

THE MASTER'S SEMINARY

PARTAKERS OF THE FIRST RESURRECTION

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Introduction

The millennial kingdom¹ of God is an age of much mystery. Even when one is committed to the particular eschatological framework of dispensational premillennialism, questions abound. What will it be like with King Jesus physically present on the earth (Rev 19:11-19)? How will humanity live so long (Isa 65:20)? What is the purpose and function of Ezekiel's temple (Ezek 40-48)? How will the glorified saints interact with the non-glorified inhabitants? How will the nations operate with Christ and His saints reigning over all the earth (Rev 20:4)? Why will the nations rebel against Christ at the end (Rev 20:7-10)? Such questions are simultaneously a source of wondrous delight and of intellectual befuddlement to many Christians. Yet, perhaps the most basic question about the millennium is, "Who will be there?" This author has heard not a few assertions that *all* the saints will be in the millennium. As one doctrinal statement says, "At that time [of the return of Christ in glory to the earth] the Old Testament and tribulation saints will be raised and the living will be judged (Daniel 12:2-3; Revelation 20:4-6). ...after the tribulation period, Christ will come to earth...and establish His messianic kingdom for 1,000 years on the earth (Revelation 20:1-7). During this time the resurrected saints will reign with Him over Israel and all the nations of the earth (Ezekiel 37:21-28; Daniel 7:17-22; Revelation 19:11-16)."²

Although the doctrinal statement references Scripture, the argument is at least a bit opaque. Daniel 12:2-3 certainly teaches that both the righteous and the unrighteous will be

¹Henceforth, referred to as "the millennium."

²Grace Community Church, "What We Teach: The Doctrinal Statement of Grace Community Church," *Grace Church*, n.d., accessed March 3, 2021, <https://www.gracechurch.org/about/doctrinal-statement>.

resurrected, but it does not specify when. Ezekiel 37:21–28 and Daniel 7:17-22 explicitly mention only Israel, not the Church. Revelation 19:11-16 doesn't speak of the resurrection of the saints at all. Revelation 20:4-6 especially seems only to add to the confusion, for a surface reading indicates that only the tribulation martyrs will be part of the “first resurrection” (20:5) and thus that they will be the *only* resurrected saints that will enter the millennium.

Before studying this topic, this author had not read a convincing, definitive argument that *all* the saints will be resurrected for the millennium. Of all the texts mentioned above, Revelation 20:4–6 was most contradictory, as it seemed to explicitly say that only a *subset* of saints would enter in the millennium. But, a more thorough analysis of Revelation 20:4–6 makes it clear who has a part in the first resurrection, and thus who will enter the millennium in resurrection bodies: *all* of saints who died before the millennium.

Preface and Assumptions

This paper will endeavor to avoid terms foreign to the Scriptures, like “second resurrection” and “first death,” which are common in existing literature.³ It is not that the concepts are unbiblical; a “first resurrection” (Rev 20:5) and a “second death” (Rev 20:14) imply a second resurrection and a first death. That there are two resurrections—one of the righteous and one of the wicked (John 5:29)—is evident. That there are two deaths—one in this life and one for eternity (Rev 20:14–15)—is also evident. But using the extrabiblical terms “second resurrection” and “first death” has the potential to drag the argument away from interacting primarily with the Scriptures towards merely discoursing with biblical commentators. Thus, this argument will use theological jargon sparingly and endeavor to stay close to the Scriptural texts.

³See Meredith G. Kline, “The First Resurrection,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 37, no. 3 (Spring 1975): 366–375 for a representative example.

In addition, to narrow the scope of this study, the following will be assumed without proof, with only brief argumentation given in the footnotes:

First, the book of Revelation was written by the apostle John⁴ near the end of the 1st century, after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Thus, an early date that would support preterism is rejected.⁵

Second, the dispensational premillennial understanding of the kingdom of God—namely, as a literal, mediatorial, future 1000-year reign of Christ, is most consistent with biblical data.⁶ With very little exception, the events prophesied in Revelation 19–22 are future historical and presented in chronological order. Thus, an amillennial construct of a spiritual, nonliteral kingdom is rejected.⁷ While this will be assumed, particular facets of amillennialism will be addressed when relevant to Revelation 20:4–6.

It is undeniably profitable to fully defend these positions, but it is far beyond the purpose of this paper. Instead, this paper will focus on analyzing the particulars of Revelation 20:4–6, especially with identifying who is resurrected to take part in the millennium.

⁴See Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, Revised ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 8–15 and Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 2–6.

