

THE FIRST RESURRECTION: A RESPONSE

J. RAMSEY MICHAELS

THE debate over the question of a millennium in Revelation 20 can be narrowed down to two points of interpretation: the binding of Satan and his deception of the nations in vv. 1-3 and 7-10, and the "first resurrection" described in vv. 4-6. In his article in the *Westminster Theological Journal*, XXXVII (Spring, 1975), 366-375, my friend and colleague Meredith Kline has advanced the discussion of the latter and raised it to a higher plane, beyond the usual charges and counter charges of "spiritualizing" and "unwarranted literalism." His excellent study deserves careful attention, especially from those who still propose to interpret the "first resurrection" as a future eschatological event separated from a second resurrection by a thousand years.

Kline argues that "first" and "second" in Rev. 20:5f. denote not mere sequence, but a difference in kind. He compares to it the use of "first" and "new," in 21:1 with reference to the heaven and the earth, as well as the contrast in the Epistle to the Hebrews between the "first" and the "new," or "second," covenant, and in I Cor. 15 between the "first" and "second," or "last," Adam.

The complex interweaving of "first" resurrection and "second" death in Rev. 20:5f. presupposes a second resurrection and a first death. This double binary pattern (as Kline calls it) focuses on the metaphorical and makes it explicit, while taking the literal for granted. The silent members of the pattern (i.e., "first death" and "second resurrection") are the realities commonly labelled death and resurrection respectively. Kline argues that while the first death is physical, the second is different in kind: not literal or physical, but metaphorical. In the case of resurrection, the second is the literal one; therefore the first is different in kind: not literal, but metaphorical. This "first resurrection" is "first" in that it "belongs to the order of the present

passing world" (p. 370). It is nothing other than the death of the Christian believer. "What for others is the first death is for the Christian a veritable resurrection!" (p. 371). Thus, living and reigning with Christ for a thousand years is identified with the intermediate state rather than with a future millennial period on earth.

When Professor Kline's article appeared, the case which it made was not entirely new to me. He had presented the core of it a number of years ago as part of a guest lecture in a course I was teaching at Gordon Divinity School. The argument has intrigued me ever since, and now seeing it in print affords me an opportunity to respond.

Several questions of exegesis and logic present themselves in connection with Kline's thesis. In the course of developing these, the outlines of my own (rather conventional) premillennial view should begin to emerge.

1. There is a difficulty in Kline's designation of the second death as "metaphorical." Although he is correct in saying that the first death is literal in that it is the loss of physical life, it does not follow that the second death is the loss of spiritual life. Those who perish in the lake of fire are not regarded as having been alive in any spiritual or metaphorical sense. Their only life has been physical life, so that for them the second death cannot be some different kind of death from the first. It is rather a finalizing of physical death in the lake of fire, whether viewed as destruction or as eternal separation from God.

Kline himself (correctly) sees the second death in close conjunction with the second resurrection (both coming to expression in Rev. 20:11-15), so it is hard to understand how he can at the same time refer to the former as "metaphorical" and the latter as "literal." Both represent realities beyond the scope of human experience. In that sense, neither can be described in human language without resorting to analogy or metaphor of some kind. Yet both seem intended by the author to be taken as real future events and therefore "literal."

The implications of this for Kline's thesis are clear. If the second death is not metaphorical, there is no reason to assume that the first resurrection is metaphorical either. If both deaths are in some sense "literal," why not both resurrections?

2. Kline stresses the parallelism between the use of "first"

and "second" in Revelation 20, and that of "first" and "new" in chapter 21. He argues that "second" is simply an alternate term for "new," used in chapter 20 for "the future reality of eternal death for which the term 'new' with its positive redemptive overtones would be inappropriate" (p. 367). He cannot be faulted in this basic assertion; it is quite true that in Rev. 20-21, in I Cor. 15, and in Hebrews, "binary patterns" (i.e., "first" and "second," "first" and "new," or "first" and "last") do not refer to a sequence of two things of the same kind but rather to realities which are qualitatively different. A problem arises, however, with Kline's assumption that the contrast of "first resurrection" and "second death" in Revelation 20 is a *double* binary pattern. In actuality it is, of course, a single binary pattern. John could, indeed, have written about a first and second resurrection, and a first and second death. If he had done so, Professor Kline's insights would have led us to infer that the second (or new) resurrection was qualitatively different from the first, and that the second death was to be similarly set in contrast to the first death. This is precisely what John has not done, however, and we should be careful about speaking of the "first death" and the "second resurrection" as if these terms were actually present in the text. Instead, John has paired the adjective "first" only with "resurrection" and "second" only with "death." The effect of this is actually to reinforce the qualitative distinction which Kline sees implied in the binary pattern: the first *resurrection* is set radically in contrast to the second *death*. But there is no real basis in the text for speaking of two different kinds of resurrection, or of two different kinds of death. To John there is only one resurrection which deserves the name, and it is called the "first" resurrection; there is only one death which carries the finality commonly attributed to that word, and it is called the "second" death. It is the commentators (on both sides of the millennial issue) who have complicated the picture.

