

## Affirming Recapitulation—and Premillennialism—in Rev. 20:1-10 A Belated Response to R. Fowler White

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In the late 1980s, when I was researching theories of the millennium for my monograph *After the Thousand Years: Resurrection and Judgment in Revelation 20*,<sup>1</sup> I somehow lost track of R. Fowler White's article, "Reexamining the Evidence for Recapitulation in Rev. 20:1-10";<sup>2</sup> it does not even appear in my bibliography. Gregory Beale, in a review of my monograph, characterized it as "the most cogent argument to date for recapitulation in Revelation 19 and 20."<sup>3</sup> Now, more than thirty years later, this article has still not yet been answered in the scholarly forum from a premillennial perspective; I propose now to give White's piece the thorough response that it deserves.<sup>4</sup>

### The Case for Recapitulation as Presented by White

White defines recapitulation as "the repetition of the same basic plot in a variety of specific formulations."<sup>5</sup> This is a reasonable starting point; I would go a little further to describe a recapitulation as *an elaborative re-presentation of a previously-introduced narrative topic*. White's argument for Rev. 20:1-3 being recapitulation proceeds as follows:

1. Advocates of a sequential relationship between Rev. 19:11-21 and Rev. 20:1-3 insist that from 19:11 to 20:10, "John records a series of visions that are *prima facie* chronologically sequential."<sup>6</sup>
2. "[R]eading the events of 19:11-21 and 20:1-3 in historical sequence does not yield a logically coherent picture."<sup>7</sup>
3. Narrative development by means other than temporal progression ("historical sequence") may be presumed to be recapitulation.<sup>8</sup> Ergo

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<sup>1</sup> J. Webb Mealy, *After the Thousand Years: Resurrection and Judgment in Revelation 20* (JSNTSup 70; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> *WTJ* 51 (1989): 319-44.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory K. Beale, "Review Article: J.W. Mealy, *After the Thousand Years*," *EQ* 66:3 (1994): 229-49 (246).

<sup>4</sup> Since I look on postmillennialism as the weakest of the four main contemporary models of the millennium (premillennialism, amillennialism, postmillennialism, and a-temporal approaches, which are currently gaining ground), I will streamline the present essay by leaving White's (and my) critique of that model undiscussed.

<sup>5</sup> "Reexamining," 319, quoting with approval A. Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (HDR 9; Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1976), 44. Instead of "plot," Yarbro Collins has the more abstract "pattern."

<sup>6</sup> "Reexamining," 321.

<sup>7</sup> "Reexamining," 322.

<sup>8</sup> White states this point without argument or elaboration, almost as an aside, as though it is self-evident: "Seeking an alternative [to an incoherent temporal progression reading of Rev. 19:11–20:3], our thoughts

4. The scene of Rev. 20:1-3, compositionally speaking, should be regarded as recapitulation.

### Evaluating White's Premises

**White's Premise 1** is broadly true as a generalization as regards evangelical premillennialists. What it does not contemplate is that there are non-sequential readings of 20:1-3 and 20:4-5 that do not require that either passage be detached chronologically from the Parousia scene of 19:11-21. For example, the capture, binding, and imprisonment of the devil in 20:1-3 seems capable in principle of being read as something that happens not so much *after* the battle of Har Magedon, as *in the angelic arena* of that battle, which comes to be narrated separately for the simple reason that not everything happening in a complex scene is describable all at once. As we will see below, John's descriptions of the defeat of the kings of the earth and the defeat of the devil both closely parallel and clearly allude to Isa. 24:21-23, which pictures the heavenly and earthly authorities being defeated and punished *together* at the Parousia of the LORD of hosts. Moreover, Rev. 20:4 evokes the glorification of the Human One in Daniel 7, and that passage presents the slaying and fiery incineration of the fourth beast and the vindication and reign of the holy ones *as the concurrently enacted dispositions of the same history-stopping divine court proceeding* (Dan. 7:9-15). Keeping in mind that Rev. 19:11–20:6 not only alludes to Daniel 7 in multiple ways, but also alludes to the Parousia announcement of Rev. 11:15-18, which itself has both battle *and* courtroom themes, it would seem that the first readerly approach to the scene of Rev. 20:4-6 would be to see it as a recapitulation—an elaborative representation—of the Parousia, not as something that happens “after” the great confrontation narrated in 19:19–20:3. Those who come to life, indeed, fit well into the scene painted by 19:14-15:

And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron.