⁵See Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 15–21 and G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 4–27 for representative arguments.

⁶See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1091–1167 for an overview of different eschatological paradigms and an argument for premillennialism.

⁷See G. K. Beale, “The Millennium in Revelation 20:1-10: An Amillennial Perspective,” *Criswell Theological Review* 11, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 29–62. Beale gives five reasons to take the one thousand years as nonliteral on pages 44–45.

The Rest of the Dead: All Unbelievers (Rev 20:5, 11-15)

Even with the above assumptions, many questions related to Revelation 20:4–6 arise, particularly from verse 4.⁸ Who are the ones seated on the throne? Who are the beheaded souls, and how are they related to the enthroned ones? What does it mean that they came to life? Why do they reign with Christ for the millennium? Because identifying these questions, especially about the groups, is so difficult,⁹ it is best to withhold the discussion of verse 4 until more clarity is reached.

Revelation 20:5 is much simpler and identifies two major groups: those who are of the “first resurrection” (which is made up of those described in verse 4) and those who are of the “rest of the dead.”

The rest of the dead are either unbelievers only, or a mixture of believers and unbelievers.¹⁰ A brief investigation of the word for dead, νεκρός, is helpful. The word νεκρός is used 21 times in Johannine literature, and every time except one it means a *physical* death.¹¹ Thus, unless context demands otherwise, νεκρός should be understood to mean the physically deceased. In verse 5, a physical death is clearly in mind because in verse 4, the souls seen are “beheaded.” The next subsequent instance of νεκρός is in Revelation 20:12-13. At the great white throne, “the dead” stand and are “judged...according to their deeds” (20:12, 13). While

⁸ “As time verges into eternity, the standard measures of life as we know them prove inadequate to communicate the fullness of eschatological truth.” Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 364. This comment surely obfuscates rather than clarifies his conclusions.

⁹Some commentaries, like Simon J. Kistemaker, *Revelation*, vol. 14, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 538, fail to make a clear identification of any of these groups.

¹⁰Arguing that “the rest of the dead” are believers only would necessarily mean that only unbelievers are part of the first resurrection, which is hardly fathomable, for Rev 20:6 says that those of the first resurrection are blessed and holy.

¹¹The exception is Rev 3:1.

some have argued that this judgment is of *both* believers and unbelievers,¹² because “the second death refers to being sent to the lake of fire (v.14), “the rest of the dead” in verse 5 implicitly refers to unbelievers.”¹³

But Revelation 20:11–15 provides more than an implicit reference to the identity of the rest of the dead. The verb κρίνω, translated “judge,” is used 9 times in Revelation and *always* in a negative sense.¹⁴ Revelation 11:18 is representative: “And the nations were enraged, and Your wrath came, and the time came for *the dead to be judged*, and the time to reward Your bond-servants the prophets and the saints and those who fear Your name, the small and the great.”¹⁵ The wicked are *judged* and the righteous are rewarded. Similarly, in the gospel of John, κρίνω is never used to mean to render reward. It is the foil of reward for the righteous,¹⁶ means to condemn,¹⁷ and describes deliberation and assessment,¹⁸ but it *never* means judged as worthy of blessing.¹⁹ John 5:22, 28–29 is representative of how the wicked are judged and righteous are rewarded: “For not even the Father judges (κρίνει) anyone, but He has given all judgment (κρίσιν) to the Son ...all who are in the tombs...and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of *judgment*

¹²Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1031–33.

¹³Richard Shalom Yates, “The Resurrection of the Tribulation Saints,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163, no. 652 (December 2006): 457.

¹⁴Rev 6:10, 11:18, 16:5, 18:8, 18:20, 19:2, 19:11, 20:12, 20:13.

¹⁵ Emphasis added. For brevity, future instances of italicized Scriptures should be understood to be emphasis added by the author.

¹⁶John 3:17–18; 5:22, 30; 12:47–48

¹⁷John 7:24, 51; 8:15–16, 26, 50

¹⁸John 7:24; 7:51; 8:15–16, 26, 50; 18:31

¹⁹The rest of the NT has a much broader use of the word κρίνω; perhaps this helps explain the confusion and wide divergence of perspective among biblical scholars.

(κρίσεως).” Thus, it is best to understand the “rest of the dead” as unbelievers *only*. Not merely a subset, but *all* of those before the great white throne are thrown into the lake of fire (20:15), the second death (20:14).

