mission, they said to Jesus, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name." Jesus replied, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Lk. 10:17-18, NIV). These words, needless to say, must not be interpreted literally. They must rather be understood to mean that Jesus saw in the works his disciples were doing an indication that Satan's kingdom had just been dealt a crushing blow — that, in fact, a certain binding of Satan, a certain restriction of his power, had just taken place. In this instance Satan's fall or binding is associated directly with the missionary activity of Jesus' disciples.

Another passage which ties in the restriction of Satan's activities with Christ's missionary outreach is John 12:31-32:

"Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (NIV). It is interesting to note that the verb here translated "driven out" (*ekballo*) is derived from the same root as the word used in Revelation 20:3, "He [the angel] threw [*ballo*] him [Satan] into the Abyss." Even more important, however, is the observation that Satan's being "driven out" or "cast out" (RSV) is here associated with the fact that not only Jews but men of all nationalities shall be drawn to Christ as he hangs on the cross.

We see then that the binding of Satan described in Revelation 20:1-3 means that throughout the gospel age in which we now live the influence of Satan, though certainly not annihilated, is so curtailed that he cannot prevent the spread of the gospel to the nations of the world. Because of the binding of Satan during this present age, the nations cannot conquer the church, but the church is conquering the nations.<sup>3</sup>

We go on now to verses 4-6, the passage dealing with the thousand-year reign. In the New International Version, these verses read,

I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

We noted previously that verses 1-3 speak of a “thousand-year” period. We now observe that verses 4-6 also refer to a period of a thousand years. Though it is possible to understand the “thousand years” of verses 4-6 as describing a period of time different from the “thousand years” of verses 1-3, there is no compelling reason why we should do so. We may therefore safely assume that verses 1-3 and verses 4-6 concern the same “thousand-year” period. That period, as we saw, spans the entire New Testament dispensation, from the time of the first coming of Christ to just before the time of Christ’s Second Coming.

Let us now take a closer look at verse 4: “I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge.” The first question we must face here is, Where are these thrones? Leon Morris points out that in the book of Revelation the word “throne” is used forty-seven times and that all but three of these thrones (2:13; 13:2; 16:10) appear to be in heaven.<sup>4</sup> When we add to this consideration the fact that John sees “the souls of those who had been beheaded,” we are confirmed in the conclusion that the locale of John’s vision has now shifted to heaven. We may say then that whereas the thousand-year period described in these six verses is the same throughout, verses 1-3 describe what happens on earth during this time, and verses 4-6 depict what happens in heaven.

John sees those who had been given authority to judge (literally, those to whom judgment had been given) sitting on thrones. The book of Revelation is much concerned about matters of justice, particularly for persecuted Christians. It is therefore highly significant that in John’s vision those sitting on thrones are given authority to judge.

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<sup>3</sup> For an expanded exposition of these verses, see Hendriksen, pp. 221-29.

<sup>4</sup> Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1969), p. 236.

John's description of them as "sitting on thrones" is a concrete way of expressing the thought that they are reigning with Christ (see the last part of v. 4). Apparently this reigning includes the authority to make judgments. Whether this means simply agreeing with and being thankful for the judgments made by Christ, or whether it means that those sitting on the thrones are given the opportunity to make their own judgments about earthly matters, we are not told. In any event the reigning with Christ described here apparently includes having some part in Christ's judging activity (see Dan. 7:22).

We ask next, Who are seated on these thrones? The answer is given in the rest of the verse: "And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God." Since John tells us that he saw "the souls of those who had been beheaded," it is quite clear that he is not talking about people who are still living on the earth. Sometimes, to be sure, the word here rendered "souls," *psuchai*, may be used to describe people who are still living on the earth — as, for example, in Acts 2:41: "And there were added that day about three thousand souls." But in Revelation 20:4 this meaning of the word *psuchai* will not work. One cannot translate *tas psuchas ton pepelekismenon* as "the people of those who had been beheaded," or as "the men of those who had been beheaded." Here the word *psuchai* must denote the souls of people who had died. This text is, in fact, a kind of parallel to an earlier passage in Revelation 6:9: "When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained."

