

Resolving the Amillennial/ Premillennial Debate

Scientific exegesis of the Bible which abides by the plain meaning of words and the established principles of language would quickly resolve the unfortunate arguments which have raged over Revelation 20:1-6. The dispute is over **the thousand-year reign of Christ and the saints**. Does this passage describe a non-literal, present “reign” of the faithful which follows their individual conversion (**amillennialism**), or does it present us with a collective resurrection of the faithful from literal death followed by a future literal reign with Christ (**premillennialism**)? The whole question of Christian hope and reward is involved in this issue.

A period of 1000 years is mentioned explicitly only in Revelation 20. But the biblical teaching about the future destiny of the saints is a massive subject referred to with great frequency in both Testaments. The *length* of the period of the saints’ rule — the first stage being 1000 years — occurs only here. But the *fact* of the future reign of the saints with Jesus on earth is taught in scores of passages in both Testaments. It would be quite illogical to separate Revelation 20 from all the repeated Bible references to the saints ruling as kings with the Messiah on earth when he comes back.

Jesus is now of course seated at the right hand of God in heaven, “**waiting** until his enemies are made his footstool” (Ps. 110:1) Joseph of Arimathea was also “**waiting** for the Kingdom of God” after the ministry of Jesus had ended (Mark 15:43). If one is not waiting for that future Kingdom of God on earth, and the joint reign of Jesus and the saints, one has abandoned the reality of Christian hope and expectation. Not to mention the inspiring hope that peace on earth for the whole world will eventually come, but only when Jesus returns.

The amillennial view, popular since the time of the very philosophically-minded Augustine, contends that “those who came to life” (*ezesan*) and

“began to reign as kings” (*ebasileusan*) in Revelation 20:4 are believers metaphorically “coming to life” at their individual conversion and baptism and “reigning” in their present Christian life. However, language really ought never to be so manipulated!

This reading of the passage overlooks a rather obvious fact — that the ones singled out who “came to life” are “those who had been **beheaded**” (*pepelekismenon*, v. 4). So Revelation 20:4 contains the very straightforward proposition that “those who had been **beheaded** came to life and began to reign with Christ for a thousand years.” The perfect participle (“those who had been beheaded”) is followed by the main verbs “came to life” and “began to reign,” telling us, of course, that the beheading *preceded* the coming to life.

The sentence construction follows a normal pattern in which “the perfect participle [‘the ones who had been beheaded’] expresses an action *antecedent* to the main verb [‘came to life’]” (Dana and Mantey, *Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 1927, p. 230).

It hardly needs to be stated that at conversion one does not come to life after being beheaded! However, one obviously *does* come to life in a literal resurrection after being martyred. The fact that the proposition in Revelation 20:4 describes a beheading *prior to* a rising from death proves that a literal resurrection of literally dead persons is meant.

The glorious reward of believers who gave their lives for Christ is described in Revelation 20. All the early premillennial “church fathers” had no difficulty with this passage.

A parallel construction in John’s gospel does not present us with the slightest difficulty. In John 11:44 we read of Lazarus that “he who had been dead came out.” The perfect participle (“he who had been dead,” *tethnekos*) naturally implies that the death of Lazarus precedes his coming to life and coming out of the tomb. No one would suggest that Lazarus came out before dying!

Yet amillennialists commit themselves to this sort of misreading in Revelation 20:1-4. They maintain that the statement “those who had been

beheaded came to life” means that “those who would later be beheaded had already come to life at conversion”! This makes no sense of plain language, and appears to “take away from the words of the prophecy,” by altering their obvious sense, a procedure which will have the direst consequences (Rev. 22:19).

The “amillennial” evasion of the description of martyred saints coming alive again in resurrection at the return of Jesus, to reign for a thousand years, stems from antagonism towards the ancient doctrine of the millennial reign of Christ and the saints. This triumphant rulership of the world will be initiated by the return of Christ and the resurrection of the faithful to inherit the Kingdom of God on the earth (cp. Rev. 5:10).

Revelation 12:9 states that “the Devil is now deceiving the whole world.” Is it too much to ask a reader to see that in Revelation 20:2-3 when the Devil is bound and thrown into the abyss “so that he can **deceive the world no longer,**” **this cannot possibly be true of the time now when he is currently deceiving the entire world (Rev. 12:9)?** To avoid the obvious here would be to undermine and confuse the fabric of the whole Bible narrative.

Our point was well made by the *Century Bible Commentary*. In this commentary, C. Anderson Scott noted that some understand “the ‘first resurrection’ in a wholly spiritual sense, as equivalent to a resurrection ‘from the death of sin to the life of righteousness.’ This is indeed the theory accepted by most Roman Catholic theologians, from Augustine downwards, making this first resurrection a symbol of admission within the church, the sphere of safety from the evil one. To this there are **two fatal objections:**

“1) This resurrection is plainly the reward or result of martyrdom, and follows not the beginning, but the end, of a Christian life...

“2) [As Henry Alford pointed out]: ‘If, in a passage where two resurrections are mentioned...the first resurrection may be understood to mean *spiritual* [non-literal] rising with Christ, while the second means *literal* rising from the grave, then **there is an end of all**

significance in language, and Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to anything.’”

Here is the full quote from Dr. Henry Alford on Revelation 20:4-6: “It will have been long ago anticipated by the readers of this Commentary that I cannot consent to distort words from their plain sense and chronological place in the prophecy, on account of any considerations of difficulty, or any risk of abuses which the doctrine of the millennium may bring with it. Those who lived next to the Apostles, and the whole Church for 300 years, understood them **in the plain literal sense**; and it is a strange sight in these days to see expositors who are among the first in reverence of antiquity, complacently casting aside the most cogent instance of consensus which primitive antiquity presents.

“As regards the text itself, **no legitimate treatment of it will extort what is known as the spiritual interpretation** now in fashion. If, in a passage where *two resurrections* are mentioned, where certain persons *came to life* at the first, and the rest of the dead *came to life* only at the end of a specified period after that first — if in such a passage the first resurrection may be understood to mean *spiritual* rising with Christ, while the second means *literal* rising from the grave — then there is an end of all significance in language, and Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to anything. If the first resurrection is spiritual [non-literal], then so is the second, which I suppose none will be hardy enough to maintain; but if the second is literal, then so is the first, which in common with the primitive Church and many of the best modern expositors, I do maintain, and receive as an article of faith and hope” (*Greek Testament*, Vol. 4). ✧