

The Millennium: An Amillennial Synthesis of the Biblical Data

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The amillennial position best accords with the biblical data. This conclusion is based on the overall structure of biblical eschatology and the language of Revelation 20.

The Structure of Biblical Eschatology

Scripture sets forth a clear, consistent, comprehensive eschatological interpretive grid that rules out premillennialism. That structure is the doctrine of the “two ages” (Greek: *aiōn*; “age”): “this age” and the “age to come.”¹ The terminology of the two ages “pervades the New Testament, is homogeneous and provides us with a truly structural concept for biblical eschatology. It means the same thing—assumes the same, basic structure—wherever it is used.”² Two features distinguish this age from the age to come. First, this age and the age to come are *qualitatively and quantitatively different*. This age is temporal; the age to come is eternal. This age is characterized by sin, death, marriage, and all that accompanies life in this body; the age to come is characterized by holiness and new, resurrected life.³

Second, the two ages *comprehend all of time*, and the age to come *immediately succeeds* this age. Vos points out, “The very name ‘coming aion’ is not merely expressive of futurity, but also carries within itself the element of direct successiveness. . . . To say that a sin will not be forgiven either in this age or in the age to come could never have served as a formula for absolute unforgivableness *ad infinitum*, Matt. xii. 32, if there were conceivable a gap

¹ The two-age structure of biblical eschatology is discussed in greater detail in the main text, chapter 4-Interpreting Biblical Eschatology in Light of its Overall Structure.

² Waldron, “Structural Considerations,” n.p.n.3.

³ See Riddlebarger, *Amillennialism*, 82-83.

between the two aions.”⁴

With the first coming of Christ, the powers of the age to come have “invaded” this age and have been “tasted” by his people (Heb 6:5). However, a specific time exists when “this age” will end and the “age to come” will be fully consummated in all its glory. “The Scriptures explicitly tell us that the line of demarcation between these two ages is our Lord’s second advent.”⁵ All of the biblical passages that deal with the second coming (i.e., the *parousia*) speak of only one coming, or one day, at the end of this age⁶ which entails three things: (1) *Resurrection* of all people, the just and the unjust alike (Dan 12:2; Matt 13:30, 39-42, 48-50; 25:31-32; Luke 17:22-37; John 5:25-29; Acts 24:14-15; Rev 20:11-15.); (2) *Judgment*—rewards for the righteous and punishment for the unrighteous (Matt 7:21-23; 10:32-33 (Mark 8:38); Matt 13:24-30, 36-51; 16:27; 24:42-51; 25:10-13, 14-30, 31-46; Luke 12:35-48; 17:22-37; 19:12-27; 21:26-28; John 5:25-29; Acts 17:31; Rom 2:5-16; 14:10-12; 1 Cor 4:5; 2 Cor 5:10; 2 Thess 1:6-10; 2 Tim 4:1; Heb 6:2; Jas 5:7-9; 2 Pet 3:7-13; Rev 11:18; 14:14-20; 19:11-21; 20:11-15; 22:12); and (3) *The restoration of creation* (Acts 3:19-21; Rom 8:17-25; Heb 1:10-12, 2 Pet 3:3-13).

Premillennialism Contradicts the Bible’s “Two-Age” Eschatological Structure and Nature of Existence after the Second Coming

For a premillennial “millennium” to work there must be some form of continued “overlap” between “this age” and the “age to come” even after Christ’s second coming. Evil must continue to exist with good; unredeemed, natural, sinful, and mortal people must co-exist with resurrected, sinless, immortal people. However, that flies in the face of the above passages which consistently describe Christ’s second coming as entailing the end of the age; the resurrection of both the redeemed and the unredeemed, the judgment of both the righteous and the wicked, and the re-creation of the earth.

⁴ Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 25-26; see also Eph 1:21.

⁵ Riddlebarger, *Amillennialism*, 85; see also Venema, *Promise*, 90-95 (“the return of Christ marks the close of the present age”). See main text, chapter 5-The Eschatological Significance of Christ’s Second Coming, for a more detailed discussion of the significance and effects of the *parousia*.

