

# THE MILLENNIUM: “A PREPOSTEROUS”?

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## INTRODUCTION

A story – probably apocryphal – is told of the great Dutch Christian, Corrie ten Boon, being asked if she was a-, pre-, or, post-millennial. According to the story she responded dismissively, “I am a pre-post-erous”.<sup>1</sup> The cleverly punned answer relegated such distinctions to irrelevance. However, Rev 20 remains part of the canon, and the question of its meaning cannot be ignored, especially given the fascination many find with that entire book. We must tread cautiously, and pay due attention to G. B. Caird’s warning: “[Rev 20] is a passage, which, more than any other in the book [of Revelation], has been the paradise of cranks and fanatics, on the one hand, and literalists, on the other. It bristles with questions.”<sup>2</sup>

## THE INTERPRETIVE MODELS

Christians have understood the millennium in four major ways. Historic premillennialism sees the millennium as a literal 1,000-year period

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<sup>1</sup> I was told this story nearly 25 years ago by an Australian Baptist pastor. I have no idea as to his source.

<sup>2</sup> G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St John the Divine*, New York NY: Harper & Row, 1966, p. 249.

preceded by the second coming of Christ.<sup>3</sup> During this period, the saints are generally regarded as reigning on the earth, although some premillennialists envisage a heavenly reign.<sup>4</sup>

The second approach to Rev 20 is dispensationalist premillennialism.<sup>5</sup> The essential features of the outline are the same as historic premillennialism, except for the fact that those understood to be reigning on the earth during the millennium are Jews saved from the great tribulation after the rapture of the church.<sup>6</sup> Dispensationalist interpreters of Revelation see the bulk of the book of Revelation (from Rev 4:1 to 19:21) as occurring in the period between the “rapture” (Rev 4:1) and the “appearing” of Christ (Rev 19:10-21). However, such a viewpoint is unsupported.<sup>7</sup> There is no basis for seeing a reference to the rapture in Rev 4:1.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Representatives of this viewpoint include G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1972, p. 261; and M. J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1992, p. 389.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Mounce notes that Rev 20 “contains no specific indication that their [the redeemed] reign with Christ takes place on the earth”, see *The Book of Revelation*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1977, p. 351. For a defence of a heavenly locale for the saints during the millennium, see J. Badina, “The Millennium”, in *Symposium on Revelation*, F. B. Holbrook, ed., Silver Springs MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992, pp. 2:225-242.

<sup>5</sup> Representatives of this view include H. A. Hoyt, “Dispensational Premillennialism”, in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, R. G. Clouse, ed., Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1977, pp. 63-92; and H. Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1970, pp. 164-165.

<sup>6</sup> There are many variations within the broad schema of dispensational eschatology, but this is not the place to develop them. For our purposes, the key point is the abiding role of Israel in God’s purposes, culminating in the millennial reign of Jewish believers over the earth.

<sup>7</sup> This is not the place for a full-scale discussion of the rapture. That may, however, be found in G. E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1956.

<sup>8</sup> A. Johnson, “Revelation”, in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, F. Gaebelein ed., Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1982, p. 12:461. There are, in fact, considerable parallels between the introduction to the first (seven churches) and second (seven seals) series of visionary scenes, which may be more of an indication that John is going over the same ground a second time from a different perspective. In both, we are told that John has

Postmillennialism, by contrast, envisages a 1,000-year kingdom of God over the earth, preceding the return of Christ.<sup>9</sup> This view was popular between the Napoleonic wars and the outbreak of World War I, when many imagined they were witnessing the dawning of the millennium. The horrors of 20th-century warfare saw the virtual demise of this system.<sup>10</sup> However, the rise of the Moral Majority in the United States in the 1980s has been paralleled by a revival of postmillennialism – perhaps due to the failure of popular premillennial prophetic speculations to materialise.<sup>11</sup>

Amillennialism regards the millennium as a symbol for the entire Christian era.<sup>12</sup> The first resurrection is generally seen as the new birth – although it is alternatively sometimes seen as a special privilege granted to martyrs – and the second is the resurrection, which occurs at the time of Christ's return. During the Christian era, Satan is bound, in that he can neither destroy the church nor prevent it from completing its mission. In Christ, the saints live and reign in heaven – a theme developed elsewhere in the New Testament, especially in Ephesians.