In the letters to the seven churches, Jesus had promised those who endured to the end—and to martyrdom if necessary—that they would receive him, they would be resurrected, they would join him in white, they would conquer with him, and they would reign with him when he came (Rev. 2:7; 2:10; 2:26-28 + 22:16; 3:4-5; 3:21). In a word, those whom John saw “live” or “come to life” (ἐξῆσαν) in Rev. 20:4 seem, in retrospect, to be worthy of being imagined as among those just seen riding the horses with Jesus in 19:14-15. When Jesus comes to reign in glory, he comes *for* his faithful, he comes *with* his faithful, he gives his faithful *the crown of life* (i.e. resurrection), he *conquers* with his faithful, and he *reigns* with his faithful. Thus 20:4 recapitulates, elaborates, a previously revealed aspect of the Parousia, namely, its judicial aspect:

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turn naturally enough to a recapitulation approach to 19:11–20:10” (“Reexamining,” 325). There are other possibilities that he does not mention, such as narration of an event that lies in the past as regards the events of the immediately preceding text, but which has not yet been narrated. Such would not be recapitulation.

We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign...and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great.... (Rev. 11:17-18).

The judicial vindication, (bodily) resurrection, and reign of the faithful in 20:4, 6 belongs right in the center of John's multi-layered presentation of the Parousia, and it is not to be imagined as following it chronologically—any more than it is to be split off from it as something that happens throughout the preceding age. The principle of recapitulation is clearly at play in the relationship between Rev. 20:4-6 and previous texts in Revelation—and its presence can be proven by appeal to specific and appropriate data in the text. By contrast, treating the “coming to life” of Rev. 20:4 as though it represents the reception of the spirits of the faithful in heaven throughout this age, thus separating the “coming to life” of Rev. 20:4 from bodily resurrection and from the judicial aspect of the Parousia, introduces narrative incoherence in five distinct ways:

1. It makes the single reference to resurrection (ἀνάστασις, 20:6) refer to something other than resurrection, in a context where resurrection would be expected.<sup>9</sup>
2. It breaks the connection between Rev. 20:4 and Daniel 7:9-28, which is clearly imagined by John as a vision of the Parousia (in line with Jesus himself, Mt. 24:30-31 || Mk. 13:26-27).
3. It muddles up the period of passive rest and waiting during the period of martyrdom (Rev. 6:9-11 + 8:1, 3-4) with the promised moment of vindication and active reigning, which is promised as attending the Parousia in 2:10, 26-28; 3:21, announced as attending the Parousia in 11:18, and finally seen in 20:4, 6.
4. It is forced to interpret the coming to life of Rev. 20:4 (ἐξῆσαν) as something completely different in kind from the “coming to life” that is temporarily denied in 20:5 (οὐκ ἐξῆσαν) specifically in relation to the former “coming to life.” Attempts to explain how this can be show themselves patently contrived.
5. It forces the interpreter to deploy a poorly-supported model of “heavenly” reigning for the deceased martyrs during the present age—an idea that no one would think to interpose unless they needed it as undergirding for a non-resurrection resurrection and a non-earthly reign in 20:4.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Philip Edgcumbe Hughes (“The First Resurrection: Another Interpretation,” *WTJ* 39 [1979], 315-18) attempts to escape incoherence (1) by saying that “the first resurrection” is that of Jesus Christ, so that “those who have a part in the first resurrection” (20:6) are Christian believers. He does not explain how John's readers, expecting to see a representation of their own vindication through resurrection, will succeed in understanding John's vision of the martyrs of the beast rising to reign as a representation of the resurrection of Jesus. We can infer, from the fact that all his argumentation stems from passages in Paul's letters, that he could find no evidence in Revelation to support this proposal.

<sup>10</sup> For an attempt to make an argument from the Church Fathers for a “heavenly reign” reading of Revelation 20:4-6, see Charles Hill, *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

In summary of Premise 1 and its implications, openness to the presence of recapitulation does nothing, in and of itself, to undermine a premillennial reading of Revelation 19:11–20:6.