⁶ Heb 9:28 says that Christ “*will appear a second time*,” not “a second and third time.” In fact, in John 5:28-29 Jesus says that there will be “*an [i.e., one] hour*,” not two separate hours, when the resurrection of, and eternal rewards and punishments to, both the just and the unjust will occur. Christ could not “come” again after his *parousia* in any event since, even by premillennialist reckoning, he will be on earth following his “second coming.”

Waldron summarizes the fatal nature of the Biblical doctrine of the two ages to any idea of post-*parousia* provisional or temporary “millennium”: Where in the two-age structure can the millennium be placed? Shall it be put in this age or in *the age to come*? The fact is that it fits into neither age. Why does it not fit in *this age*? Because the millennium occurs after Christ’s second coming. Why does it not fit in *the age to come*? Because no wicked men in an unresurrected condition remain in that age. When we remember that there is no intermediate period between the two ages and no other period beside the two ages, no place for premillennialism remains.⁷

Revelation 20 Recapitulates, Rather than Follows, the Events of Rev 19:11-21

In Rev 19:11-21, Christ triumphs over and destroys all nations that are opposed to his kingdom. The language of Christ’s victory is complete, final, and total. If Revelation 20 is read chronologically, it is senseless to speak of binding Satan in order to prevent his deceiving the nations since the nations which were formerly deceived by Satan have been completely vanquished.

Rev 19:17-18 quotes from the Gog-Magog conflict in Ezek 39:17-20. In Rev 20:7-10, which describes the great warfare that will conclude the millennium, John again draws from the Gog-Magog conflict of Ezekiel.⁸ The premillennial scheme has the identical language and imagery from the same episode of a single prophecy described by Ezekiel, but has such identical language and imagery refer to two different episodes in history, separated by a thousand years. A far more plausible reading is that the visions of Revelation 19 and 20 describe the same event as parallel descriptions of the same historical period.

Rev 16:14, 19:19, and 20:8 all describe an end-time conflict in which Christ is triumphant and the rebellious nations are defeated. Each time it is described as “the battle” (or “the war”). The use of the definite article (“the”) in Rev 16:14, 19:19 and 20:8 suggests that this battle represents the final and conclusive defeat of Christ’s enemies. The “article of previous reference” in Rev 20:8 “tells us that John is referring to something of which he has already spoken. This previous reference is to ‘the battle’ mentioned in 19:19 and 16:14-16.”⁹ Since in 16:14 and 19:19 the battle takes place in close association with Christ’s second coming, “this clear reference of 20:8 to the battle of 19:19 and 16:14-16 makes clear that the time period in view immediately precedes the second coming.”¹⁰ Rev 15:1 declares that with the outpouring of the seven bowls “*the wrath of God is finished.*” The last of the seven bowls of wrath was poured in Rev 16:17-21. In

⁷ Waldron, “Structural Considerations,” n.p.

⁸ Compare Rev 20:8 with Ezek 38:2; 39:1, 6; and Rev 20:9 with Ezek 38:22; 39:6.

⁹ Waldron, “Eschatological Kingdom,” n.p.

¹⁰ Ibid.

16:17 a loud voice came from the throne of heaven saying “*it is done.*” The completion of God’s wrath is recapitulated by the parallel vision of Rev 19:11-21.¹¹ To read Revelation 19 and 20 as historically consecutive, as premillennialists do, would mean that God’s wrath would not be completed as Rev 15:1 says but that God would continue to have and pour out his wrath a thousand years later, after Christ’s reign during the millennium.

First Cor 15:25-26 states that Christ “*must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death.*” That constitutes “*the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father*” (1 Cor 15:24). “The end” (15:24) is coterminous with the abolition of death (15:26), which is when our mortal bodies are changed and “*put on immortality*” (15:52-54). Rev 19:11-21 describes the *parousia* of Christ and the concomitant death and destruction of “the rest.” Rev 20:7-9 similarly pictures the destruction and death of the nations who gathered together for “the war” against Christ and his church “*when the thousand years are completed.*” Those events all occur at Christ’s “coming,” i.e., the *parousia* (1 Cor 15:23). That means that Revelation 20 has to recapitulate Revelation 19 and the *parousia* must occur after, not before, the “thousand years.”