If one should ask how John could see the souls of those who had died, the answer is, John saw all this in a vision. One could just as well ask, How could John see an angel laying hold of the devil and binding him for a thousand years?

John sees the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. In other words, he sees the souls of the martyrs — believers who had suffered martyrs' deaths because of their faithfulness to Christ. When John wrote Revelation, many Christians were being martyred for their faith. Needless to say, the vision here recorded would bring great comfort to the relatives and friends of these martyrs: John sees their souls as now sitting on thrones in heaven, taking part in the work of judging.

"They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands." The New International Version renders these words as if they were a further description of the martyrs referred to in the preceding clause. There is, however, another possibility — the possibility conveyed by the translation found in the American Standard Version: "and such as worshiped not the beast, neither his image, and received not the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand." Earlier in the book unbelieving opponents of Christ and his kingdom were described as those who worship the beast or his image and who receive the mark of the beast on their foreheads or on their hands (see 13:8, 15-17; 14:9-11). Conversely, believers who remained faithful to their Lord are described as those who were victorious over the beast (15:2) or who did not worship the beast or his image (13:15). I take it, therefore, that in the clause we are

now considering John is describing a wider group than just the martyrs. By “those who had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark” John means all Christians who had remained true to Christ and had resisted anti-Christian powers — all Christians, in other words, who had remained faithful to the end. Those who had died a martyr’s death would constitute a part of this group but not the whole group. (Though John does not here specifically speak of “souls,” we may safely assume that he is still talking about the souls of believers who have died, since he began by speaking about the souls of the martyrs who had been slain.)

Now follow the most controversial words in the passage: “They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.” Premillennial interpreters, whether dispensational or non-dispensational, understand these words as referring to a literal resurrection from the dead, and therefore find in this passage proof for a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, after his Second Coming. Is this the correct interpretation of the passage?

It must be granted that the Greek word rendered “came to life,” *ezesan*, can refer to a physical resurrection (see, for example, Mt. 9:18; Rom. 14:9; 2 Cor. 13:4; Rev. 2:8). The question is, however, whether this is what the word means here.

That John is speaking of a kind of resurrection here is apparent from the second sentence of verse 5: “This is the first resurrection” — words which obviously refer to the living and reigning with Christ of verse 4. But is this “first resurrection” a physical resurrection — a raising of the body from the dead? Obviously not, since the raising of the body from the dead is mentioned later in the chapter as something distinct from what is described here (see vv. 11-13). Only if one believes in two bodily resurrections — one of believers at the beginning of the millennium and another of unbelievers after the millennium — will one be able to understand the *ezesan* of verse 4 as referring to a bodily resurrection. Since the Scriptures elsewhere clearly teach only one bodily resurrection which will include both believers and unbelievers (see Jn. 5:28-29; Acts 24:15), what is described in the last clause of verse 4 must be something other than the physical or bodily resurrection which is yet to come.

What is meant, then, by the words “they came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years”? The clue has already been given in verse 4a. There John said, “I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge.” The rest of the verse makes plain that those sitting on the thrones were the souls of people who had died — martyrs for the faith and other Christians who had remained true to Christ to the very end of their lives. This is the group which John sees as “living and reigning with Christ.” 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. This life is a life of great happiness (see Paul’s words in Phil. 1:23 and 2 Cor. 5:8). It is a life in which they sit on thrones, sharing in the reign of Christ over all things, even sharing in his judging activity! This heavenly reigning is a fulfillment of a promise recorded earlier in the book: “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne” (3:21, NIV).

We can appreciate the significance of this vision when we remember that in John's time the church was sorely oppressed and frequently persecuted. It would be of great comfort to those believers to know that though many of their fellow Christians had died, some even having been cruelly executed as martyrs, these deceased fellow believers were now actually alive in heaven as far as their souls were concerned — living and reigning with Christ. This living and reigning with Christ, John goes on to say, shall continue throughout the thousand years — that is, throughout the entire gospel era, until Christ shall come again to raise the bodies of these believers from the grave.

