

THE RESURRECTIONS OF REVELATION 20

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THE interpretation of Revelation 20 is foundational for pre-millennial eschatology. It is doubtful whether anything like the premillennial scheme as it is currently popularized would have emerged from relevant passages in either the Old or New Testaments apart from settled convictions with respect to the meaning of Revelation 20. A classic formulation of these convictions respecting the two-fold resurrection may be found in the commentary of Henry Alford whose brief but cogent observations have proved decisive for many. Alford writes, "If, in a passage where *two resurrections* are mentioned, where certain ψυχαὶ ἔζησαν at the first, and the rest of the νεκροὶ ἔζησαν only at the end of a specified period after the 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 any thing."¹ Alford further argues that if at least one of the resurrections must be a bodily resurrection, both are; the one is of the just, and the other, of the unjust at the end of the millennial reign of Christ.

The purpose of what follows is to offer in at least a tentative way a different understanding of the resurrections of Revelation 20, taking account of the broader biblical and theological context in which the prophecy concerning these resurrections appears.

Revelation 20:4 indicates that the persons described in the verse "lived, and reigned with Christ a thousand years." There is no need to determine the precise identity of these persons, nor is it necessary to determine the precise force of the verb, ἔζησαν. It could mean "they lived," or "they came to life." Living would seem to carry with it the implication of an inception of life, and

¹ Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, with revision by E. F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), IV, 732. See also p. 252.

in terms of the succeeding context it is appropriate to refer to this inception of life as resurrection. Vss. 4 and 5 together indicate that of a larger group called the dead, some lived (ἔζησαν), and the rest did not live (οὐκ ἔζησαν). To this point there is in view not two resurrections, but *one* resurrection in which some participate and others do not. Therefore vs. 5 concludes with the summary affirmation. "This is the first resurrection." When it is said that the rest did not live until the thousand years should be finished, there is no express statement to the effect that they then did live. This is a possible and even legitimate inference, but it is an inference. In any case, the focus is on what is true during the thousand years. There are those who came to life, or live, and this is the first resurrection.

If, according to the premillennialist view, those who came to life are identified as the just and the rest of the dead as the unjust, what the text affirms is a resurrection of the just. Further, in terms of Alford's argument that ἔζησαν must be understood in the same sense in vss. 4 and 5, the text simply states that the kind of resurrection affirmed with respect to the just, must, during the same period, be denied with respect to the unjust. There is not the necessary warrant here for the doctrine of a resurrection of the just in the body followed at a thousand year interval by the bodily resurrection of the unjust.

Although the combination, ἔζησαν-οὐκ ἔζησαν, does not itself require a two-fold resurrection, the description of the life attested as "the first resurrection" does, indeed, suggest the possibility of at least a second resurrection, the more so in view of the fact that the context speaks of a second death indicating that the dead ones of vs. 5 are to be thought of as subject to the *first* death. A peculiar and obvious feature of Revelation 20 is the fact there there is no second resurrection named as such in the context, nor is there any detailed and explicit instruction concerning the way in which the implied second resurrection is to be understood absolutely, or in relation to the first resurrection, or in relation to the resurrection phenomena alluded to at the end of the chapter.

We are compelled to ask, therefore, whether the broader context of Scripture affords any help in understanding the meaning of a first and second resurrection; and there does, indeed, appear to be this kind of distinction in the letters of

Paul. I Corinthians 15 sets before the reader in unmistakable terms the truth of a bodily resurrection in which all believers have part. This resurrection occurs at the return of Christ (vs. 23). Prior to the resurrection at the return of Christ, there is another resurrection which occurs at baptism. Paul speaks of this resurrection in various places. In Colossians 2:12 the addressees are described as "having been buried with him [Christ] in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead." This affirmation is to be correlated with Romans 6:4 where Paul says that men walk in newness of life because they were raised with Christ in baptism. Similarly, Colossians 3:1 and Ephesians 2:6 speak of resurrection with Christ, but without expressly linking resurrection to baptism. When all of these verses are correlated with I Corinthians 15:23, the pattern of a two-fold resurrection clearly emerges.

This same pattern does not appear to be absent from John, the author of Revelation. The relevant passages are John 5:24-29 and John 11:24f. The least that John 5:24f. has to offer is a passage from death to life as a present experience. This passage from death to life does not await the consummation; it is a resurrection experience now, prior to the end of all things. Vss. 28f. go on to speak of a resurrection of the body. Similarly in John 11:25, Jesus is offering more than the consolation of a resurrection to come. There is a prior living in spite of, and through, the phenomenon commonly called death. It is a life derived from the resurrection of Christ, from his life. It is therefore resurrection life antecedent to the resurrection at the last day (vs. 24).