**White's Premise 2** correctly argues that 19:18-21 parallels 6:12-17 and 16:12-21, observing that the radical cosmic breakdown pictured in the latter passages naturally precludes the notion of mortal humans living through the Parousia. Three other kinds of information in the text reinforce this strict dichotomy between the experience of the faithful, who will be vindicated by Christ at his glorious Parousia, and that of all other mortals, who will be slain by him:

1. The warnings and promises in the letters to the churches make it very clear that only the faithful will be found acceptable when Jesus comes in glory, and that the alternative, for the unrepentant, is going to be death (compare 2:5, 16, 22-23; 3:3, 5, 11 [cf. 2:10], 16).
2. As the Parousia draws near, and non-believers on earth are confronted by God's last warnings (the trumpets) and chastisements (the bowls), it is pointedly observed that they all refuse to repent (Rev. 9:20-21;<sup>11</sup> 16:9, 11), and John's visions, in agreement with Jesus and the rest of the NT writers, make it clear in various ways that no unrepentant person will survive to take part in the glories of the age to come.
3. An angel describes those to be slain (and left for the carrion birds) at Christ's Parousia as "all" (πάντες, 19:18; cf. 6:15), and John sees "the rest" (οἱ λοιποῖ), that is, all human beings aside from the beast and the false prophet, slain by the sword of Christ's testimony (19:21; cf. 1:16; 2:12, 16; 19:15; Isa. 49:2).<sup>12</sup>

There is simply no basis in the text of Revelation 1–19 for the idea that anyone except the faithful can survive the Parousia. White and I are entirely agreed on this point. White now argues that the destruction of all the unrepentant nations in 19:18-21 means that

it makes no sense to speak of protecting the nations from deception by Satan in 20:1-3 after they have just been both deceived by Satan (16:13-16, cf. 19:19-20) and destroyed by Christ at his return in 19:11-21 (cf. 16:15a, 19).<sup>13</sup>

Is this true? In the first place, John does not "speak of protecting the nations from deception by Satan," but of imprisoning him so that he should *no longer deceive the nations* (ἵνα μὴ πλανήσῃ ἔτι τὰ ἔθνη). Reading sequentially from Rev. 13:1 to Rev. 19:21, readers have witnessed the devil using the beast and false prophet to deceive the nations with unparalleled success. He incites them to attack and defeat the faithful (13:7), and even go fight against Jesus himself (17:14; 19:19). The slaying of the deceived ones and the devil's capture at the battle of Har Magedon stop this deception from going on any longer. But there is more to it. Understanding the intimate relationship between Revelation 19–21 and

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<sup>11</sup> Note the occurrence of οἱ λοιποῖ in Rev. 9:20 and 19:21. All the unrepentant are slain.

<sup>12</sup> Closely associated with the sword of Christ's mouth is the "rod of iron" that he wields, which is manifestly *not* to be used for any discipline short of death (19:15; cf. Rev. 2:27; 12:5; Ps. 2:8-9; Isa. 11:4; 30:14; Jer. 19:11; Dan. 2:44).

<sup>13</sup> "Reexamining," 321.

the Isaiah Apocalypse reveals the significant fact that rebellious humans and the devil are thrown into the underworld *together* for the thousand years.

Consider these points:

