

THE FIRST RESURRECTION: ANOTHER INTERPRETATION

PHILIP EDGCUMBE HUGHES

THE premillennarian has rightly objected, in my judgment, that, assuming that Revelation 20:5f. is speaking of two resurrections (as most Christians do: for the mention of the *first* resurrection quite naturally implies that there is a second resurrection, just as the mention of the *second* death quite naturally implies that there is a first death), it is inconsistent to explain (as amillennarians generally do) the first resurrection as spiritual and the second resurrection as bodily. On the other hand, the amillennarian rightly objects, in my judgment, that to place both resurrections in the eschatological future shows inadequate regard for all that the New Testament says about the fact that Christians even now, in this present age, have been raised with Christ. My purpose in this brief contribution is to propound what I believe to be a simple and straightforward solution to this conflict.

Let me declare, to begin with, my acceptance of the postulation that both first and second resurrections are *bodily* resurrections. In Scripture, resurrection has no proper meaning if it is not understood as *bodily* resurrection. Rising from the dead necessarily involves the resurrection of the body. If there is no resurrection of the body, there is no resurrection at all. This, of course, is the main point of Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 15. Gnostic notions of a mere continuity of the spirit are destructive of the Christian faith; and we should be quite clear that they are no more applicable to Christians than they are to Christ. Accordingly, we should be on our guard against introducing the unbiblical concept of non-bodily resurrection into our interpretation of Revelation 20 or of any other New Testament passage.

Scripture speaks plainly and particularly about two bodily resurrections which are of ultimate significance. One of these

is the universal or general resurrection of all men at the end of this age. Because this is the *final* resurrection it obviously cannot be what is intended by "the first resurrection"; but it may with full appropriateness be described as the *second* resurrection. Thus our Lord has declared that "the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his [God's] voice and come forth, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment" (Jn. 5:28f.) — a statement reminiscent of the assertion of Daniel 12:2 that "the many who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." Our Lord is speaking of one resurrection, not two: *all* are to be raised, and the final sorting of mankind into the two eternally significant categories, the justified and the unjustified, destined respectively for life and judgment, will then be carried out. The stroke of this last hour is the moment not only of the raising of both righteous and unrighteous but also of the ultimate division between the redeemed and the lost. Prior to that hour, "both grow together until the harvest" (Mt. 13:30). It is then, at that ultimate hour, "when the Son of man comes in his glory" and all are gathered before "his glorious throne," that the separation between the sheep and the goats will be infallibly made (Mt. 25:31ff.). So also St. Paul speaks of a single resurrection when he says that "there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust" (Acts 24:15).

If this is the second resurrection, what, then, is the *first* resurrection? The New Testament, I submit, gives a clear answer to this question. Obviously, it must be a resurrection leading to life and blessing, for those who benefit from it live and reign with Christ a thousand years (Rev. 20:4). And there is only one such resurrection known to the New Testament, and that of a single Person — the resurrection, namely, of our Lord Jesus Christ, the significance of which is central to our understanding of the Gospel. *This* bodily resurrection is the constant theme of the apostolic message. How could anything else properly be defined as the *first* resurrection? Apart from *his* resurrection there is no life and blessing, and no resurrection, for anyone at all. "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished" (1 Cor. 15:17f.). Any talk of

resurrection that is not related to *that* resurrection is empty and pointless. The resurrection of Jesus is and must be first both in time and in significance. It is, and must be, Christ *first*: "In fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the *firstfruits* of those who have fallen asleep." That is why Paul insists that there is a proper sequence, that it is a case of "*each in his own order*: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ" (1 Cor. 15:20,23).

In the meantime, however, this first resurrection, Christ's resurrection, has profound significance for the Christian, not just as a gage or guarantee of his own bodily resurrection to life and glory at the end of this age, but here and now. Christian believers are so inseparably united to their Lord that his destiny becomes their destiny and what is predicated of him may also be predicated of them. They are truly, as Paul was fond of emphasizing, *in Christ*. With this in mind, it is important to notice that Revelation 20:6 states: "Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection"; for the expression *who shares in* (ὁ ἔχων μέρος ἐν) would certainly seem to confirm the rightness of the interpretation of the first resurrection I am offering here. One does not share in one's own but in another's resurrection; and it is precisely the resurrection of Jesus in which believers share even in this final age, and even after the experience of physical death during that interval between death and (the second) resurrection "as we wait for . . . the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:23).

This, moreover, is the significance of Christian baptism, which graphically symbolizes our death, burial, and resurrection *with Christ*. Sharing in his resurrection, we are to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4); or again, as St. Paul says elsewhere: "You were *buried with him* in baptism, in which you were also *raised with him* through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God *made alive together with him*" (Col. 2:12f.). The Christian believer, even though he still awaits the consummation of Christ's return and the second (his own) resurrection, is already *raised with Christ* and *seated* (enthroned) *with him* in heavenly places (Col. 3:1; Eph. 1:4-6). In other words, he is blessed by having a share in the first resurrection and in the reign of Christ. And this is true of him

whether he is physically alive or dead. Physical death does not nullify his participation in the first resurrection and its blessing since for the Christian to die is to "depart and be *with Christ*" (Phil. 1:23) and to be "away from the body" is to be "at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:6-9). For him, then, as for the Apostle, "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21).

Accordingly, the souls of God's faithful witnesses now departed this life are in a state of blessedness, as described in Revelation 20:4ff. (cf. also 14:13), because, having a share in Christ's (the first) resurrection, they now live and reign with their risen Lord as they await the consummation of their own (the second) resurrection and the ingathering of that glorious harvest of which the raising of Jesus was the firstfruits.

For my understanding of the period of a thousand years of which Revelation 20:4-6 speaks I venture respectfully to refer the reader to what I have written in my little book entitled *Interpreting Prophecy* (published by Eerdmans in 1976).

Westminster Theological Seminary,
Philadelphia.