When this conception of a two-fold resurrection found in Paul, but also in John, is allowed to interpret Revelation 20:4f., the first resurrection must be understood to have reference to the experience of baptism. The experience is more commonly spoken of as "conversion" to which baptism is later appended. The appropriate biblical terminology appears to be that of baptism and ingrafting into Christ.

From this perspective it is a subordinate question whether all of the just are in view in Revelation 20 as participating in the first resurrection, or only Christian martyrs. Even if one were to conclude that the concern of John's prophecy at this point is only

with the martyrs, they are said to *live*; and in the pattern of biblical thought life does not accrue from any merit peculiar to martyrdom, but solely from the righteousness of Christ by faith. At the heart of martyrdom is total abandonment to the mercy of God, and that is the faith which receives life from Christ. The martyrs are just men, and this experience of the first resurrection does not differ in principle from the experience of all the elect, though their violent end may suggest otherwise to the natural eye of man.

From the perspective described above it is less likely that the first resurrection refers to the moment of physical death when the just go to be present with the Redeemer in a new and distinctive way to await the final judgment. Although the benefits to be received by the just at death are not to be depreciated, nevertheless the experience is characteristically called death in the Bible. In the context of Revelation 20, it is referred to at least by implication, as the first death. Similarly, in Revelation 14:13, the experience is denominated a dying in the Lord rather than a rising in the Lord. But even if one were to insist that the new stage of life into which the just enter at death is what is in view, that life is simply an unfolding of what is more appropriately and specifically resurrection, the experience of baptism.

If the first resurrection has reference to baptism according to the pattern of Paul and John, the implied second resurrection of Revelation 20 would then have reference to the resurrection of the body at the return of the Lord. Further, "second resurrection" would be a more fitting description of the experience of the just than of the rest of the dead. The wicked are, indeed, also raised in the body, and the Bible does speak of a resurrection of the unjust. However, because resurrection is pre-eminently a redemptive category, there is a certain reserve observable in the application of the terminology of resurrection to the unjust. One can sense the resultant incongruity if John were to have written that at the end of a thousand years, the unjust come to life and this is the second resurrection.

But John does not even describe the bodily resurrection of the just expressly as the second resurrection. This may well be indicative of the fact that contrary to much popular thought on the subject, baptism is even more properly resurrection than is the resurrection of the body. The just who are alive at the return of

the Lord will not be resurrected in the body but will be transformed. The righteous dead who do rise bodily at the last day do not again assume mortality but immortality. Not resuscitation but transformation is the leading feature of resurrection, and the foundational transformation and transition takes place at baptism, the first resurrection. The ordinal number may suggest eminence as well as sequence. Christ was raised from the dead in the fullest sense of the word, although his body saw no corruption. Those joined to him by baptism experience resurrection with him before their bodies see corruption.²

The propriety of using the Pauline and Johannine pattern of a first and second resurrection, associating these with baptismal resurrection and the resurrection at the return of Christ, as a model for the interpretation of Revelation 20 is confirmed by reference to parallel phenomena. The transformation and transition wrought in baptism is spoken of in Scripture not only as resurrection but also as creation and as birth. The central significance of the sacrament of baptism as a means of grace is union with Christ. In Christ the elect of God are raised to newness of life; they are created again living souls in the image of their Maker; and they are born into everlasting life. Resurrection, creation, and birth describe the origin of new life which the baptized have in Jesus Christ as arising from the will of God. Both Paul and John use the language of resurrection; Paul more characteristically uses the language of new creation,³ and John, of new birth.⁴

If the transformation wrought in baptism may be called the *first* resurrection, it may also be called the *first* creation and the *first* birth. The question now arises whether there are a second creation and a second birth⁵ parallel to the second resurrection. There does, indeed, appear to be such a parallel carrying

² Similarly, the fact that John in Revelation 20 speaks expressly only of a second death does not make the death of the just in the body (their first death) anything less than death (see the preceding paragraphs). However, death is peculiarly the death of eternal condemnation, the second death.

³ *E.g.*, II Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:10, 4:24; and Colossians 3:10.

⁴ *E.g.*, John 3:1-8; I John 3:9, 5:1, 18.

⁵ The ordinal numbers have reference to creation and birth as soteric phenomena. They leave out of account the original creation as well as

with its significant consequences for the understanding of Revelation 20.

The second creation is not known by that name in the New Testament, but the phenomenon is there under the name of the new heavens and the new earth (II Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21:1). The Bible describes a cataclysm of cosmic proportions to occur at the end-time out of which emerges a new creation or second creation.