1. The angel casts the devil, bound with a chain, into the abyss in Rev. 20:2-3. Given that the angel locks the abyss with the key and seals it (the opposite of Rev. 9:1-2), the devil is clearly being imprisoned there—and even being kept bound within the prison—for a thousand years.
2. Readers heard in Rev. 9:1-2 that the abyss was both a place that could be locked and unlocked from the outside (making it a prison) and a place of fire, like a furnace.<sup>14</sup>
3. Readers heard in Rev. 1:18 that Jesus has the keys to death and Hades, clearly indicating that Hades is also a prison. This implies that if Jesus slays a living mortal person at his coming in glory, that sends them to the prison of Hades (cf. Rev. 6:8); correspondingly, if he releases someone from Hades, he does so by resurrecting them.
4. Jesus pictures the underworld of Hades as a place of fire; he also refers to the punishment of those slain at the coming judgment as their being cast into a furnace of fire (Lk. 16:24; Mt. 13:42, 50).
5. Jesus says in Mt. 25:41, 46 that when he comes in glory (25:31) to judge the world, those who have been heartless towards “the least of these my brothers and sisters” will go into “the αἰώνιος fire that has been prepared *for the devil and his angels*.”<sup>15</sup>
6. Demons, in their interactions with Jesus, seem to acknowledge that he has the authority to send them into the prison of the abyss: “And they begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss” (Lk. 8:31).
7. Hades is not cosmologically distinct from the abyss; after all, Paul writes this in Rom. 10:6-7: “But the righteousness based on faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?”’ (that is, to bring Christ down), ‘or “Who will descend into the abyss?”’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).” The abyss is identical to Hades as regards its function as the subterranean realm of the dead.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Gr. κάμινος, as in Mt. 13:42, 50; cf. the related imagery in Mt. 25:41.

<sup>15</sup> That αἰώνιος is capable of meaning “age-long” and not simply “everlasting” appears to be evidenced by the near-contemporaneous *4 Macc.* 12:12: “Because of these [crimes], justice is going to serve you up to a more concentrated and age-long (αἰώνιος) fire, and to tortures that will not release you for the whole age (εἰς ὅλον τὸν αἰῶνα).” If the author expects a future general resurrection, which he may, then the punishment the wicked experience after death will not be everlasting, but will be superseded by a new condition after resurrection.

<sup>16</sup> Note also that the “beast,” an emperor figure who appears to have died of a head wound and been resurrected, “will come up out of the abyss and go to his destruction” (Rev. 17:8; cf. 11:7; 13:14). It is simply a convention of Hellenistic Jewish Greek parlance to restrict the use of the term “Hades” (Gr. ᾗδης, which consistently translates Heb. Sheol (šəʾôl) in the LXX) to cases where deceased human beings (as opposed to

8. There is exactly one place in the Hebrew Bible that explicitly pictures rebellious angelic beings and rebellious human beings being gathered together and consigned together to the prison of the underworld (Heb. *bôr*) for a long time on the day that the LORD of Hosts appears in glory to reign.<sup>17</sup> That passage is Isa. 24:21-23:

The earth staggers like a drunken man; it sways like a hut; its transgression lies heavy upon it, and it falls, and will not rise again. On that day the LORD will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth. They will be gathered together as prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished. Then the moon will be confounded and the sun ashamed, for the LORD of hosts will reign<sup>18</sup> on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and his glory will be before his elders.

9. Jesus pictures the appearance of the glorious reign of the LORD of Hosts as identical with his own coming Parousia in glory.<sup>19</sup> Correspondingly, in the Book of Revelation, the co-Parousia of God and the Lamb is mentioned or seen seven or more times.<sup>20</sup>
10. The Isaiah Apocalypse (Isa. 24–27) is quoted no fewer than 14 times in the NT and is alluded to numerous times in the Book of Revelation, including in Rev. 20:1-3 itself (cf. Rev. 20:2; Isa. 27:1). John is intimately familiar with it.

All of this information, when added together, leads to a firm conclusion: John would have his readers understand that the devil is prevented from deceiving the unbelieving nations any longer at Christ's and his Father's Parousia by being captured and imprisoned in the underworld *along with them*. He can no longer deceive them because he is now shown to be every bit as helpless, every bit as subject to God's punishment and control, as they are. His being chained up even within the abyss (20:1-2) serves to underline this.

Although Isaiah 14 functions in its original context as a fantasy taunt song about the death of the human king of Babylon, the dynamic of that passage resonates strongly here. Not only do the living (human and non-human) taunt the slain king (Isa. 14:4-8), but so do the dead, who had once held him in awe:

9 Sheol beneath is stirred up  
to meet you when you come;  
it rouses the shades to greet you,  
all who were leaders of the earth;  
it raises from their thrones  
all who were kings of the nations.

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angels) are being discussed. The "abyss" (Gr. ἄβυσσος) serves equally well as a name for the underworld prison for angelic or human beings.