From this brief survey of the way the millennium has been understood, it can be readily seen that the central issue of debate is whether the millennium represents the Christian era (in whole or in part) or a period

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been taken into vision (“in the spirit” – Rev 1:10, 4:2); in both he is shown what the future holds (“what must soon take place” – Rev 1:1; “what must take place after this” – Rev 4:1); in both, he hears a voice like a trumpet commanding him (Rev 1:10; 4:1); in both, he is initially given a vision of the glorified Lord (Rev 1:12-16; 5:5-13). There is, thus, significantly more contextual evidence for seeing a recapitulation here than there is for seeing one in Rev 20 (see further, below).

<sup>9</sup> Representative of this position is L. Boettner, “Postmillennialism”, in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, R. G. Clouse, ed., Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1977, pp. 117-141.

<sup>10</sup> Erickson, *Christian Doctrine*, p. 388.

<sup>11</sup> D. Hunt, *Whatever Happened to Heaven?*, Eugene OR: Harvest House, 1988, pp. 57-78; cf. D. Ford, *Crisis!: a Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, Newcastle CA: Desmond Ford, 1982, p. 711.

<sup>12</sup> Representatives of this view include L. Morris, *Revelation*, London UK: Tyndale Press, 1969, pp. 233-239.

following the second coming of Christ. The purpose of this article is to argue for a (non-dispensational) premillennial understanding of Rev 20.<sup>13</sup>

### LITERARY AND STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATION

One thing is generally agreed upon: from a *literary* point of view, the millennium follows the return of Christ in Revelation. Broad consensus exists that Rev 19 is a highly pictorial representation of the second coming.<sup>14</sup> The next scene presented in Revelation is the millennium (Rev 20). However, this fact is not as helpful for interpretation as it would initially appear. It is also generally recognised that the literary structure of Revelation involves frequent recapitulations and repetitions. In many cases, a series of seven scenes leads up to the second coming of Christ, only to be followed by another series covering the same ground from a different perspective. Amillennialists and postmillennialists argue that just such a recapitulation begins with Rev 20. Is such an interpretation correct?<sup>15</sup> A number of factors suggest that it is not.

Kenneth Strand argues that Revelation is characterised, not only by recapitulation, but also by progression.<sup>16</sup> Structurally, he understands Revelation to be a chiasm with the second half of the book giving an eschatological mirror to the more-historical first half.<sup>17</sup> This approach has

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<sup>13</sup> The discussion in this article will revolve around two alternatives: premillennialism and amillennialism. In terms of the issues separating these alternatives, the distinctions between historic and dispensational premillennialism are irrelevant. Further, many of the arguments for and against amillennialism are also applicable to postmillennialism. Since amillennialism is much more common today, postmillennialism can conveniently be subsumed under that heading also.

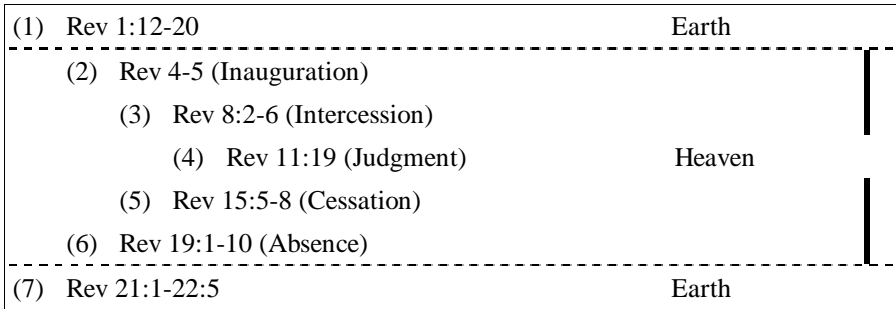
<sup>14</sup> Ladd, *Revelation*, pp. 252-258; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974, pp. 277-287; Mounce, *Revelation*, pp. 338-350.