Second birth is a technical term used to describe what is known in theology as regeneration in the narrow sense. This new birth is called in Scripture simply a begetting or generation.⁶ It could appropriately be called the first birth because the literal expression, regeneration (*παλιγγενεσία*), is used only once in the Bible and appears to refer to the end-time cosmic cataclysm (Matthew 19:28).

The second creation and the second birth are cosmic events, and it might appear that the second resurrection does not have this same cosmic scope. However, Romans 8:18–23 shows that the scope of the second resurrection may not be restricted to the personal experience of the believer. In vs. 21 Paul speaks of the future deliverance of the creation from the bondage of *corruption* (*φθορά*), a term also used by him to describe the condition of the body under the power of death and about to be resurrected (I Corinthians 15:42, 50). The deliverance of the creation would therefore have to be construed as a *cosmic resurrection*. Moreover, and more pointedly, the cosmic resurrection is coincident with the resurrection of the body. In vss. 22f., the personal groaning in ardent longing for the resurrection

physical birth. But even here it may be possible to discern certain interesting parallels. For example, the concept of resurrection may not be altogether foreign to Genesis 1 and 2 as the ordered platform for human life emerges by the power of God out of the waste and void resulting from the original creative fiat. In particular, the first man is created of the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7). He returns to dust at death (Genesis 3:19) and therefore will at last be resurrected out of the dust. Another parallel is suggested by Psalm 90:2 which uses the language of both creation and procreation to describe the origin of the earth.

⁶ In John 3, Nicodemus seems to have been misled by an argument similar to Alford's. He thought of the birth of which Jesus spoke as a physical birth identical in kind with the first. However, the first birth is "literal", and the second, the birth from above, is spiritual.

parallels the longing of the creation for cosmic deliverance. The *terminus ad quem* is the same: a cosmic resurrection whose leading feature is the resurrection of the bodies of those for whom Christ died. It is the resurrection of the *body* of Christ!

The resurrection of the body provides an index for understanding the nature of the cosmic cataclysm and renewal. There is identity and continuity. This mortal and none other, is raised immortal. Similarly, the same cosmos is in view, not a replacement. But just as resurrection is not merely resuscitation but transformation — so much so that Paul can say that flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom (I Corinthians 15:20) — so also there is transformation of the cosmos comparable in kind to that which enables flesh and blood to inherit the Kingdom, and rendering the cosmos suitable to the new dimensions of the Kingdom whatever the demands of those dimensions, whether spiritual or physical, might be.

This cosmic resurrection must be identified with the cosmic creation and cosmic birth. Each has its counterpart in the prior personal experience of the baptized believer. Further, the resurrection of the body in particular signalizes the personal aspect of the end-time cosmic *salvation*, and in a similar way the cosmic scope of redemption is discernible in the appropriation of personal salvation. This is the matrix for understanding the miraculous events recorded in the New Testament including resurrections from the dead prior to and at the time of Jesus' death (cf. Matthew 27:51–53). The redemptive accomplishment of Christ is literally an earth-shaking phenomenon (Matthew 27:51); it has cosmic import and significance. Just as Noah sets foot with his family after the first household baptism (I Peter 3:20f.) on a new earth in which once again righteousness dwells, so also Christ by his baptism — his death and resurrection — introduces his children by their baptism into him, to a new existence in which they can begin to see and participate in a new earth characterized by righteousness and holiness. In the power of the Spirit they cultivate the earth for the glory of God.

When Revelation 20 is interpreted in the context of the soteriology of the New Testament, the contrast does not appear to be between a first bodily resurrection separated from a second at the end of a thousand years, with both resurrections still future. Indeed, the basic contrast is not between the just and

the unjust or even between a spiritual resurrection and a "literal" resurrection. Rather, the basic contrast is between personal salvation and cosmic salvation. Personal salvation is a resurrection experience; it is baptism into, and resurrection with Christ. It is the first stage of the cosmic salvation, personal participation in which includes the resurrection of the body. The *implied* second resurrection of Revelation 20 need not be limited in scope to the resurrection of the body. In the immediate context John, himself, sees a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1). The personal bodily resurrection is coincident with cosmic resurrection as an integral and leading aspect of it. This is the second resurrection.

There is yet a further consideration which deserves to be explored in this connection. The salvation of the elect is grounded in their union with Christ. In Christ they are raised from the dead and they are created or born anew. They are baptized into Christ. Similarly, the cosmic salvation at the end of the age may be thought of as grounded in union with Christ.