It is true that Kline can point to the use of the word "death" in 20:13f. and 21:4 as evidence that the *concept*, though not the term, "first death" is present in the context. But is this an adequate basis for reconstructing a "double binary pattern?" In 21:4 "death" is not set in any relationship to the "second death." It gives way not to a new kind of death but to life (cf. v. 6). In 20:13f., where such a relationship does seem to exist,

death is personified and linked with Hades, so that the two virtually function as a single entity (cf. 1:18, 6:8). The second death is not "second" in relation to these its victims, but in relation to the "first resurrection" mentioned earlier in vv. 5f. In fact, the second death is only mentioned in v. 14 in a parenthetical comment explaining its previous use in v. 6: "This is the second death, the lake of fire." In Rev. 2:11, where "second death" also appears against the backdrop of a reference to "death" (v. 10), a somewhat stronger possibility exists that the one is "second" precisely with reference to the other (see pp. 373f.). But it is more likely that the reference is proleptic. Even as 2:11 waits on 20:14 for the explanation of the "harm" which is in view, so it waits on 20:5f. for the explanation of why the death is called "second." The promises in chapters 2-3 to the "overcomers" characteristically tend to anticipate aspects of the consummation which emerge only later in the book (2:7, 27f.; 3:5, 12, 21).

Thus while the notion of a binary pattern is useful for understanding Rev. 20:5f., it is important not to confuse the picture by supplying "phantom" elements in the pattern which are not explicit in the text. There is no "first death" which passes away for those who inherit the second; there is only "death," which loses its power precisely for those who *escape* the second death. Thus Kline's analogies with Rev. 21, I Cor. 15 and Hebrews cannot be pressed. The contrast which he wants to establish between "first resurrection" and "second death" is as strong as he says it is, perhaps even stronger; but its real force does not lie in the ordinal numbers. If it did, the analogy of Scripture would lead us to expect the "second" to be somehow "better." The real contrast comes in the nouns themselves, for resurrection and death are indeed polar opposites.

3. Another problem with Kline's construction arises in connection with his paradoxical understanding of "resurrection" in 20:5f. What is called resurrection in this passage is actually physical death, the death of the Christian believer (p. 371). In a manner reminiscent of G. B. Caird in his Harper Commentary on Revelation, Kline argues that what is one thing empirically may to the "eyes of faith" (Caird's term) be something quite different. The "eyes of faith" imply for Caird a higher reality, a divine perspective on earthly happenings which transforms them

into acts of God. A classic example of this in Caird's commentary (for which Kline obviously bears no responsibility!) is the argument in Rev. 14 that the awful bloodbath described there is not God's literal judgment on Babylon, but rather Babylon's slaughter of the Christian martyrs, seen by the "eyes of faith" as divine judgment on the oppressors. (As virtue is its own reward, so vice becomes its own punishment.)

This Kantian view of reality does admittedly have some legitimate basis in the New Testament. There is general agreement, for example, that the Gospel of John views the crucifixion of Jesus as already his glorification and exaltation. The question is whether such a principle is applicable to the "first resurrection." The danger in Kline's application of the principle is that the paradox tends to become a logical contradiction. On the one hand, he argues that the "first resurrection" is called "first" because it "belongs to the order of the present passing world." It is "antithetical to consummation and permanence" (p. 370). But, on the other hand, he states that it can be called a resurrection because "the real meaning of their passage from earthly life is to be found in the state to which it leads them" (p. 371). Kline attempts to resolve the tension by insisting that "bright as is the prospect that is opened up by the identification of dying in Christ as a resurrection to heavenly glories. . . that state is still not the ultimate glory of the Christian. It stands on this side of the consummation. It is only the intermediate, not the final state" (*ibid.*). But the first resurrection *as resurrection* can hardly be described as temporary or transitory. It does not "pass away," like death or the sea or the old heaven and earth. The Christian who dies, according to Kline's own view, begins to participate then and there in the blessings of the age to come. His death *as death* is indeed transitory, but his death *as resurrection* (to use Kline's terms) belongs to the new age. Is that not the whole point in referring to it as a resurrection? It appears that Professor Kline wants to have it both ways. The strangeness of his proposal becomes clear as soon as we press his interpretation of "first" so as to speak of the "old" resurrection. The difficulty is not so much that Kline includes the intermediate state in the present passing order of existence, but that he does so while at the same time calling it a resurrection. The point of the few New Testament passages that speak of Christians as