There is no indication in these verses that John is describing an earthly millennial reign. The scene, as we saw, is set in heaven. Nothing is said in verses 4-6 about the earth, about Palestine as the center of this reign or about the Jews.<sup>5</sup> The thousand-year reign of Revelation 20:4 is a reign with Christ in heaven of the souls of believers who have died. This reign is not something to be looked for in the future; it is going on now, and will be until Christ returns. Hence the term *realized millennialism* is an apt description of the view here defended — if it be remembered that the millennium in question is not an earthly but a heavenly one.

The next sentence, verse 5a, is of a parenthetical nature, and is therefore properly put between parentheses in the New International Version: “The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.” I have already given the reason why I do not believe that these words describe a bodily resurrection which is to take place after the millennium. The word *ezesan* (“lived” or “came to life”) as it is used in this sentence must mean the same thing that it meant in the preceding sentence. John is here speaking about the unbelieving dead — the “rest of the dead,” in distinction from the believing dead whom he has just been describing. When he says that the rest of the dead did not live or come to life, he means the exact opposite of what he had just said about the believing dead. The unbelieving dead, he is saying, did not live or reign with Christ during this thousand-year period. Whereas believers after death enjoy a new kind of life in heaven with Christ in which they share in Christ's reign, unbelievers after death share nothing of either this life or this reign.

That this is true throughout the thousand-year period is indicated by the words, “until the thousand years were ended.” The Greek word here translated “until,” *achri*, means that what is said here held true during the entire length of the thousand-year period. The use of the word *until* does not imply that these unbelieving dead will live and reign with Christ after this period has ended. If this were the case, we would have expected a clear statement to this effect. (For an example of this kind of statement, see Rev. 20:3.)

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<sup>5</sup> As a matter of fact, even *if ezesan* is interpreted to mean a bodily resurrection, the verse still does not describe the earthly millennium commonly held to by premillennialists. For on the basis of the common premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20:4, it is only *raised believers* who are said to reign with Christ; nothing is said in this passage about a reign of Christ over people who have not died but are still living. The millennium of the premillennialists, however, is said to be primarily a reign of Christ over people who are still alive when Christ comes and over their descendants!

Rather, what happens to the unbelieving dead after the thousand years have ended is what is called in verse 6 “the second death.” When it is said in verse 6 that the “second death” has no power over the believing dead, it is implied that the “second death” does have power over the unbelieving dead. What is meant by “the second death”? Verse 14 explains: “This is the second death, even the lake of fire” (ASV). The second death, then, means everlasting punishment after the resurrection of the body. As far as the unbelieving dead are concerned, therefore, there will be a change after the thousand years have ended, but it will be a change not for the better but for the worse.

Now John goes on to say, “This is the first resurrection.” These words depict what has happened to the believing dead whom John was describing at the end of verse 4, previous to the parenthetical statement just discussed. In the light of what was said above, we must understand these words as describing not a bodily resurrection but rather the transition from physical death to life in heaven with Christ. This transition is here called a “resurrection” — an unusual use of the word, to be sure, but perfectly understandable against the background of the preceding context. The expression “the first resurrection” implies that there will indeed be a “second resurrection” for these believing dead — the resurrection of the body which will take place when Christ returns at the end of the thousand-year period.

John now says, in verse 6, “Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection.” The next words give the reason for this blessedness: “The second death has no power over them.” The second death, as we saw, means eternal punishment. These words about the second death imply that the “first resurrection” which John has just mentioned is not a bodily resurrection. For if believers should here be thought of as having been physically raised, with glorified bodies, they would already be enjoying the full and total bliss of the life to come, and it would not need to be said that over them 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” (v. 6b). During this entire thousand-year period, therefore, the believing dead shall worship God and Christ as priests and shall reign with Christ as kings. Though John is here thinking only about the thousand-year period which extends until Christ returns, the closing chapters of the book of Revelation indicate that after Christ’s return and after the resurrection of the body these believing dead shall be able to worship God, serve God and reign with Christ in an even richer way than they are now doing. They shall then worship and serve God throughout all eternity in sinless perfection with glorified bodies on the new earth.

This, then, is the amillennial interpretation of Revelation 20:1-6. So understood, the passage says nothing about an earthly reign of Christ over a primarily Jewish kingdom. Rather, it describes the reigning with Christ in heaven of the souls of believers who have died. They reign during the time between their death and Christ’s Second Coming.

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