

## The Thousand Years of Revelation 20 – Part II

by

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In the first part of this essay one of the outstanding events that occurs during the thousand years, namely Satan's binding, was analyzed and interpreted within the framework of NT teaching. Now it is the turn of the remaining major event, namely the resurrection and reign of the saints. This is what the text, Rev 20:4-6, actually says (the former is a translation as literal as possible; the later is the text from NIV):

### 3. *Those who reign with Christ* (Revelation 20:4-6)

“And I saw thrones and they were seated on them, and judgment was given to them, even [or and] the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and who did not worship the beast nor his image and did not receive the mark on their forehead and on their hands. And they lived [again] and reigned with the Christ [for a] thousand years. The other dead did not come back to life until the thousand years were finished. This [is] the first resurrection. Blessed and holy he who has a part in the first resurrection; the second death has no authority over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and will reign with him for the thousand years.”

“I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years (the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended). This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.” (NIV)

The right interpretation of these verses is a much debated issue among committed Christians. The task is difficult, but not hopeless. We should begin from the immediate context, the larger context of the book of Revelation, and the even larger context of the Bible as a whole. We should employ the

principle of the analogy of faith, i.e., that Scripture interprets Scripture; thus we can gain a better understanding of difficult texts if we see them in the light of clearer texts. This is particularly important when we deal with a writing that makes liberal use of symbolic language as the present one.

For a proper understanding of what this controversial passage says, it may be profitable first to note what it fails to mention. The reason for this unusual approach is that, believe it or not, many interpreters put into this text a lot of things that simply are not there. They assume – usually on the basis of a preconceived framework – that these things are implicit. I will not challenge, for the time being, the validity of this assumption, but simply point out that the following things are not actually mentioned:

1. Location. We are not told if the reign John saw took place in a heavenly or earthly realm.
2. A temple. In fact, no building at all is mentioned.
3. Sacrifices. No worship is described.
4. Jerusalem. Neither heavenly nor earthly Jerusalem are mentioned.
5. Israel. Any mention of the land of Israel (Eretz Israel) is lacking
6. The Jewish people. Not a single Jewish name, no tribe at all, is mentioned.
7. The Gentile nations. They are not in sight in this part of John’s vision.
8. Earthly life conditions. Peaceful living, the birth of babies, house building, harvesting and the like are conspicuously absent.

Therefore, those Christians who believe that this text depicts an earthly kingdom are forced to supply some or all of these things to John’s succinct description. They usually draw plenty of material from OT prophecies that speak of a glorious future Davidic kingdom. Many of those who embrace this approach adhere to it because they believe it to be required by a literal interpretation of the Bible.

However, a little reflection will show that this approach falls short of a so called “consistent literalism.” Some early Church Fathers -most notably Irenaeus of Lyon- thought that here an earthly rule of the Church after Christ’s second coming is envisaged. No early orthodox millennialist entertained for a minute that the thousand years would be a Jewish kingdom. Therefore, they had to apply all OT prophecies not to Israel as a nation, but to

the Christian church.

On the other hand, some current day exegetes start from the basic assumption that prophecies addressed to Israel must be fulfilled physically (although they call it a literal fulfillment, actually a physical, as opposed to a spiritual, fulfillment is intended). Since this did not happen in the past, these prophecies must be fulfilled in the future, and they find no other time for this but the thousand years of Revelation 20. Some relevant prophecies in this regard are found in Isaiah (9, 11, 24-27, 35, 65-66), Ezekiel 37-48; Zechariah 12, 14, etc. However, in order to apply all these prophecies to the one thousand years period mentioned in Revelation 20, some significant concessions have to be made. This is because these prophecies depict the glorious future of Israel with a language clearly resembling OT culture, to wit:

1. The kingdom will be established and kept by sheer power.
2. The nations will serve Israel
3. Transportation will require ancient means, like asses, horses and chariots.
4. Weapons will be old fashioned (spears, swords, shields and the like).
5. Sacrifices will be reestablished as under Moses' Law
6. New Moons, sabbath days and all OT feasts will be celebrated again.

For belief in a literal earthly kingdom to be sustained, at least some of these things must be understood in figurative, or at least typical ways. But in so doing, the very same principle on which this view is based is undermined. Those who believe in a future Jewish millennium cannot have it both ways.

On the other hand, some of the Scriptures on which this view is based, if taken literally, seem to contradict this futuristic view. For example, in Isaiah 25:8 we read that God "will swallow up death forever", yet Isaiah 65:20, literally interpreted, implies that death is still there. In Isaiah 11:9 it says that "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea". Notwithstanding this bright text, we learn that at the end of the millennium there are vast God-hating hordes waging war against God's people. In Isaiah 9:7, another Scripture applied to the millennial kingdom, it is said that "Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end." This is simply not true if there will be a worldwide rebellion at the end of this period. At its best, this millennial kingdom would have a "peace" that

would be a lack of war out of fear, not willing submission and knowledge of the truth.