already in some sense resurrected (e.g., Rom. 6:4, 11; Eph. 2:5f.; Col. 3:1ff.) is that, to the extent that this resurrection is a present reality, the believer is set free from the transitory present world and ushered into the age to come. Whether or not the "first resurrection" refers to a present experience remains to be seen; but wherever it comes chronologically, it is hard to deny that it partakes of the very nature of consummation.

4. As a corollary of this objection to Kline's use of paradox, a further question must be asked. If the literal future resurrection of Christian believers is not what is meant by the "first resurrection," then where in the chapter is this traditional New Testament hope to be found? It would be strange indeed if a work emphasizing so strongly at the outset the resurrection of Jesus (1:5, 18), and with such a pervasive concern to offer consolation to Christians facing persecution and martyrdom, were to overlook the very heart of the church's eschatological expectation.

The only possible answer to the question, it appears, is that the literal future resurrection of Christians is described in 20:11-15. But in these verses there is no emphasis at all upon this future resurrection as the positive object of Christian hope. As Kline notes, "where we would expect to find mention of the second resurrection we find instead 'the second death'" (p. 371). He adds significantly that this event "at least includes *if it is not exclusively concerned with the unjust*" [Italics mine]. Kline leaves open the question of whether believers are in view at all in vv. 11-15; if they are not, the problem remains of why the future resurrection of the saints is totally absent from this climactic vision of the Christian hope. If, on the contrary, they are assumed to be included in "the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne" (v. 12), there remains in the text a "scandal" which Kline himself has put his finger on: the glorious hope of Christian believers, celebrated by Paul in Rom. 8 and I Cor. 15, is referred to here as a *second death!* The object of hope has been shifted away from the future bodily resurrection to physical death, and this despite the fact that the "first resurrection" in the experience of dying is acknowledged to be a transitory thing belonging to the present order of existence.

It would not be a great step from Kline's hypothesis to the view that Rev. 20 is actually a polemic *against* the belief in a future bodily resurrection. John would then be saying that what

ordinary experience perceives as death is for the Christian a glorious resurrection, the first stage of the believer's entrance into the presence of God, while the future resurrection of the body expected by literalists is no resurrection at all, but death. It has no relevance for Christians because they are already "raised" in the only way that matters, while for the unbelievers it is but a transition to the lake of fire. As far as I know, a "gnostic" interpretation of Rev. 20 along these lines does not exist. If the Book of Revelation was a forerunner of Christian gnosticism, the gnostics themselves seem to have missed the point! Obviously this is not Professor Kline's view, and there is no way he can be legitimately made to press the implications of his approach this far. But the problem remains. Whether there is room in Rev. 20:11-15 for the resurrection of believers or not, the *emphasis* of this passage is clearly not on them but on the judgment of the wicked. It seems inconceivable that the resurrection hope would appear only implicitly, and under the heading of the "second death."

Conceivably one might argue that Rev. 20:11-15 describes the "death of death and Hell's destruction" in a way which is reminiscent of I Cor. 15:26, 54f. and which clears the stage for the positive promises of chapters 21-22; but the fact remains that the focus of these verses is precisely on those whose names are *not* written in the book of life and who are raised up only to join Death and Hades in the lake of fire. Where then *does* the common hope of a bodily resurrection for Christians come to expression in chapter 20? The only alternative to Kline's answer is the traditional premillennial one: in the phrase, "the first resurrection." Premillennialism is often criticized for finding in Rev. 20 a teaching which is foreign to the rest of the New Testament, and in a formal sense this is true. But in another way it is amillennialism, at least in its Augustinian form, which places the chapter in tension with other New Testament passages. Although the New Testament writers know and believe in a general resurrection of all the dead (e.g., John 5:28f.; Acts 24:15), the focus of their interest is on the specific hope that Christian believers will be raised. Resurrection is seen as a redemptive reality far more than as a prelude to judgment. This is true of all the great Pauline passages on resurrection, I Cor. 15, I Thess. 4, and Rom. 8, and is, ironically, something of which