Reconciliation is a central category in terms of which the redemptive accomplishment of Christ must be understood. John Murray has shown how, in the thinking of Paul, the reconciliation of the cross has cosmic dimensions.⁷ The key passage is Colossians 1:20 with the reconciliation of all things unto Christ whether of things on earth or in heaven. This cosmic reconciliation must be associated with the end-time cosmic resurrection, creation, and birth previously described. But the cosmic reconciliation is simply the summing up of all things in Christ, the things in the heavens, and the things upon the earth, spoken of in Ephesians 1:10. This is the "recapitulation" (*ἀνακεφαλαίωσις*), the cosmic headship of Christ to which Paul refers again at the end of Ephesians 1. Christ is head over all. The cosmic resurrection, or creation, or birth, toward which all things are pressing is really cosmic salvation in union with Christ. It is a definitive baptism into Christ, cosmic in scope, of which the baptism at the time of Noah and the repeated baptisms administered in the church are but anticipations.

⁷ John Murray, "The Reconciliation," *The Westminster Theological Journal*, XXIX (1966) 1, pp. 1-23. "Our interest now is the relation of the reconciliation wrought by Christ to this cosmic regeneration and restoration" (p. 3).

This cosmic salvation through union with Christ may be further elaborated in terms of the benefits which flow from the headship of Christ. They may be summarized in terms of sanctification, adoption, and justification.⁸ These benefits are conspicuous in the personal salvation of the believer, but also have their cosmic counterpart.

II Peter 3:10–13 describes a cosmic sanctification to be wrought by fire. This cosmic cataclysm is, as previously noted, a cosmic resurrection. Though the individual believer is made perfect at death, the full sanctification in terms of deliverance of the body from corruption and the power of death is realized only in conjunction with the cosmic resurrection and sanctification.

Paul also provides a warrant for thinking in terms of a cosmic adoption when he says in Romans 8:21 “that the creation itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God.” Similarly, the personal bodily resurrection as an aspect of the cosmic resurrection is described as an adoption (vs. 23). The personal end-time adoption of the sons of God is the leading aspect of the cosmic adoption.

Finally, the whole end-time event is frequently and fairly described as the final judgment. This obviously includes the final and public justification of the children of God as individuals; but in Christ the new heavens and the new earth are acceptable to God. The world which Christ came to redeem is at last saved, and the judgment concerning the original creation can be declared again: And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good (Genesis 1:31).⁹

⁸ Although the order suggested here is the reverse of the usual *ordo salutis*, it is the one presented by Paul in Ephesians 1:1–10, leading up to the climatic affirmation of cosmic union with Christ (vs. 4, sanctification; vs. 5, adoption; vs. 7, justification). This order appears appropriate to the order of cosmic salvation, and therefore, perhaps, is not wholly inappropriate to the order of personal salvation. This suggestion deserves fuller elaboration than can be provided at this point. Of course, not sanctification, but Jesus Christ is the foundation of justification; and by the same token, not justification but Jesus Christ is the foundation of sanctification. This is Paul's concern in I Corinthians 1:30. Similarly, in Ephesians 1, each of the benefits of Christ is related directly to Christ, whether considered in particular (vss. 4f., 7) or in sum (vs. 3).

⁹ This attempt to focus on a distinction between personal and cosmic

It has become increasingly clear that the Bible itself provides rich resources for a perfectly natural understanding of Revelation 20. The movement described within the compass of the New Testament is one marked by steady progress under the Kingship of Christ from the baptism of the cross to the baptism of the cosmos as Jesus systematically overcomes all opposition until the last enemy, death itself, is destroyed (I Corinthians 15:25f.). Thus baptism into the death of Christ is also baptism into his resurrection from the dead, and a baptized cosmos becomes a resurrected cosmos. The distance between the first resurrection and the second resurrection is not a thousand years between the "literal" resurrection of the just and the "literal" resurrection of the unjust. It is rather the distance between the resurrection of Jesus Christ in whom and with whom believers are raised by baptism, and the resurrection of all things at the end of the age. Having shown himself alive from the dead, Jesus ascended to the Father, and the heavens have received him until the times of the restoration of all things (Acts 3:21). This restoration is the recapitulation of Ephesians 1:10, the cosmic resurrection and redemption.

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salvation as the proper orientation for an understanding of Revelation 20 has involved the introduction of several lines of thought needing full elaboration including the supporting biblical warrant. The suggestions are programmatic rather than definitive and lead in the direction of a more unified conception of what Berkhof calls "individual eschatology" and "general eschatology", as well as a more unified conception of soteriology and eschatology. Soteriology is eschatologically qualified, and eschatology is soteriologically qualified. The church's proclamation cannot afford either neutrality or silence with respect to eschatological options just because soteriology is not a matter of indifference.