<sup>15</sup> Ladd calls this a “key issue in our understanding of the millennium” (*Revelation*, p. 261).

<sup>16</sup> K. A. Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, Worthington OH: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1976; *Idem*, “The Eight Basic Visions”, in *Symposium on Revelation*, F. B. Holbrook, ed., Silver Springs MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992, pp. 1:35-50.

<sup>17</sup> An illustration of Strand’s approach can be seen in a comparison of the trumpets (Rev 8:6-11:19) and the plagues (Rev 16:1-21). That there is a relationship between these two visionary sequences can readily be seen by the repetition of words and themes. The

been further explored by Jon Paulien.<sup>18</sup> He draws attention to the way the sanctuary imagery of Revelation supports Strand’s supposed chiasmic structure. He notes, for example, the transition from the imagery of Israel’s spring feasts, in the first half of the book, to that of the autumn feasts, in the second half.<sup>19</sup> He also notes the transition from imagery, drawn from the daily temple liturgy, in the first half of the book, to that drawn from the annual (Day of Atonement) liturgy in the second half.<sup>20</sup> In his analysis of the seven introductory sanctuary scenes, Paulien discerns further patterns that he summarises in the following diagram.<sup>21</sup>



All of this strongly suggests that Rev 20 is not a recapitulation of church history. It does not come in the historical section of the book, but in the eschatological section. Furthermore, it makes perfect sense, in its context, when understood eschatologically. Rev 19 climaxes with the defeat of

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element of progression can be seen in the fact that the trumpet punishments are typically inflicted on “one-third” of the earth (Rev 8:7-9, 11-12); whereas the plagues afflict all (Rev 16:3). Furthermore the possibility of repentance is implied in the trumpet sequence – even though the opportunity is not taken (Rev 9:20-21), whereas the plagues are unmixed with mercy (Rev 14:10; cf. 15:1; 16:1-2). Strand concludes that the trumpets are a series of preliminary judgments throughout the history of the church culminating in the eschatological plagues immediately preceding Christ’s return.

<sup>18</sup> J. Paulien, “Seals and Trumpets: Some Current Discussions”, in *Symposium on Revelation*, F. B. Holbrook, ed., Silver Springs MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992, pp. 1:183-198.

<sup>19</sup> Paulien, “Seals and Trumpets”, pp. 190-191.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 189-190.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

God's enemies, and the destruction of the beast and the false prophet. Of the destruction of the greatest enemy, Satan himself, that chapter says nothing. But Rev 20 moves directly to his fate, thus completing the picture being drawn in Rev 19.<sup>22</sup>

### **THE BINDING OF SATAN**

When Rev 20 is studied carefully, the meaning of the millennium becomes clearer. Satan is bound, and thrown into the abyss. In the amillennial view, this refers to his inability to destroy the church, and has support from outside Revelation (e.g., Matt 16:18), but none from within the book itself. In John's vision, Satan appears to have two roles: deception of those who dwell on the earth, that is, the unsaved (Rev 13:8, 14; cf., 17:2; 18:3), and persecution of the church (Rev 12:13; 13:7; cf., 17:14). The destruction of the wicked, in Rev 19, means his first role is ended. The introduction of Rev 19 suggests that the righteous have been snatched away from the devil's attacks as well (Rev 19:1-7). It may be significant that their rejoicing is located in heaven. With the two objects of his labours removed from him, Satan is bound by chains of inactivity. It is enlightening to notice the circumstances under which Satan is unbound: the wicked are raised to life (Rev 20:5a, 7) providing him with targets for deception. In addition, the "camp of the saints" is presented as being on the earth, and it is immediately attacked (Rev 20:9).<sup>23</sup>

Far from Rev 20 providing a recapitulation of events already described in the book, the thematic contacts of Rev 20, compared with the rest of the book, can be seen as contrasted, rather than parallel. Twice before, in

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<sup>22</sup> Ladd, *Revelation*, p. 261.