<sup>17</sup> Hebrew *bôr*, "the pit," is a standard way of referring to the underworld of the dead (e.g. Ps. 28:1; 30:3; 88:4; 143:7; Prov. 1:12; Isa. 14:15; 24:22; 38:18; Ezek. 26:20; 31:14, 16; 32:18, 23-30).

<sup>18</sup> ESV "reigns." Context militates against this rendering.

<sup>19</sup> Compare Mt. 16:27; 19:28; 25:31; Lk. 9:26; esp. compare Mt. 8:11-12; Lk. 13:28-29; Isa. 25:6-7, where we have the LORD of hosts giving a feast for all nations on "this mountain."

<sup>20</sup> Compare Rev. 3:21; 5:12-13; 6:16; 7:9-10; 14:10; 21:22, 23; 22:1, 3.

10 All of them will answer  
 and say to you:  
 ‘You too have become as weak as we!  
 You have become like us!’  
 ...  
 13 You said in your heart,  
 ‘I will ascend to heaven;  
 above the stars of God  
 I will set my throne on high;  
 I will sit on the mount of assembly  
 in the far reaches of the north;  
 14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;  
 I will make myself like the Most High.’  
 15 But you are brought down to Sheol,  
 to the far reaches of the pit.  
 16 Those who see you will stare at you  
 and ponder over you:  
 ‘Is this the man who made the earth tremble,  
 who shook kingdoms,  
 17 who made the world like a desert  
 and overthrew its cities,  
 who did not let his prisoners go home?’

Let us consider it settled—from the serial readers’ point of view, the devil’s co-imprisonment, *in chains*, along with the unrepentant dead provides a satisfying means of putting a stop to the devil’s deceiving of the nations, and of keeping him from deceiving them *for as long as he and they are imprisoned together*. White’s Premise 2, that the stated reason for the devil’s imprisonment (20:2) makes no sense if the nations are all dead, does not stand. Thus his whole argument for the necessity of searching for a reading of Rev. 20:1-3 that separates it from the Parousia must be laid to the side until we see how the co-imprisonment at the Parousia reading, based on recognition of John’s allusion to Isa. 24:21-23, shakes out. Let us see where this reading strategy takes us.

### **The Thousand-Year Reign of the Holy Ones and the Devil’s Last Stand**

Following on the devil’s imprisonment scene in Rev. 20:1-3, Rev. 20:4 sets a scene that looks very much like the opening to Dan. 7:9-18. In that scene, Daniel watched as “thrones were set up” and “the court sat” (7:10; cf. Rev. 20:4a). He saw the fourth “beast” empire, with its boastful horn—the final emperor of the world’s final empire—judged and incinerated (7:11, 26; cf. Rev. 13:5; 19:20), and the holy ones vindicated. God then handed the kingdom of the world over to them “for the age, and for the ages of the ages” (7:13-14, 17-18; cf. Rev. 13:7; 20:4bc, 6; 22:5). Daniel saw that the boastful horn had been “making war on” the holy ones and successfully defeating them (7:21, 25; cf. Rev. 13:5-7), and he was told that this deadly persecuting activity was (divinely) permitted for three and a half years (7:25; cf. Rev. 13:5). Readers of Revelation, as they encounter Rev. 20:4, have just

seen the defeat—and incineration—of the ten-horned “beast.” That which is pictured in Daniel 7 and announced in Rev. 11:18, but which *the readers have not yet seen before this point*, is the divine council vindicating the holy ones and the kingdom of the world being handed over to the faithful.<sup>21</sup> By the end of Rev. 20:3, the readers have seen all the unworthy pretenders to the rulership of the world neutralized—swept from the face of the earth and locked up together in the underworld (Rev. 6:14; 16:20; 19:18-21; 20:3).<sup>22</sup> It now remains for Christ and his holy ones to take up their reign together on the earth, just as he has repeatedly promised them would happen, even—and especially—if they died in his service due to persecution.<sup>23</sup> And this the we now see in 20:4:

I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.<sup>24</sup>

Given the nearby context of the Battle of Har Magedon (19:17-21), this is tracking well with the pre-announcement of the Parousia that they heard in Revelation 11:

