

THE FIRST RESURRECTION

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ONE of the critical points in the exegesis of Revelation 20 is the interpretation of *prōtos* in the phrase, "the first resurrection" (v. 5). Premillennarians understand it in the purely sequential sense of first in a series of items of the same kind. They interpret both "the first resurrection" and the resurrection event described in verses 12 and 13 of this chapter as bodily resurrections. The contextual usage of *prōtos*, however, does not support such an exegesis; it rather points compellingly to an interpretation of "the first resurrection" found in (so-called) amillennial exegesis.*

The Meaning of Prōtos

The vision of the recreation of the world in Revelation 21:1ff. will be a good starting place for our survey of the relevant data concerning *prōtos*. This word is employed here as the opposite of "new." The consummation of history brings "a new heaven and a new earth" (v. 1) and a "new Jerusalem" (v. 2). Indeed, God as Consummator will make "all things new" (v. 5). And the word "first" is used for that which is superseded by the "new": "the first heaven and the first earth were passed away" (v. 1). Indeed, when God makes all things new, all "the first things" pass away—tears, death, sorrow, crying, pain (v. 4). In this passage to be "first" means to belong to the order of the present

* Two articles on Revelation 20 appearing in the forum of this journal within the last two years (cf. *The Westminster Theological Journal* 35, 3 (1973), 281-302 and 36, 1 (1974), 34-43) were in agreement on the negative conclusion at least that "the first resurrection" is not a bodily resurrection. I find that the supplementary evidence for that conclusion to be offered in the present comments is not altogether unanticipated in the commentary literature, but I wish to call attention to it because it seems to be generally overlooked in current discussions and because it has, I believe, a quite decisive bearing on the whole millennial issue.

world which is passing away. *Prōtos* 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. It signifies that the present world stands in contrast to the new world order of the consummation which will abide forever.

An alternate term for "new" in Revelation 21 is the word "second." The death that is identified with the lake of fire and is the eternal counterpart to the death that belongs to the order of "first things" (v. 4) is called "the second death" (v. 8). Thus "second" as well as "new" serves as the antithesis of "first." Whatever accounts for the preference for "first" over "old" in describing the present world, the use of "first" naturally led to the use of "second" alongside of "new" for the future world, particularly for the future reality of eternal death for which the term "new" with its positive redemptive overtones would be inappropriate.

In this antithetical pairing of first death (an expression virtually contained in verse 4) and "second death" (v. 8), Revelation 21 confronts us with the same idiom that we find in Revelation 20 in "the first resurrection" (vss. 5, 6) and the second resurrection (an expression implicit in this chapter). The arbitrariness of the customary premillennial insistence that "the first resurrection" must be a bodily rising from the grave if the second resurrection is such is exposed by the inconsistent recognition by premillennial exegesis that, although the first death is the loss of physical life, "the second death" is death of a different kind, death in a metaphorical rather than literal, physical sense.

Before tying the data of Revelation 21 into the interpretation of Revelation 20 more closely, it will be useful to take notice of certain other New Testament instances of the use of *prōtos* in antithetical pairs, these too descriptive of comprehensive historical-eschatological structures.

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": "He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second" (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.

Although the term "second" appears along with "new," it is "new" that predominates as the counterpart to "first." Accordingly, the significance of "first" in this context is not so much priority in a series but opposition to the idea of "new." *Prōtos* thus functions here as an equivalent for "old," our traditional designation for the Mosaic covenant. Indeed, the author of Hebrews expressly observes that when God speaks of a "new covenant, he hath made the first old," adding, "Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away" (8:13). This contrast between the first and new covenants does not correspond exactly to that between the first and new worlds in Revelation 21, but in both cases the reality described by the term "first" is one that passes away. In Hebrews as in Revelation 21 *prōtos* is used for the provisional and transient stage in contrast to that which is consummative, final, and enduring.