Venema concludes, “The parallels between these visions—in language, symbolism, use of Old Testament prophecy, and content—is so pervasive and compelling as to yield but one likely explanation: they are describing the same period of history, the same episodes and the same conclusion at the end of the age.”¹² Additionally, since at his coming Jesus will raise to glory *all* those who believe in him (e.g., Matt 24:31; John 6:39-40), and according to Rev 19:18, 21 *everyone* else is slain, no one would be left to enter a post-*parousia* “millennium” and repopulate the earth in any event.

The “Thousand Years” and the “Two Resurrections

The specific context of Revelation 20 itself indicates that the term “thousand years” is a symbolic or figurative term, not a literal thousand-year period of time. Even premillennialists Ladd, Osborne, and most other commentators agree.¹³

Rev 20:4 talks about those who “come to life” (Greek = *ezēsan*), which is called “the first resurrection” in Rev 20:5b.¹⁴ Amillennialists view the “first resurrection” as our new life in and union with Christ,¹⁵ or as Christ’s resurrection in which

¹¹ Rev 19:15 specifically refers to Christ’s treading “*the wine press of the fierce wrath of God.*”

¹² Venema, *Promise*, 314-15.

¹³ Ladd, *Commentary*, 262; Osborne, *Revelation*, 701.

¹⁴ *Ezēsan* (Rev 20:4-5) is the aorist tense of the verb *zaō* (“to live”). The word used for “resurrection” in Rev 20:5-6 is the common noun for resurrection, namely, *anastasis*.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Civ.*, 20.6-10; White, “Death and the First Resurrection,” 22; Shepherd, “Resurrections,” 36-38; Venema, *Promise*, 331-36.

believers spiritually participate,¹⁶ or as the Christians' translation to heaven upon their physical death.¹⁷ The wording and the context of Rev 20:4-6 offer compelling reasons why the two uses of *ezēsan* do *not* both represent bodily resurrections separated by thousand literal years.

Parallels of other NT and OT passages with Rev 20:4-6 indicate that the "first resurrection" is spiritual and takes place before the final, general, physical resurrection at the *parousia*

"Most striking is the observation that elsewhere in the NT *anastasis* [resurrection] and *zaō* ['to live'] (or the cognate noun *zōē*, 'life') and synonyms are used interchangeably of both spiritual and physical resurrection *within the same immediate contexts*."¹⁸ Further, the verb *zaō* ("to live") also is used for the soul living on after the death of the body in Luke 20:38 and 1 Pet 4:6. *Ezēsan* (Rev 20:4-5) is the aorist tense of *zaō*. Since the words *life* and *resurrection* can be used together to contrast a spiritual with a physical state of affairs, the primary hermeneutical objection to the amillennial view—that *ezēsan* in Rev 20:4-5 can only be referring to physical resurrection—is undercut.

The descriptions of the resurrections in John 5 and Revelation 20 are perfectly parallel. In John 5:25 "the coming hour already is: the resurrection life for the physically dead in the end time is already being manifest as life for the spiritually dead," whereas in John 5:28 "the future, final apocalyptic resurrection is in view. The voice of the Son is powerful enough to generate spiritual life now; it will be powerful enough to call forth the dead then."¹⁹

There also is a clear parallel between Eph 2:5-7 and Rev 20:4-6. Eph 2:5-6 uses the phrases "*made us alive*," "*raised us up*," and "*seated us with him in the heavenly places*" to refer to spiritual resurrection with Christ in this age, the present. As N. T. Wright says, "Without downplaying the future hope of actual resurrection itself, the fact that the church lives in the interval between the Messiah's resurrection and its own ultimate new life means that the metaphorical use of 'resurrection' language can be adapted to denote the concrete Christian living described in [Eph] 2:10." That corresponds with Rev 20:4-6 in that, in both cases, the words pertaining to life and resurrection are used spiritually or metaphorically, the participants are sitting in the heavenly realm, and the time period is the present.²⁰ Similar language of spiritual rebirth or "resurrection" which

¹⁶ Hughes, "First Resurrection," 315-18.

¹⁷ Kline, "First Resurrection," 366-75.

¹⁸ Beale, *Revelation*, 1004 (citing Rom 6:4-13 and John 5:24-29; cf. Rom 8:10-11), emphasis in original.