The First Resurrection: All the Saints (Rev 20:5)

John identified two major groups in verse 5: the “rest of the dead” and those of the “first resurrection.” If the rest of the dead are all unbelievers, therefore, those who partake in the first resurrection must be all the saints who died before the millennial kingdom.²⁰

But what is the first resurrection? Opinions abound. After a lengthy discussion of “first” (πρῶτος), Kline concludes, “If the second resurrection is a bodily resurrection, the first resurrection must be a *non-bodily resurrection*.”²¹ Hughes calls all resurrection a physical resurrection, but contends that the first resurrection is truly “the resurrection, namely, of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . How could anything else properly be defined as the *first* resurrection?”²² Aldrich suggests that the first resurrection has in fact ten divisions.²³ Appealing to 1 Corinthians 15 and passages in John, Shepherd says that “the first resurrection [in Revelation 20] must be understood to have reference to the experience of *baptism*.”²⁴

²⁰Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 370 disagrees but does not provide argument.

²¹Kline, “The First Resurrection,” 370. Emphasis added. So also Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 14:539–40. For a rebuttal of Kline, see J. Ramsey Michaels, “First Resurrection: A Response,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 39, no. 1 (Fall 1976): 100–109.

²²Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, “First Resurrection: Another Interpretation,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 39, no. 2 (Spr 1977): 316. Emphasis original.

²³Roy L. Aldrich, “Divisions of the First Resurrection,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128, no. 510 (June 1971): 118–119. He seems to confuse the rapture and the resurrection because he includes Enoch, Elijah, the raptured saints, and the two witnesses.

²⁴Norman Shepherd, “Resurrections of Revelation 20,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 37, no. 1 (Fall 1974): 36. Emphasis added.

The best way to understand the resurrection is as a physical, literal, bodily resurrection. As Alford says, "...if in [Revelation 20] 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."²⁵ Waymeyer aptly summarizes a typical premillennial argument for a literal, physical, first resurrection: (1) ἀνάστασις (resurrection) is used almost exclusively to refer to bodily resurrection after death, (2) those described in verse 4b are physically dead, and thus their resurrection must be unto physical life, (3) verse 5a parallels 4b in the usage of ἐζήσαν (lived/came to life), so if one is a physical resurrection, the other must also be.²⁶

Therefore, the first resurrection is a physical resurrection, just as Christ's resurrection was a physical resurrection. But because no one except Christ has been resurrected to dwell upon the earth forever, the first resurrection must therefore be a *future* resurrection. Thus, those who partake of the first resurrection must not only be saints, but also those who are physically dead before the millennium begins. Thus, those who are of the first resurrection are the saints who died before the millennium. With such clarity, verse 4 can now be examined.

The Saints of the First Resurrection (Rev 20:4)

Having positively identified the "rest of the dead" (Rev 20:5) as unbelievers, and those of the "first resurrection" as the saints who died before the millennium, the much-debated verse 4 can now be addressed. There may be two distinct groups mentioned here: (1) the enthroned ones

²⁵Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, ed. E. F. Harrison, IV (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 732. Quoted in Shepherd, "Resurrections of Revelation 20," 34.

²⁶Matt Waymeyer, "The First Resurrection in Revelation 20," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 27, no. 1 (Spr 2016): 6–7. See the subsequent pages for a prolonged argument against the amillennial perspective. He interacts extensively with the amillennial perspective from Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1003–15.

and (2) the tribulation martyrs; or there may be three distinct groups: (1) the enthroned ones, (2) the tribulation martyrs and (3) the tribulation non-martyrs. However one divides the groups, all are part of the first resurrection.

Those on the Thrones (Rev 20:4a)

After describing Satan's imprisonment (Rev 20:1-3), John describes his vision of thrones and those sitting on those thrones. But there is no clear reference to who these enthroned ones are. Beale identifies no less than five different opinions: (1) martyrs, (2) all the saints, (3) angels of Daniel 7, (4) angels who represent saints, (5) angels/elders of Revelation 4:4, 11:16.²⁷ Mounce refuses to identify them at all.²⁸

It is tempting to conclude that these are the thrones of the twenty-four elders (option 3, 4, and 5), as the only other time "thrones" (θρόνους) appears in the book of Revelation, it refers to the twenty-four thrones of the twenty-four elders (4:4, 11:16). However, there are references to thrones in previous Scripture that are not related to the thrones of the elders (Dan 7:9, Matt 19:28, Luke 22:30), so the argument is far from conclusive. While it is difficult to definitely conclude whether it is angels, apostles, or saints who sit on the thrones from 20:4a alone, the greater corpus of Scripture promises that *saints*, never angels, will be given the privilege of reigning with Christ (Matt 19:28, 1 Cor 6:2-3, 2 Tim 2:12, Rev 2:26-27, 3:21). God desires to share His throne with His redeemed people. As Christ says to the church of Laodicea, "He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My *throne*" (Rev 3:21). But this promise is not made only to those of Laodicea. In fact, all of God's redeemed, "from every tribe and

²⁷Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 996.