Another example concerns the duration of the kingdom. The kingdom spoken by OT prophets was clearly to be eternal: “He will reign on David’s throne ... from that time on and forever” (Isaiah 9:7, Cf. Ezekiel 36:26ff). Of course it may be argued that the kingdom that begins with the millennium will stand forever, but then, why the segregation of its first thousand years?

Finally, one of the main texts advanced as proof of this view, namely Isaiah 65:17-25, begins with the words: “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth”. In the NT, this promise is understood to be fulfilled after this present world has passed away: “But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness (2 Pet 3:13, see vv. 10-12). Similarly, the new heavens and *the new earth are not mentioned in connection with the thousand years*. They are, however, seen in Revelation 21:1 *after* the millennium is over.

The above discussion is meant to show the problems arising when attempts are made to make too much of the thousand years kingdom, and particularly when it is understood as an earthly political rule of Christ. Therefore, we must turn to the NT, which is both God’s final revelation and His inspired interpretation of the OT prophecies. We will start from the text, continue to the context provided by the book of Revelation, and finally examine the broader NT teachings on the kingdom.

At this point, it will be useful to read again very carefully the text of Revelation 20:4-6. John has just seen Satan’s binding. Now the scenario changes: He sees thrones. Where are they? As pointed out before, the text itself does not tell us this. Thrones are mentioned 47 times in Revelation. Only three times earthly thrones are mentioned, and invariably they belong to evil powers: Satan’s throne once (2:13) and the beast’s throne twice (13:2; 16:10). The other 41 instances besides 20:4, the thrones belong to God (1:4, etc; 37 times), to the Lamb (3:21; 22:3) or to the 24 elders (4:4; 11:16). In all these instances, heavenly thrones are meant. Therefore, it is possible that the same be true for the thrones John saw. To whom do these thrones belong?

The description of those who took their seats on the thrones is intriguing. Some say that they are a group distinct from those mentioned in the same phrase, but I find no firm basis for this. This company is described in the

following clauses of the same verse. John says that he saw the souls (*tas psychas*) of those beheaded (*pepelekismenön*, literally those killed with an axe) because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God. This description, however, is very similar to what John saw at the opening of the fifth seal: “I saw under the altar the souls (*tas psychas*) of those who had been slain (*esphagmenön*) because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained” (6:9). To these white robes were given.

Might both of these groups of souls be one and the same company? If we turn to the messages addressed to the churches, we notice that to those who overcome *both white robes and the privilege of sitting with Christ in His heavenly throne* are promised (3:4f; 3:21). The overcomers in white robes have been seen by John in heaven (7:9, 13f), and the Bride herself, a figure of the Church, is dressed in fine linen, a symbol that corresponds to the “righteous acts of the saints” (19:8). Furthermore, about those souls seen by John in 20:4-6 it is declared that the second death has no power over them. This matches Jesus’ promise to the overcomers in 2:11, “He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death”.

The nature of the victory of the saints has little to do with earthly power. This is an important point, which is at the heart of Revelation. It is true that the book was written to reveal things that “must soon take place” (1:1), and that one of its goals is to strengthen believers facing persecution. But there is a deeper aspect, one that runs throughout the book, namely that in God’s plan, believers are expected not just to endure tribulation, but to boldly overcome *through* tribulation. It is the same pattern of Jesus Christ’s decisive victory on the cross. To the Lamb it is said: “you are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, *because you were slain...*” (5:9, my emphasis). The heavenly court also sang: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!” (5: 12). The same Greek verb, *sphagmō*, is used for “slain” here and in 6:9, where the martyrs are seen under the altar.

Jesus himself says that this is God’s path to real, eternal victory: “To him who overcomes ... *just as I overcame ...*” (3:21, emphasis mine). Similarly, in 12:11 it is said that “They overcame him [the dragon, i.e. Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death”. *Those who sit on the thrones fit the*

*description of the overcomers*: they were “beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God”, and this also means that they refused to worship the beast or his image and to receive his mark. Although this is not explicitly mentioned here, in the message to the Church in Philadelphia Jesus says that the overcomers will have the name of God, the new name of Jesus (the Lamb?) and the name of the new Jerusalem written on them (3:12). We can further speculate, although I would not press on this, that the names written on them are equivalent to “the seal of the living God” that protects His servants against the plagues unleashed not by unrighteous powers but as a result of *God’s judgment* over the “inhabitants of the earth” (7:1-8; 9:4).

Now we come to a paradox. These saints have been defeated by the beast, who has killed them. In previous chapters it is said that the beast was given power to conquer the saints and to kill the witnesses (13:7; 11:7). But it is also said that they overcame the dragon, who is the beast’s master, and they are unmistakably depicted as conquerors in Chapter 20. How can they be simultaneously losers and overcomers? Actually they cannot be both things at the same time and in the same sense.