¹⁹ Carson, *John*, 257-58; see also Jordan, *The Law*, 57 ("In John 5:21-29, Jesus distinguishes a first resurrection, when those dead in sin will hear the voice of Christ and live [v. 25]; and a second resurrection, when those dead in the grave will come forth to a physical resurrection [v. 29].").

²⁰ In Eph 2:5, the word for "*made us alive*" is *suzōpoieō* which is part of the same cognate word group as *zaō*, from which *ezēsan* is derived (Trenchard 1998: 43). In Eph 2:6, the word for "*raised us up*" is *sunegeirō*, which is derived from *egeirō*, an important NT word for "resurrection." Consistent with the use of *ezēsan* for the "first resurrection" in Rev 20:4, both words in Eph 2:5-6 are being used spiritually or metaphorically. In Col 2:12 and 3:1, the word for the believers' being "raised" is *sunegeirō*, the same word

is as transformative as physical resurrection likewise is expressed in 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; Col 2:12-13; and 3:1-4.²¹

This also is in accord with what Jesus said in Luke 20:37-38 (see also Matt 22:31-32; Mark 12:26-27), “*But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the burning bush, where he calls the Lord THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB. Now He is not the God of the dead but of the living; for all live to Him.*” The word used by Jesus for “raised” in v. 37 is *egeirō*, one of the primary words used in the NT for “resurrection.” The important point here is that Jesus was using clear “resurrection” language to describe Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob *in the intermediate state*, not their final bodily resurrected state. In other words, Jesus uses *egeirō* in Luke 20:37 the way amillennialists use the similar word, *anastasis*, in Rev 20:5-6.

The contrasting "first-second" schema of Rev 20:4-6

Additionally, specific “contextual clues” in Rev 20:4-6 justify interpreting the first *ezēsan* (Rev 20:4) spiritually and the second *ezēsan* (Rev 20:5) physically. In Rev 20:5-6 the “first resurrection” and the “second death” are explicitly mentioned; the “second resurrection” and “first death” are not, but are implied. However, the ordinal ‘first’ (*prōtos*) with “resurrection” occurs nowhere else in Bible except here. That use of “first” along with “resurrection” provides the key which demonstrates that the so-called “two resurrections” of Rev 20:4-6 are, in fact, of qualitatively different orders.

Over 200 years ago, Alexander Fraser pointed out, “The terms, first and second, are used in Scripture to distinguish subjects which are in some respects similar, but in others are very different, lest we should mistake the one for the other.”²² In Revelation and elsewhere the use of “first” and “second,” “old” and “new,” “first” and “last,” are markers of *qualitative difference*, not temporal sequence of things that are alike. Thus, in Rev 20:5-6 the “first resurrection” is not simply the first of two resurrections which are alike but is *antithetically contrasted* with the “second death” and with the (implied) “second resurrection.” Indeed, the fact that a “second resurrection” is not explicitly mentioned is itself evidence that the “second” resurrection is of a qualitatively different kind than the “first” resurrection: “John refuses to mention the ‘second resurrection’ by name in 20.13 [or in 20:5-6], not because resurrection is not in view, but because he wishes to discourage the very idea . . . that the ‘rest of the dead’ will experience ‘life’ in the deepest sense when they finally ‘stand again’ in their bodies. . . . The second ‘resurrection’, that of the unrepentant, can hardly be called such because it

used in Eph 2:6; the word in Col 2:12 for Christ’s being raised is *egeirō*, from which *sunegeirō* is derived. In Col 2:13, the word for “made you alive” is *suzōpoieō*, the same word used in Eph 2:5.

²¹ Wright, *Resurrection*, 237.

²² Fraser, *Key to the Prophecies*, 418.

issues not in everlasting life, but in the second death.”²³

The use of “first” and “second,” “old” and “new,” “first” and “last,” as terms of *contrast*, not *sequence*, is found throughout the NT. Fraser states, “The Scriptures frequently mention the second or new birth. The first birth is that of the body. Is it necessary that the second should be so too? . . . The second birth is doubtless an allegory. But does it follow that the first birth is an allegory too?”²⁴ In 1 Cor 15:22, 42-46, the “first Adam” had a perishable, natural body and brought death; the “last Adam” has an imperishable, spiritual body and brought life. In 1 Cor 15:47-49, the “first man” is from the earth and is earthy; the “second man” is from heaven and is heavenly. Paul’s discussion of the “first and last Adam” and “first and second man” is part of a broader discussion of contrasts, including the “first” or “natural” (“earthly”) body and then the “spiritual” (“heavenly”) body (1 Cor 15:42-44, 46-49).