²⁸Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 365. "Since the text itself remains silent about the occupants of the thrones, it may be wise not to go beyond suggesting that they may be a heavenly court (as in Dan 7:26) that will assist in judgment."

tongue and people and nation...will *reign* upon the earth” (Rev 5:9–10). Thus, neither elders or angels are in view in 20:4a, but saints. Vlach agrees with this identification and postulates that the enthroned ones are specifically the “armies \[of the saints] that return with Jesus at His second coming in Revelation 19:14, 19 [because they are] the nearest antecedent of the “they” in 20:4.”²⁹ However, the actual closest antecedent of “they” is “the nations” (Rev 20:3); that “they” cannot refer to the unbelieving nations is obvious. In addition, the saints are never referred to as part of “the armies... in heaven” (Rev 19:14) in Scripture. Instead, this description is given to angels (2 Kings 6:17, Psa 68:17, Matt 26:53, 2 Thes 1:7). Thus, although Vlach’s conclusion that “they” refers to saints is sensible, the argument is lacking.

Below it will be argued that it is best to understand the “enthroned ones” to be all the saints except the tribulation martyrs.

The Tribulation Martyrs (Rev 20:4b)

John then says he saw “the souls of those who had been beheaded” (Rev 20:4b). In Johannine literature, the word translated soul, ψυχή, means physical life³⁰ or the inner life.³¹ The use in the NT is varied and complex,³² thus context determines the precise meaning of the word; in this case it is best to be understood as souls.³³ Three descriptions of these souls follow: (1) they were beheaded “because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God,” (2)

²⁹Michael J. Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 2nd ed. (Silverton, OR: Lampion House, 2020), 498.

³⁰Of humans: John 10:11, 15, 17; 12:25; 13:37, 38; 15:13; 1 John 3:16; Rev 12:11. Of animals: Rev 8:9; 16:3.

³¹John 10:24, 12:27; 3 John 2; Rev 6:9, 18:14, 20:4.

³²William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1098.

³³Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 998. “If such a distinction of soul and body is not held, an awkward picture emerges: “bodies of beheaded people.”” Also, Yates, “The Resurrection of the Tribulation Saints,” 454.

they “had not worshipped the beast or his image, and (3) they “had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand.”

The only other NT instance of the first description is Revelation 6:9, describing “underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain.” While Revelation 20:4 uses the word beheaded and Revelation 6:9 does not, this does not invalidate the connection.³⁴

Commentators note that the next two descriptors may refer to a separate group of tribulation persons, namely the tribulation saints who were *not* martyred.³⁵ There does not seem to be a clear grammatical resolution.³⁶ Beale concludes that “[n]o decisive answer can be given. Both views are possible.”³⁷ Mounce is bolder and says that all descriptors describe the same group—the tribulation martyrs.³⁸ Johnson rather confusingly says that the descriptions all refer to the tribulation martyrs, but that they also “represent the whole church that is faithful to Jesus whether or not they have actually been killed.”³⁹

Yet, the context sheds light. Revelation 20 comes right after the victory of Jesus over the beast and the false prophet. Throughout Revelation, John is concerned particularly with the saints who will suffer during the tribulation at the hands of the beast (Rev 11:7, 13:15, 15:2). Thus, in context, it seems best to understand all three descriptions to be describing the tribulation

³⁴Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 365. “These are the souls under the altar in 6:9 and all who are to meet a similar fate until the time of their vindication (6:11).”

³⁵Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 999. Also Yates, “The Resurrection of the Tribulation Saints,” 454–58.

³⁶See Yates, “The Resurrection of the Tribulation Saints,” 457 and Johnson, “Revelation,” 583 for further discussion.

³⁷Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 999. Beale analyzes the Greek and concludes that it is likely a separate group in 1001–2.

³⁸Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 365.

³⁹Alan F. Johnson, “Revelation,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 583.

martyrs.⁴⁰ If this is granted, the souls who John sees in Revelation 20:4 are the same souls of Revelation 6:9—the tribulation martyrs.