18 The nations raged,  
but your wrath came,  
and the time for the dead to be judged,  
and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints,  
and those who fear your name,  
both small and great,  
and for destroying the destroyers of the earth. (Rev. 11:18)

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<sup>21</sup> As mentioned above, there is potential to see, in the armies in heaven who follow Jesus in white garments on white horses, the vindicated faithful (cf. 19:8-9; 3:5, 18; 7:9, 13-14). On the other hand, Jesus is also known to be coming in glory with armies of angels (Mt. 13:41; 16:27; 24:31; 25:31; Mk. 8:38; 13:27; Lk. 9:26; 2 Thess. 1:7-8; cf. Jude 1:14 and 1 En. 60:8, where the Lord comes as judge with thousands upon thousands of his holy angels). There is no conflict between Christ coming with his angels and coming with his human faithful. It can be both. More on this below.

<sup>22</sup> The beast and the false prophet are the exception, not being consigned to Hades but rather to their final fiery perdition in the lake of fire (cf. Dan. 7:11-12). It is conceivable (but difficult to confirm one way or the other) that their unique fate stems from the fact that they are both to be imagined as having been resurrected already (Rev. 11:7; 13:3, 11, 14).

<sup>23</sup> See Rev. 2:7; 2:10; 2:26-28 + 22:16; 3:4-5; 3:21; cf. 5:10. I regard it as significantly more likely that βασιλεύσουσιν is original in 5:10, since it has early and wide attestation and there is no attestation of βασιλεύουσιν prior to the ascendancy of amillennialism, whose early advocates are known to have been willing to alter texts to erase traces of premillennialism. I think particularly of the alteration of the last chapter of the Didache and of Victorinus of Pettau’s commentary on Revelation, not to mention the destruction of all of Papias’s works.

<sup>24</sup> Just as in Dan. 7:13-14, the holy ones (cf. 20:6, where those who reign are blessed and *holy*, and their city is called “the camp of the *holy ones*” in 20:9) reign for the age that dawns after the period of persecution under the beast. A thousand years is a familiar round figure for a divinely ordained era or age for ancient Jews, including Christian Jews (e.g. 2 En. 32:3–33:1; Ep. Barn. 15). Past ages in human history are a familiar concept (e.g. Eccl. 1:10 LXX; Ps. 145:13 LXX; 1 Cor. 10:11; Eph. 3:9, 11; Col. 1:26; Heb. 9:26); so are future ages—the expression εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων and similar formulas occurs dozens of times in both testaments.



In Rev. 19:19-21 they have just seen things that look a whole lot like the nations raging against the conquering King of kings and Lord of lords, and the judgment of the living, resulting in the destruction of destructive humanity (cf. 17:14; 19:16). Now in 20:4 they see the repeatedly promised *reward* for all the faithful, including the prophets who died bearing witness to “the word of God.” If the *faithful* have now been vindicated and rewarded in the “judgment of the dead” that had been announced in Rev. 11:18, what of the *unrepentant* among the dead, who presumably faced a negative verdict and a sentence of *punishment* in the same judgment? We immediately learn of the disposition of their case in Rev. 20:5:

5 The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.  
This [“they lived and reigned,” v. 4] is the first resurrection.

In a word, the court rules that everyone other than the faithful witnesses of Christ and the Father must suffer incarceration in Hades for a thousand years. This, of course, is exactly the concept we began with as our reading strategy based on (1) the understanding that the abyss and Hades are both terms that refer to essentially the same underworld prison, and (2) the apparent close connection between Rev. 19:19–20:3 and Isa. 24:21-22. If one wishes for a New Testament precedent for this concept, one need look no further than the words of Jesus in Lk. 20:35-36:

[T]hose who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from among the dead...cannot die anymore, but are equal to the angels...

Jesus’ reference to their being “found worthy” naturally implies that a divine judgment is going to take place at the juncture between this age and “that age”—a judgment that will distinguish between the worthy and the unworthy, resulting in resurrection for the worthy, and denial of resurrection to the unworthy.<sup>25</sup>

As we go on to encounter Rev. 20:6, we hear a possible echo of Jesus’ affirmation of the permanent immortality of the worthy ones:

6 Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! *Over such the second death has no power*, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

Readers will of course find out shortly that *there is* a second death that befalls those among the resurrected whose names are not written in the Book of Life (Rev. 20:14b-15; cf. 2:11), but no one who is raised to reign for the thousand years need worry about that. They are slated for resurrection life and priestly reign not just for the age, but for the ages of the ages (εις τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων; cf. Rev. 20:4, 6; 22:5; Dan. 7:18 Aramaic and Greek).