<sup>23</sup> It is significant that the picture of the second coming in Revelation emphasises the resultant devastation of the world (Rev 6:14; cf. 16:17-21). The cumulative effect is to suggest that the earth is uninhabitable during the millennium, and that the saints of God are in heaven during this time. If this is so, the presence of the "camp of the saints" in Rev 20:9 must be understood in light of the descent of the holy city from heaven in Rev 21:2-3. Such a proleptic mention of a feature developed in greater detail latter is characteristic of Revelation. It is also important to notice that Rev 20 is primarily concerned with Satan and the wicked. The saints are only introduced, as necessary to fulfil that primary purpose.

Revelation, an angel is described as descending from heaven to earth (Rev 10:1; 18:1). Both of these occurrences are set prior to the second coming of Christ, and, on both occasions, the angel makes a loud proclamation (Rev 10:22; 18:2, 4). By contrast, the angel in Rev 20:1 says nothing. Similarly, the abyss is mentioned elsewhere in Revelation. It is the source of Satanic attacks on God's people (Rev 9:1-12; 11:7; 17:18). By contrast, in Rev 20, Satan is confined to the pit. Before the return of Christ, the people of God bear witness, and suffer the hostility of Satan, which billows from the pit. After the second coming, the saints enjoy their rest and rewards, and the pit has become Satan's prison.

Rev 20 has numerous points of contact with Rev 12, but, again, the contrasts between the two chapters are crucial for correctly understanding their significance. In both chapters, Satan suffers a defeat. In chapter 12, he is cast from heaven, but is able to immediately begin his attack on the church (Rev 12:13). By contrast, in chapter 20, he is cast into the abyss "so that he would deceive the nations no more" (Rev 20:2). The summary comment by William H. Shea is very apt:

In general, Rev 12 portrays the devil on the offensive, and the church on the defensive, with this general picture interrupted in the central section to describe an initial defeat of the devil – the one that took place in heaven during his confrontation with Michael. In Rev 20, on the other hand, the picture is reverse. The chapter begins with a picture of an initial defeat of the devil, and it ends with a picture of his final defeat, but, between these two poles, we encounter the victorious members of the church, especially the martyrs, whom the dragon had previously defeated in a limited physical way.<sup>24</sup>

The setting of Rev 12 is prior to the second coming, and the devil's hostility looms large. The change of tone in Rev 20 strongly suggests the setting is after the second coming.

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<sup>24</sup> W. H. Shea, "The Parallel Literary Structure of Revelation 12 and 20", in *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, 23 (1985), p. 46.

The same conclusions are readily drawn from the other passage in Revelation, with many points of contact with Rev 20 – the fifth seal (Rev 6:9-11). Rev 6 is clearly set prior to the second coming. God’s witnesses on earth are suffering martyrdom, praying for vindication (κρίνεις) and being told to wait a little longer.<sup>25</sup> In Rev 19, there is rejoicing, because this prayer for vindication (κρίσεις) has been answered. In Rev 20, the souls of the martyrs appear again – no longer under the altar, but sitting on thrones, engaged in judgment (Rev 20:4). They are described as “souls”, not to indicate their disembodied state, but to highlight the contrast with their forlorn condition in Rev 6:9-11. Mounce is certainly correct when he says, “This judgment appears to be connected in some way with the vindication of the martyrs.”<sup>26</sup>

### LINGUISTIC CONSIDERATIONS

Amillennialism regards the two resurrections of Rev 20:4-5 as two different *types* of events. The first resurrection is seen as being either conversion or entrance of the martyrs into the intermediate state. However, the second resurrection is regarded as the physical resurrection, which occurs at the second coming of Christ. There are serious difficulties with this approach.