Regardless if there is one group or two groups of tribulation saints in view here or not, the argument still stands that the first resurrection comprises of *all* the saints. If Revelation 20:4bff refers to tribulation martyrs and tribulation non-martyrs, then the enthroned ones (Rev 20:4a) are all the saints from before the tribulation. If Revelation 20:4b refers to tribulation martyrs only, then the enthroned ones are all the saints from before the tribulation *and* tribulation nonmartyrs. Either way the groups are divided, *all* of the saints are still part of the first resurrection; talk of the tribulation martyrs figuratively representing all the saints⁴¹ is unnecessary.

Priests and Coregents with Christ (Rev 20:6)

As noted above, some have postulated that the great white throne could be considered a “second resurrection” of both saints *and* unbelievers. However, the words used to describe those of the first resurrection in Rev 20:6 are used in other passages in Revelation consistently to refer to *all* the saints. Each of the descriptions—blessed, holy, impervious to the second death, priests of God and Christ, and co-reigners with God—will be examined below.

Blessed and Holy

All the saints are blessed. They are blessed when they “die in the Lord” (Rev 14:13), as “those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (19:9), and those who wash their

⁴⁰This does not mean that John is unconcerned with the saints who live before the tribulation. See Rev 13:10, 14:12.

⁴¹Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 999–1000.

robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city [of the new Jerusalem]” (22:14).⁴² *All* the saints are blessed.

That all the saints (οἱ ἅγιοι) are holy (ἅγιος) is a tautology.

Protected From the Second Death

All the saints “will not be hurt by the second death” (Rev 2:11). Those that are part of the second death are “the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars” (Rev 21:8); these are obviously the unbelieving. Revelation 21:8 is an echo of Revelation 20:6; the latter refers to the first resurrection, and the former refers to the second death.⁴³ Using the language of two resurrections from John 5:29, if Revelation 20:11-15 is the resurrection of judgment for “the rest of the dead”, then Revelation 20:4-6 must be “first resurrection,” the resurrection of life for the righteous.

Priests of God and Christ

All the saints are priests of God and Christ. Johannine literature contains four instances of ἱερεύς, three of which are in Revelation.⁴⁴ First, “[Christ] loves us and released us from our sins by His blood—and He has made us to be a kingdom, *priests* to His God and Father” (Rev 1:6). The “us” refers to all those whom John expected to read the book of Revelation—namely all the saints in every age (Rev 1:3). *All* those whom Christ loves and forgives, He has made to be priests. Second, the four living creatures and twenty-four elders sing that Christ “purchased for

⁴²There are other uses of μακάριος. In Rev 1:3 and 22:7, John blesses those who read and heed the prophecy of the book, something that he expected every saint to do. Revelation 16:15, probably, but not necessarily, refers to all the saints. Revelation 20:6 is the passage in question.

⁴³They have a similar construction, both using the word μέρος.

⁴⁴The fourth is in John 1:19 and is used to refer to the Jewish priests.

God with Your blood men *from every tribe and tongue and people and nation* [and] made them to be a kingdom and *priests* to our God” (Rev 5:9–10). All the saints, from place and age, are priests. Lastly, those “who ha[v]e a part in the first resurrection...will be priests of God and of Christ” (Rev 20:6). The first two instances are undeniable references to all the saints; it would be highly irregular, without extraordinary proof, for the third reference to refer to a mere subset.

The priesthood of all believers is the most important identifying characteristic for discerning who enters the millennium in resurrected bodies. After the millennium, in the eternal state of the new heaven and the new earth (Rev 21–22), there will be a kingdom (Rev 22:5), but there is no mention of priests. If in the eternal age, “the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them” (Rev 21:3), then there is no longer any need for priests to bring the nations to God. If in the new Jerusalem, there is “no temple...for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (Rev 21:22), then there are no sacrifices and no need for a priesthood to mediate the presence of the God. Lastly, if all the inhabitants will “see His face” (Rev 22:4), then these glorified saints will behold the direct glory of the Lord, and there is no need for a set-apart priesthood to intercede for men before God. As Charles summarizes, “After the final judgment...the special priestly office will no more exist.”⁴⁵

All the saints must be resurrected during the first resurrection to be “priests of God and of Christ” (Rev 21:6); otherwise, there is no time period for them to function as priests to God, and the promises of God will go unfulfilled.⁴⁶ As Yates says, “these [Jewish] resurrected Tribulation

⁴⁵R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, vol. 1, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 1920), 17.