The short answer is that our *perspective* will determine our assessment as to the winner in this spiritual war. They are losers in a sense and at the same time overcomers in a different sense. Again, this is the pattern followed by the Lord. From their own, limited earthly perspective, at first His disciples only saw a tragedy in Jesus’ death (Luke 24:20f; John 20:10f). However, the crucifixion was actually Jesus’ path to enter His glory and to receive all authority on heaven and on earth (Luke 24:26; Matt 28:18). As noted above, this was also the occasion of His decisive triumph over the powers of darkness. *The risen Lord himself showed the heavenly perspective, which is the true one, to His disciples.*

The same happens with Christ’s followers. For an earthly observer, they have been utterly defeated and killed. Their life has come to an end; they are no more, and this is their sad fate. But as God sees them, nothing could be farther from the truth. In His controversy with the Saducees, Jesus refuted their unbelief in resurrection with this conclusion: “For He is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all live to Him.” (Luke 20:38). The faithful martyrs and confessors are alive; not just alive, but also reigning with Christ,

even as Christ is reigning now! Thus, John's vision stresses not just that the faithfulness of true believers will be rewarded in the end, but that it is *being rewarded right now*; and that to boldly face suffering as Christ did is the path to overcome as He did (by the way, it's interesting to note that the cowardly rank *first* among those excluded from the heavenly Jerusalem, 21:8!).

In what sense did these souls "came to life"? This is a much debated issue. As a rule, those who believe in an earthly millennium assert that a physical, bodily resurrection is here intended. However, this is by no means obvious. John calls the coming to life of those reigning with Christ "the first resurrection". In his vision, he saw the souls of those beheaded, etc. He says that they "lived" (*ezësan*). The tense conveys the meaning "they come to life", or "they lived again". This reminds us the answer that Jesus gave to Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live (*zësetai*) even though he dies" (John 11:25). In fact, there are many Scriptures that depict salvation as life eternal and even resurrection; for example, see the following Scriptures:

"unless you can eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will rise him up at the last day ... the one who feeds on me will live because of me ... he who feeds on this bread will live for ever" (John 6: 53f, 57f).

"Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:19).

"In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6:11).

"But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness ... if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live ..." (Rom 8: 10, 13).

"... God ... made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions ... And God raised us up with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus ..." (Eph 2:4f).

"having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God ..." (Col 2:12).

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God" (Col 3:1).



“Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him” (2 Tim 2:11f).

“He himself bore our sins ... so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness” (1 Pet 2:24).

“He [God] sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9).

Thus, there is no a priori reason why the “first resurrection” *must* necessarily be understood as a physical one, first because John is speaking about *souls* and second because the NT frequently uses the terms “to live” and even “to be raised up” in a profoundly spiritual sense. Furthermore, it should be remembered that in Revelation John is displaying before us things from a heavenly perspective, *as God sees them*: For the world, martyred Christians are dead, but in truth they are alive, reigning and judging with Christ. Those who were under the earthly kings’ rule, now are themselves heavenly kings; those condemned by the earthly judges are now judges belonging to the highest court.

One of the promises earlier made to the overcomers was that they can’t be harmed by the second death (2:11). Again, John says here that “the second death has no power over them” (20:6). An intriguing feature is that while both the *first resurrection* and the *second death* are mentioned, neither the *second resurrection* nor the *first death* are. However, the later are implied by the former. Following this logic, the first death must be physical death (Cf. Heb 9:27), and the second resurrection must be that described in 20:12f. This is obviously a physical resurrection.

Some interpreters contend that if the second resurrection is a physical one, then the first one should be of the same kind. But this is arbitrary, as can be readily seen when we consider the nature of the first and second deaths. Our Lord spoke of spiritual and physical death in the same verse: “let the dead bury their own dead” (Matt 8:22). And again, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul [first death]. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell [second death]” (Matt 10:28). If there is both a physical (first) death and a spiritual, eternal, second death, it seems reasonable to assume that the same thing may be true of the resurrection. Thus, if the second resurrection is physical, the first must be spiritual.



To sum up this chiasm:

First resurrection (spiritual); First death (physical)

Second resurrection (physical); Second death (spiritual)

Therefore, those who partake in the first resurrection will also partake in the second one, but they won't go through the second death. Actually, this pattern is also found in Jesus' words during His earthly ministry:

“I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live ... a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5:25, 28f).

In Christ's own words, there will be a “resurrection of life” and “a resurrection of condemnation.” At the Lord's return, only two fates are possible: resurrection (transformation) for life eternal, or resurrection for eternal punishment. There is no indication whatsoever that any believer still alive at the time of the *Parousia* will remain in his physical, corruptible body; nor there is any hint that unbelievers may remain in that condition after that time. Rather the opposite is taught by 2 Thessalonians 1 and 2 Peter 3.

In summary, that company of overcomers first seen under the heavenly altar, and then singing praises to God before the heavenly throne, is now seen enthroned, as heavenly priests, kings and judges with Christ. There is obviously a progression in their perceived status as the revelation unfolds.

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