Certainly, the Bible refers to spiritual and physical realities in close connection, and in similar phraseology (e.g., John 5:25-29; 11:25-26; Luke 9:60). However, in these cases, the passages are nonsensical unless

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<sup>25</sup> It is important to remember the symbolic nature of this scene. The imagery is that of the altar of sacrifice in the courtyard of the sanctuary. In the Old Testament cultus, the blood of sacrifice was poured out at the base of the altar. The blood of the martyrs is here said to be analogous to this, and to cry out to God for vindication, even as the blood of the first martyr, Abel, did (Gen 10:10). The imagery should not be over-literalised. It gives us no information about the prayer life of martyred Christians, nor about the nature of death itself. Ladd rightly observes “The fact that John saw the souls of the martyrs *under the altar* has nothing to do with the state of the dead, or their situation in the intermediate state; it is merely a vivid way of picturing the fact that they had been martyred in the name of their God” (*Revelation*, p. 103).

<sup>26</sup> Mounce, *Revelation*, p. 345.



understood in this way. This is not the case in Rev 20:4-5, which makes perfect sense if both resurrections are regarded as being physical.

In Rev 20:4, the saints come to life (ἐζήσαν, an aorist indicative active of ζάω – literally “lived”) in the “first resurrection” (ἀνάστασις). While it is true that ζάω, and the corresponding noun ζωή, can refer to spiritual rather than physical life, the same ambiguity does not apply with ἀνάστασις, which is used over 40 times in the New Testament, and, with the possible exception of one pre-Christian usage (Luke 2:34), always refers to physical resurrection from the dead.<sup>27</sup> It is belief in the ἀνάστασις which separates the Pharisees from the Sadducees (Matt 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8). It is the ἀνάστασις of Christ which lies at the foundation of early Christian proclamation (Acts 1:22; 2:31; 4:2, 23; 17:18; Rom 1:4; etc.). And it is the eschatological ἀνάστασις of believers, which is fundamental to Christian hope (1 Cor 15:12-13, 21, 42). Significantly, it is John who distinguishes between the “ἀνάστασις of life” and the “ἀνάστασις of judgment” (John 5:29).<sup>28</sup> Here John mentions two physical resurrections, although without mentioning any time gap between them. The word ἀνάστασις is never used in the New Testament for conversion, or for entry into the intermediate state. There are no compelling reasons for seeing Rev 20:4 as an exception.

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<sup>27</sup> J. Kremer, “ἐξελάνιστημι”, in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, H. Balz, and G. Schneider, eds, Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1990-1993, pp. 1, 88. The word has a broader meaning in non-biblical Greek, and the verbal form, although often used with the technical meaning of resurrection from the dead, is also used in non-technical ways, even in the New Testament. The Lukan exception may not be an exception. I. H. Marshall argues that Luke has resurrection in mind in this verse (*The Gospel of Luke*, Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1978, p. 122).

<sup>28</sup> Common authorship of the fourth gospel and the book of Revelation is often denied. However, the Johannine “flavour” of Revelation is none-the-less widely recognised. Caird’s comments are quite typical: “There are striking similarities between the five Johannine writings, as well as striking differences, and it is certain that they all came from the same geographical, cultural, and theological setting, if not from the one hand.” (*Revelation*, p. 4).

## THE MILLENNIUM AND CHRISTIAN HOPE

The strongest amillennialist objection to premillennialism is that Rev 20 is the only passage in scripture that teaches it. Sound hermeneutics interprets obscure passages in the light of clear ones, but premillennialism forces the many clear eschatological presentations, which do not mention the millennium, into a schema based on one obscure passage in a highly-controverted book.