⁴⁶Osborne, *Revelation*, 709–10 states that both the priestly and kingdom function of the saints continues from the millennium into the new heavens and new earth but does not provide any evidence.

saints will...serve in the religious life of the millennial kingdom... \[as] millennial priests. Their priestly role *will be shared by church-age believers* (1:6) and revived Israelites (Isa 61:6).”⁴⁷

Answering a Rebuttal: Spiritual Priesthood

One might quickly argue that the priesthood of all believers is a *spiritual*, not a physical reality. After all, the apostle Peter says that all the saints are “being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:5); the saints are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood” (1 Pet 2:9). While the spiritual priesthood is a current reality for the church, it need not be understood as superseding God’s promise of a literal priesthood. God’s promise to Israel must stand: “you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6).⁴⁸ When Israel heard that God would take “some of them for priests and for Levites” (Isa 66:21), they would have understood it to mean priests in a tabernacle, sacrificial system.⁴⁹ God promised that “[i]n those days ten men from all the nations will grasp the garment of a Jew, saying, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you”” (Zech 8:23). For these promises to be fulfilled, Jews must be resurrected and fulfill their role in the millennium as literal priests of God, not *only* spiritual ones. The NT adds

⁴⁷ Yates, “The Resurrection of the Tribulation Saints,” 459. Emphasis added. He also mentions Zech 8:23.

⁴⁸Beale says, “that those sharing in the first resurrection will be “priests” and “reign” is a promise based on Exod. 19:6, which Rev. 1:6 and 5:9–10 apply to the whole community of the saints. A reference to the entire community of the faithful is suggested further by the partial allusion to Isa. 61:6, who asserts that in the end time the *entire group* of Israelite faithful “will be called the priest of the Lord.”” Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1000. Emphasis original.

⁴⁹ In commenting on Rev 1:6 and Isa 66:21, Charles says, “As respects the priesthood, the privileges of ancient Israel have passed over to the Christian Church. Even to pre-Christian Judaism it was foretold that all true Israelites would become in a certain sense priests—priests as compared with the nations that served them. [He quotes Isa. 61:5–6.] But that this general priesthood of Israel as regards the heathen nations *was not to supersede the special ministries of priests and Levites* in the redeemed Israel is clear from 66:21: “And of them will I take for priests for Levites, saith the Lord.” Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, 1:16. Emphasis added.

to this revelation, in that not only Jews, but also Gentiles will be part of that holy priesthood (Rev 1:6). The NT does not supersede but augments and expands the promises of the OT.

Co-reigners with Christ

All the saints will reign (βασιλεύω)⁵⁰ with Christ upon the earth. All the saints from “every tribe and tongue and people and nation [Christ has] made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth” (Rev 5:10). Again, all the saints, from every place and time, will reign with God, and thus all the saints must be part of the first resurrection.⁵¹

Conclusion

Beale, a committed amillennialist, ironically gives the best synopsis of the premillennial understanding of Revelation 20:4–6 that this paper has been arguing for:

“...all the deceased saints who participate in the first resurrection (v. 5) and reign for a thousand years must be pictured in v. 4. The reason is that, according to v. 6, only those who take part in the first resurrection will overcome the second death and reign with Christ. Yet according to vv. 14-15, all saints whose names are written in the book of life will overcome the second death, which is the judgment of God upon the lost. In fact, the promise given to the faithful saints of the first resurrection that they will be priests and reign with Christ (v. 6) is based on Exod. 19:6, which Rev. 1:6 and 5:9-10 clearly apply to the whole community of saints. This means that the “rest of the dead” (v. 5) who do not share in the first resurrection must be unbelievers on their way to eternal judgment. Those who are saved become priests serving eternally in God’s presence while the lost are forever separated from Him.⁵²

All the saints who died before the millennium—whether they be OT saints, church age saints, pretribulation saints, or tribulation saints—have a part in the first resurrection. And thus,

⁵⁰The word βασιλεύω is used to refer to God reigning in Rev 11:15, 11:17, 19:6, and to refer to saints reigning in 5:10, 20:4, 20:6, 22:5.

⁵¹Rev 22:5 says that all the saints in the eternal state will “reign forever and ever” as well. But it is surely possible for them to reign in the millennium and in the eternal state.

⁵²Beale, “The Millennium in Revelation 20:1-10: An Amillennial Perspective,” 47.

they will inherit the millennium and reign with Christ in most blessed age this world has yet seen, as coheirs with Christ and priests to God. And so, in life or death, in the intermediate state or in resurrection, in the millennium or in the eternal state, “so we \[that is, all believers] shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thess 4:17).

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