A similar usage of *prōtos* is found in connection with Paul's treatment of the theme of resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. Once again there is a binary pattern with contrasting parts which together span all history. In contraposition in this pattern stand the two Adams. The "first man Adam" (v. 45; cf. vv. 46f.) is not first in the sense of heading an indefinite series of Adams but first in the antithetically qualitative sense of being counterpart to the "last Adam" (v. 45). Here again "second" appears as an alternate term of contrast to "first": "the second man is the Lord" (v. 47). By eliminating the thought of any intermediate Adams between the "first" and "last" Adams, the term "second" here, as in the Hebrews and Revelation 21 passages, underscores the binary (as over against indefinitely seriatim) framework within which *prōtos* is functioning and derives its specific meaning.

The first Adam is earthy and psychical; the last Adam is heavenly and Spiritual (vv. 45, 47). Because of the federal positions occupied by the two Adams the qualities of each one also inform the life sphere at the head of which he stands (vv. 44-49). "First" is thus correlated with the preliminary, pre-consummative phase of kingdom development over against the eschatologically final stage of the kingdom which bears the image of the last Adam. The connotative force of *prōtos* in this passage is

further articulated in the distinguishing elements of the world order that emerges out of the fall of the first Adam: dishonor, weakness, corruption, death (vv. 42f.).

Instructive linguistic and theological parallels to the usage of *prōtos* in Revelation 21 are thus afforded by the exposition of the covenant theme in Hebrews and by the Pauline treatment of the two Adams. Like Revelation 21, Hebrews uses "first" for an historical stage that passes away. Like Revelation 21, Paul uses "first" and its opposite in 1 Corinthians 15 for a two-fold structure comprehensive of cosmic history. In none of these passages does *prōtos* function as a mere ordinal in a simple process of counting objects identical in kind. In fact, precisely the reverse is true in all three passages; in each case it is a matter of different kinds, indeed, of polar opposites. Whatever idea of priority still attaches to *prōtos* in these passages, it is thoroughly subordinated in all of them to the function of expressing in combination with an antonym ("new," "second," or "last") a sharp antithesis. As for Revelation 21 itself, the framework within which *prōtos* performs its antithetical function is that age-spanning structure of biblical eschatology which divides universal history into the two stages: this world and the world to come. To be called "first" within that pattern is to be assigned a place in this present world with its transient order. That which is "first" does not participate in the quality of consummate finality and permanence which is distinctive of the new kingdom order of the world to come.

The Meaning of "The First Resurrection"

An interpretation of *prōtos* in keeping with the usage and meaning of the word found in Revelation 21 is required in Revelation 20, specifically in the expression "the first resurrection." The proximity of the Revelation 20 and 21 contexts and the general thematic continuity between the two chapters would be enough to suggest and indeed to create a presumption in favor of such an interpretation. But the matter is put beyond reasonable doubt by the striking fashion in which the first-(second) resurrection pattern is interlocked in the "thousand years" context with the (first)-second death pattern of Revelation 21.

Thus, in the account of the post-millennial resurrection for

final judgment in Revelation 20:13ff. the issue of that judgment for those not found in the book of life is "the second death," "the lake of fire" (v. 14). And, most to the point, "the second death" formula is directly conjoined with "the first resurrection" formula in the very verses where the latter expression appears: "This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power" (vv. 5b, 6a). "The second death" is thus utilized right within the explanation of what "the first resurrection" is. Clearly the usage of *prōtos* in the first-(second) resurrection pattern must be the same as the usage of *prōtos* in the intertwined (first)-second death pattern, which is itself part of the broader first-new things pattern of Revelation 21.

"The first resurrection" is not, therefore, the earliest in a series of resurrections of the same kind, not the first of two (or more) bodily resurrections. The antithetical usage of *prōtos* in this context requires a conclusion diametrically opposite to the customary premillennial assumption. If the second resurrection is a bodily resurrection, the first resurrection must be a non-bodily resurrection.

The specific meaning *prōtos* bears in this context, as well as its grammatical function, contradicts the interpretation of "the first resurrection" as a bodily resurrection. For bodily resurrection is man's introduction into the final order of the world to come. That which is constituted through the experience of bodily resurrection is permanent; it belongs to the sphere of consummated things. But the meaning of *prōtos* in this context is, as we have seen, antithetical to consummation and permanence. That which is "first" belongs to the order of the present passing world. "The first resurrection" must then be something this side of bodily resurrection, some experience that does not bring the subject of it into his consummated condition and final state.