In Mark 2:21-22 Jesus uses “old” and “new” (cloth and garments; wine and wineskins) to contrast the “newness” of life that Jesus and the gospel bring, as opposed to the “oldness” of Jewish religious rituals (see also Luke 5:36-39). In 2 Cor 5:17 Paul’s use of “old” and “new” clearly is showing the radical difference of life in Christ as opposed to life without Christ. Similarly, in Eph 4:22-24 and Col 3:9-10 Paul contrasts the “old man” (the unregenerate person) with the “new man” (the regenerate person).

Meredith Kline points out how Hebrews uses the exact terminology used in Revelation in order to distinguish the “first” or “old,” temporary, non-salvific Mosaic Covenant from the “second” or “new,” everlasting, salvific New Covenant: “In the Book of Hebrews the terms ‘first’ and ‘new’ are used to distinguish the Mosaic and the Messianic administrations of God’s redemptive covenant (*cf.* 8:7, 8, 13; 9:1, 15, 18; 10:9). The new covenant is also called ‘the second’ [Heb 10:9]: . . . Here then in this terminology for the two-covenant pattern is the identical pairing of terms, including the same alternate for ‘new,’ that we find in Revelation 20 and 21.”²⁵

That same pattern is found in Revelation itself. In Revelation 21, which is thematically and proximately related to Revelation 20, *prōtos* (“first”) is repeatedly used, *not* as the first in a series of things that are alike but as something that stands *in contrast* to what is described as “new” or “second.”²⁶ “The contextual force of *prōtos* [is] descriptive of the pre-consummate stage of things.”²⁷ Thus, in Rev 21:1 there is antithesis between the “first” (old) creation and the second (“new”) creation: “the former was preconsummate or incomplete and the latter

²³ Mealy, *After the Thousand Years*, 230n.5; see also Kline, “First Resurrection,” 371; Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 465.

²⁴ Fraser, *Key to the Prophecies*, 418.

²⁵ Kline, “First Resurrection,” 367-68.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 366-67, citing Rev 21:1-8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 371.

consummate or complete.”²⁸

The point of Rev 20:6 is that the dead in Rev 20:4 are the ones who, by their participation in the “first resurrection,” have passed from death to life *before* they die physically; therefore, they are free from the second death's power *when* they die physically. They have this freedom because, before they died physically, Christ freed them from the bondage of their sins by his blood made them his kingdom of priests. Only the Christian dead are so blessed. In other words, the Rev 20:6 is a beatitude for the Christian dead.²⁹

In sum, the “first resurrection” occurs in this age, is spiritual (i.e., union with God through union with Christ), and applies only to believers; the (implied) “second resurrection” is the general resurrection at the end of the age, is physical, and applies to all people. The (implied) “first death” is a part of this life, is physical, is temporary, and applies to all people; the “second death” occurs after this life is over, is spiritual (i.e., separation from God because of separation from Christ), lasts forever, and applies only to nonbelievers.

Conclusion

The New Testament sets forth a comprehensive two-age scheme in which “this age” of sin and things temporal is succeeded by the “age to come” that will be eternal and without sin. Although it has been inaugurated by Christ’s first coming, the “age to come” will be consummated at his second coming which will entail resurrection and judgment for all persons, living and dead, and the restoration of all of creation. Revelation 20 is consistent with that New Testament pattern. By not taking into account the significance of “first” coupled with “resurrection,” “second” coupled with “death,” and the contrasting, as opposed to sequential, “first-second” schema of Rev 20:4-6, premillennialism leads to serious inconsistency, arbitrariness, and to the disregarding of vital aspects of the *parousia* that are clearly and repeatedly established throughout the NT. Both Revelation 20 and the rest of Scripture leave no room, either temporally or exegetically, for a provisional “millennial reign” of Christ and his saints following the *parousia*.

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²⁸ Beale, *Revelation*, 1006.

²⁹ I owe this succinct summary of the import of Rev 20:6 to R. Fowler White.

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