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<sup>25</sup> On Lk. 20:35-36 in relation to Rev. 20:4-6, see in detail, J. Webb Mealy, *New Creation Millennialism* (Seattle: Amazon.com, 2019), 107-12. Isaiah 26:18-19, followed by Daniel 12:2, is the most explicit promise of resurrection in the Old Testament: “You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! | For your dew is a dew of light, | and the earth will give birth to the dead [rəpā’im].” But this same passage also, with equal explicitness, denies resurrection to the former oppressors of the faithful: “They are dead, they will not live; they are shades [rəpā’im], they will not arise” (26:14).

Let us look again at Rev. 20:5. In a serial reading of Revelation, this verse will make attentive readers prick up their ears.<sup>26</sup> They just heard a few seconds ago (at the end of Rev. 20:3) that the devil was chained and locked in the prison of the abyss so he would be unable to deceive the nations any longer “until the thousand years are ended” (Gr. ἄχρι τελεσθῇ τὰ χίλια ἔτη). Now, in 20:5, they hear that the “rest of the dead,” essentially all the unrepentant, who are themselves to be imagined as imprisoned in the underworld,<sup>27</sup> did not come to life “until the thousand years are ended” (Gr. ἄχρι τελεσθῇ τὰ χίλια ἔτη). This phrase, in Greek as in English, is identical word for word. John, by repeating the exact same phrase, is telling his readers that the devil and the unrepentant will be released from the pit of the underworld at the same time, and that when this happens, the devil will be allowed to deceive the unrepentant nations anew, for a very short while (Gr. μικρὸν χρόνον, 20:3).<sup>28</sup> In other words, John seems to be indicating that the unrepentant, when granted release from the prison of Hades by being resurrected, will immediately fall under the deception and temptation of the devil. Thus readers are left at the end of Rev. 20:6 in a state of suspense. What is going to happen when the unrepentant are finally released from Hades? Will they return to the very same devil-deceived and devil-instigated behaviors that landed them in the prison of the underworld in the first place—such as rebelling against God and attacking the community of the faithful? They find out in the very next sentence.

7 And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison  
8 and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the  
earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle;<sup>29</sup> their number is like the sand  
of the sea. 9 And they came up on<sup>30</sup> the broad plain of the earth and surrounded

<sup>26</sup> The Apocalypse was, of course, composed to be *read aloud* to groups of believers (Rev. 1:3). No reading of a passage in Revelation can be regarded as plausible that does not explain how a *serial reader* comes to that reading from the information provided in the prior Revelation narrative itself.

<sup>27</sup> They were either in there already thanks to having died in an unrepentant state prior to Christ’s Parousia, or they died when, judged as unworthy tenants of the world by Christ at his coming, they were slain “by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse” (Rev. 19:21).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Isa. 26:20 LXX, μικρὸν ὅσον ὅσον, describing the brief amount of time it will take to destroy those who have it in mind to attack the resurrected faithful in the glorious kingdom of God (paralleling Isa. 26:10-11). This also, not coincidentally, leads immediately into an oracle of God’s final defeat, “on that day,” of “the serpent...the dragon” (Isa. 27:1; cf. Rev. 12:9; 20:2).

<sup>29</sup> The phrase εἰς τὸν πόλεμον is a stock phrase in the LXX, in which the article need not indicate a specific battle, a familiar battle, or a battle mentioned previously in the context. It can mean “for war/battle” or “to war/battle” in the abstract (e.g. Num.32:27, 30; Deut. 24:5; Josh. 14:11). It is certainly valid to explore the possibility that John’s use of the expression “the war/battle” in Rev. 20:8-9 indicates he is referring to the same event as “the war/battle” of Rev. 19:19. But John’s use of the definite article does not lock in such an identification. Not only can εἰς τὸν πόλεμον simply mean “for battle,” as indeed all English translations render it in Rev. 19:19 despite the possibility of treating it as resumptive of 16:14, but serial readers have been led in Rev. 20:1-3 to expect a renewed deception of the nations—and new trouble from them—when they and the devil emerge together from their underworld prison after the thousand years. So if one reads the definite article in 20:8 as indicating that this is a battle the readers already know about, then one can see it as presaged in 20:3 or in Ezek. 38:1-16 or both.