What then is meant by "the first resurrection"? The answer must certainly be sought in terms of the striking paradoxical schema of which the expression is an integral part. In this arrangement two binary patterns are combined into a complex double pattern with antithesis between the parts within each pair (*i.e.*, the first-new contrast) and also between the two pairs themselves, the one having to do with death and the other with resurrection. As we shall see, there is also a criss-crossing pat-

tern of connections between the two pairs, "the first resurrection" and "the second death" being the explicit and metaphorical members of the two pairs, while the first death links with the second resurrection, both being implicit and literal.

Within this schematic pattern, where we would expect to find mention of the second resurrection we find instead "the second death." When describing the event of bodily resurrection that at least includes if it is not exclusively concerned with the unjust (v. 13), the author deliberately does not refer to it as a "resurrection." For the true significance of the event is to be found in the destiny in which it issues and in the case of the unjust the grave delivers them up (v. 13) only to deliver them over to the lake of fire (v. 15). Hence, the real meaning of the resurrection of the unjust to physical life is conveyed by the paradoxical metaphor of death, "the second death" (v. 14).

The proper decipherment of "the first resurrection" in the interlocking schema of first-(second) resurrection and (first)-second death is now obvious enough. Just as the resurrection of the unjust is paradoxically identified as "the second death" so the death of the Christian is paradoxically identified as "the first resurrection." John sees the Christian dead (v. 4). The real meaning of their passage from earthly life is to be found in the state to which it leads them. And John sees the Christian dead living and reigning with Christ (vv. 4, 6); unveiled before the seer is the royal-priestly life on the heavenly side of the Christian's earthly death. Hence the use of the paradoxical metaphor of "the first resurrection" (vv. 5f.) for the death of the faithful believer. What for others is the first death is for the Christian a veritable resurrection!

This interpretation of "the first resurrection" is consistent with the contextual force of *prōtos* as descriptive of the pre-consummation stage of things. For bright as is the prospect that is opened up by the identification of dying in Christ as a resurrection to heavenly glories with exemption from the power of the second death assured (v. 6), that state is still not the ultimate glory of the Christian. It stands on this side of consummation. It is only the intermediate, not the final state.

The other major amillennial interpretation of "the first resurrection," which views it as regeneration or baptism into Christ, would also meet the contextual requirement that *prōtos* refer to

an experience within the present course of history. However, it does not handle satisfactorily the paradoxical schema we have been examining; in particular, it misses the clear correlation of first death and "first resurrection" in this pattern. It also encounters other difficulties. If "the first resurrection" were regeneration, the death of which "the first resurrection" was the triumphant reversal would be fallen man's death in sin, his unregenerate state. But the living and reigning (v. 4) which is "the first resurrection" (v. 5) is surely to be regarded as answering to the death experience described earlier in the same verse, the death of Christian martyrdom: "(I saw) the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus . . . and they lived." Though this martyrdom imagery is apparently a concrete, typical individualization of a more general kind of experience and is in that sense figurative, it is clearly a Christian experience that this figure portrays. Martyr death would obviously be a most unsuitable figure to depict death in sin. It would be incongruous even for the Christian experience of dying to sin. 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 that has been manifested in faithful Christian witness (*cf.* Rev. 2:10; 12:11). The same problem surfaces in the reference to "the rest of the dead" who do not take part in "the first resurrection" (v. 5). On the interpretation under criticism this would be another group of the unregenerate and verse 5 would then become a rather pointless statement to the effect that the unregenerate are unregenerate during the thousand years. However significant the theological observation that triumphant Christian death belongs to a spiritual process whose source is regeneration, spiritual resurrection from death in sin simply is not what is meant by "the first resurrection" in Revelation 20:5f.

The Beatitude of the Christian Dead

For the Christian, to die is resurrection. This interpretation of "the first resurrection" finds further confirmation in the fact that the blessedness of Christian death is a recurring theme in

the Apocalypse, as was to be expected in a book of its origin and purpose. The support is the stronger in that the parallelism between Revelation 20 and the other occurrences of this theme involves the literary form in which it is expressed. In fact, the parallels in concept and terminology are so close as to make the identification quite unmistakable.