amillennialists often remind their premillennialist friends! Is it not appropriate that what Rev. 20 calls a resurrection is what the New Testament generally understands by that term, i.e., the bodily raising of Christian believers at the Parousia? Kline argues that what the text calls resurrection is not empirically a resurrection, while that which the text does not call resurrection, but death, signals the great redemptive event for which the church has been waiting! Is it not more logical that what John calls resurrection is the same redemptive event which Paul anticipated, and that what he calls death is designated in that way because it is only formally a resurrection? In actuality it is a raising up for judgment and destruction, and therefore not "resurrection" in the Christian sense at all.

Premillennialism and amillennialism, each in its own way, are thus forced to see at least *some* diversity, whether in terminology or substance, between Rev. 20 and the rest of the New Testament. It is not obvious that the problem is greater for premillennialism than for amillennialism at this point.

5. A final observation has to do with Kline's use of other passages in Revelation to support his case. The parallels in 14:13 and 2:10f. require no special comment because they merely establish the principle that there is a hope for the Christian dead, without specifying whether that hope focuses on the intermediate state or the final resurrection. More important is the parallel in 6:9-11, which Kline mentions only in passing (p. 373), but which comes the closest of all to the language of 20:4-6. Whatever we say of the latter, it is clear that 6:9-11 *does* refer to the intermediate state, and at first glance it may seem that the earlier passage is important evidence in favor of Kline's position. The reference to "the souls of those who were killed for the word of God and for the witness which they had" (6:9) corresponds closely to "the souls of those who were slaughtered for the witness of Jesus and for the word of God" (20:4). Apparently the same group is in view in both instances (i.e., Christian martyrs or, more likely, the whole church described in martyrological terms), except that in chapter 6 the number is not yet complete (v. 11). This exception, however, is important because it serves as a caution against simply equating the two passages. They are obviously related, but their relation is one of continuity rather than simple identity. There is a progression from 6:9-11 to

20:4-6, so that if the former refers to the intermediate state (as it clearly does), the latter must refer to a subsequent stage in the experience of the martyred saints. This can only be the bodily resurrection at the coming of Christ. There is an incompleteness about the situation of the group described in chapter 6. They are waiting and crying out, "How long, O holy and true Master, before you pass judgment and avenge our blood from the dwellers on the earth" (6:10). Although they have died, they are still clearly on this side of the consummation. What Kline says of the "first resurrection" is true of their experience: "It is only the intermediate, not the final state" (p. 371). But it is different in 20:4. Here the sense of incompleteness is gone. There are no anguished pleas for vindication, but instead "they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years." To put it in simplest terms, the prayer of 6:9-11 is answered in 20:4-6. This can be seen even in the terminology; the question "How long before you pass judgment?" (ἕως πότε . . . οὐ κρίνεις) is answered with the words of 20:4 (καὶ κρίμα ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς), which should be translated "and judgment was passed for them," or "a verdict was handed down in their favor" (this appears to be the meaning also in Daniel 7). The point is not that the saints are given the right to judge others, but that God vindicates them by passing judgment in their behalf. The intermediate state in Revelation is thus seen as a state of longing and anticipation, not unlike our physical existence here and now. The prayer "How long?" corresponds exactly to the prayers of the suffering righteous on earth in the Old Testament (e.g., Ps. 13:2ff.; 79:5; Zech. 1:12). Though the saints are given a white robe and told to "rest" (6:11; cf. 14:13), this grace is only a temporary measure. The real answer to their plea is the glory of an actual resurrection, granted at last in 20:4-6.

In spite of being informed and challenged by Professor Kline's article, I remain unconvinced that the "first resurrection" is a paradoxical expression for the death of the saints. John in his Gospel was able to reinterpret the death of Jesus as a glorification only because he knew that it had in fact been followed by a bodily resurrection. Similarly, the only basis on which John in Revelation can speak of "rest" for the souls of the Christian dead (6:11, 14:13) is his confidence that their bodies will be raised

to life at the coming of Christ. This is the hope which he unfolds in rather straightforward fashion in 20:4f.: "They lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. . . . This is the first resurrection."

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary,
South Hamilton, Massachusetts