As plausible as this objection sounds, it has certain flaws. Firstly, an objection could be made of many of the features of Revelation. Are the seven last plagues presented elsewhere in biblical eschatology? Or the mark of the beast? Does this mean that they are to be deleted from Christian eschatology?

The presentation of eschatology in Rev 20 is distinctive. One reason for this is the concentration in the chapter on the fate of the wicked, which has already been noted. Most presentations of eschatology climax with the return of Christ because that is point at which decisions for or against God are irrevocably made (Matt 25:31-46). Whatever Rev 20 means, it is not teaching a “second chance” for the wicked, after Christ’s return.

It must also be observed that nothing in the other biblical presentations of eschatology excludes the possibility of a millennium.<sup>29</sup> We have already noted John 5:25-29, with its mention of two physical resurrections, which harmonises well with the idea of a millennium. Ladd suggests that 1 Cor 15:22-26 actually implies a millennial reign.<sup>30</sup> These verses read:

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<sup>29</sup> Erickson, *Doctrine*, p. 389.

<sup>30</sup> G. E. Ladd, “Historical Premillennialism”, in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, R. G. Clouse, ed., Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1977, pp. 38-39. Significantly, Hans Conzelmann observes that this part of 1 Cor shows Paul’s indebtedness to traditional Jewish apocalyptic eschatology, specifically the idea of the messianic kingdom, see *1 Corinthians*, Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1975, pp. 269-274. The idea of 1,000 years in Rev 20 is widely thought to originate in exactly the same background. See D. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, in *Word Biblical Commentary 52c*, Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998, pp. 1078-1081; cf. J. M. Ford, “Millennium”, in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, D. N. Freedman, ed., New York NY: Doubleday, 1992, pp. 4:832-834.

For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the first fruits; then, when He comes, those who belong to Him. Then the end will come, when He hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after He has destroyed all dominion, authority, and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Hoyt supports Ladd's exegesis of this passage:

there is a progressive triumph of Christ's kingdom, as set forth in 1 Cor 15:23-26, in which Christ completes the subjection of His enemies. The first state is marked by the resurrection of Christ Himself. This is followed by an undefined period of time, the church age. Then comes the *parousia*, and resurrection of the saved. This is followed by another period, undefined in 1 Cor 15, which is defined in Rev 20 as the millennial kingdom. The third stage is the end, when Christ will raise the wicked dead, and judge them, and then turn the kingdom over to the Father for eternity.<sup>31</sup>

The argument, based on the uniqueness of Rev 20, can be turned back on opponents of premillennialism. If amillennialists are correct, the "first resurrection" does not refer to the physical resurrection of the redeemed. In which case, where does that event appear in the chapter? It is not found in verses 11-15. Attention is focused there on the judgment of the wicked. The term "second resurrection" is not used. Instead, John refers to the "second death".<sup>32</sup> (Significantly, John never used the phraseology "first death".) It is certainly startling to find an eschatological picture that does not mention the resurrection or reward of the redeemed.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> H. A. Hoyt, "A Dispensational Response [to Historic Premillennialism]", in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, R. C. Clouse, ed., Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1979, p. 45.

<sup>32</sup> M. G. Kline, "The First Resurrection", in *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1974-1975), pp. 366-375.

<sup>33</sup> On an amillennial understanding, verse 4 refers to the intermediate state and not to the final eschatological reward of the saints.

## CONCLUSION

Eschatology has divided Christians, almost since the beginning of the church – and it continues to do so today. Rev 20, and the topic of the millennium, present a flashpoint for discussion. This article has presented an argument for seeing the 1,000-year period of Rev 20 as a literal millennium, occurring after the return of Christ. If this is so, the period is bounded by two resurrections – that of the righteous at the return of Christ, and that of the wicked, at the end of the millennium. However, only the former is a resurrection of life, and, it alone, is worthy of the title “resurrection”.

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