In Revelation 20 "the first resurrection" prospect takes the shape of a beatitude: "Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years" (v. 6). This is one of the seven beatitudes of the Apocalypse (*cf.* 1:3, 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 22:7, 14). Christian death is also the subject of the second beatitude in this series: "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them" (14:13). This sabbath blessing is very much the same as the millennial blessing of Revelation 20:6. For 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). The sabbath rest of the risen Christ is his kingly session at God's right hand. To live and reign with Christ is to participate in his royal sabbath rest. In Revelation 20:6 this blessedness is promised to those who have part in "the first resurrection" and in the Revelation 14:13 equivalent it is pronounced on the dead who die in the Lord. A similar promise of rest is given to the martyr-souls in the vision of the opening of the fifth seal (Rev. 6:11).

The letter to the church in Smyrna in Revelation 2 contains a section that closely parallels Revelation 20:4-6 in its treatment of the blessedness of Christian death. Like the Revelation 20 passage it speaks of martyrdom and promises that through such death the "crown of life" will be secured, a life exempt from "the second death": "be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life . . . He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death" (vv. 10b, 11b). An additional point of resemblance is the contextual reference in both passages to the activity of Satan (2:9, 10 and 20:2f., 7ff.). There is also the intriguing possibility of a relationship between the numerical symbols of the ten days of tribulation (2:10) and the thousand years of reigning (20:4, 6). The intensifying of ten to a thou-

sand together with the lengthening of days to years might then suggest that the present momentary tribulation works a far greater glory to be experienced even in the intermediate state as the immediate issue of martyrdom. The equation of the state of Christian death referred to in this letter with "the first resurrection" state of Revelation 20 is of course firmly established by the common contextual mention of "the second death" (not found in any other context), the same assurance of deliverance from this "second death" being given in both cases. But the "crown of life" promise in Revelation 2:10 is also a strong confirmation of this equation. The crown, *stephanos*, though it might be the festive garland might also be the royal crown. If the latter image is intended here, the "crown of life" promised to the Christian dead is precisely 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.

The way "the first resurrection" is identified with living and reigning with Christ a thousand years in Revelation 20:4-6 has the effect of connecting the qualifying force of *prōtos* quite directly to "the thousand years." 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 must then follow these "thousand years." The premillennial view of the Second Advent is excluded.

The postmillennial view will not do either. If the "thousand years" are, as postmillennarians hold, a late concluding phase of the interadvental age, and if (as is then the case) Revelation 20 is the only place in the book where this special phase of kingdom development is mentioned, it would not seem possible to discover a satisfactory explanation for the almost exclusive focus of this one and only millennial disclosure on the intermediate state, while nothing is said, beyond what might be implied in the prior binding of Satan, about the distinctive situation of the church and the nations on earth during the thousand years. This same difficulty obtains on the premillennial view. On an amillennial approach, earthly developments in church and world during the time denoted by the "thousand years" are dealt with all through the book. The special attention given to the church in heaven in Revelation 20 is then simply

a supplemental emphasis and quite understandable in this book, as we have noted.

If the postmillennial view were to account at all plausibly for the almost total concentration on the intermediate state in the Revelation 20 description of the millennium, the justification would have to involve the assumption that the features here assigned to the intermediate state were at least peculiar to the millennial phase of it. But if the millennium is restricted to a late phase of the present church age, such an assumption is quite unacceptable. For in this book the beheaded faithful who provide the individualizing image for the Christian company who are said to live and reign during the thousand years (20:4) will naturally be understood to include those persecuted first century believers with whom the author identified himself as a companion in tribulation for the testimony of Jesus. And certainly, according to the perspective of the series of Apocalyptic beatitudes to which Revelation 20:6 belongs, the Christian dead have participated in the blessedness of the millennial "first resurrection," the blessedness of the intermediate state of royal rest with Christ, from the time of the church's beginnings when the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ was revealed on Patmos. For the voice from heaven said to John: "Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth" (14:13).

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