<sup>30</sup> ESV overtranslates this phrase, ἀνέβησαν ἐπὶ, as “marched up over.” By this point in Revelation, the verb ἀναβαίνω has acquired very distinct overtones of rising from the abyss and/or coming back from the grave. Cf. τὸ θηρίον τὸ ἀναβαῖνον ἐκ τῆς ἀβύσσου, 11:7; καὶ ἐστάθη ἐπὶ τὴν ἄμμον τῆς θαλάσσης [cf. 20:8], καὶ εἶδον ἐκ τῆς θαλάσσης θηρίον ἀναβαῖνον, 13:1; καὶ εἶδον ἄλλο θηρίον ἀναβαῖνον ἐκ τῆς γῆς, 13:11; τὸ θηρίον

the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven<sup>31</sup> and consumed them.

John's readers know that the (rest of the) dead of all time once lived out as far as the far corners of the earth; those who know Ezekiel 38 also know that Gog and his hosts come from the farthest reaches of the world known to the Hebrews: Meshech and Tubal<sup>32</sup> and Gomer in the far north (38:3, 6), Persia in the far east (38:5), Cush and Put in the far south (38:5), and, presumably, Tarshish in the far west (38:13) and Sheba and Dedan in the far south (38:13), who have no intention of being denied their portion of the products of the despoliation that Gog has in mind. In Rev. 20:9 John watched as Gog and his hordes "came up on the broad plain of the earth" (Gr. ἀνέβησαν ἐπὶ τὸ πλάτος τῆς γῆς), not an easy maneuver unless you started *from underneath the broad plain of the earth*. Thus the LORD says to Gog and his hordes in Ezek. 38:14 LXX, "In that day, when my people Israel is living in peace, will you not arise/be raised up?"<sup>33</sup> The verb ἐγείρω in the passive voice, of course, is the very same word Isaiah uses in Isa. 26:19 LXX to refer to the resurrection of the faithful, and this word has very distinct connotations of resurrection in the NT.<sup>34</sup> Another, potentially even more suggestive, parallel is to be found between Isa. 24:21-22 and Ezek. 38:8:

21 On that day the LORD will punish  
the host of heaven, in heaven,  
and the kings of the earth, on the earth.  
22 They will be gathered together  
as prisoners in a pit;  
they will be shut up in a prison,  
and after many days they will be dealt with (*ûmērōb yāmîm yippāqēd*).

After many days you will be dealt with (*meyyāmîm rabbîm tippāqēd*, Ezek. 38:8).

The first of these predicts that rebel angelic and human powers, after many days together in "the pit," to which they are to be consigned on the day that the LORD of Hosts takes up his glorious reign on Zion, will be dealt with/seen to/punished by God.<sup>35</sup> The second uses

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ὁ εἶδες ἦν καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν καὶ μέλλει ἀναβαίνειν ἐκ τῆς ἀβύσσου καὶ εἰς ἀπώλειαν ὑπάγει, 17:8. See also 9:1-2, in which smoke comes up, ἀναβαίνω, from the abyss, and 4:1 and 11:12, in which ἀναβαίνω describes people going up not from the first to the second level of the cosmos (from the abyss to the earth), but from the second to the third level of the cosmos (from earth to heaven).

<sup>31</sup> Some manuscripts *from God, out of heaven, or out of heaven from God*.

<sup>32</sup> The fearsome hordes of Meshech and Tubal, perhaps not coincidentally, appear as denizens of Sheol in Ezek. 32:26.

<sup>33</sup> Gr. οὐκ ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ ἐν τῷ κατοικισθῆναι τὸν λαόν μου Ἰσραὴλ ἐπ' εἰρήνης ἐγερθῆσθαι; The MT has שָׂוִי, "...will you not know/notice it?"

<sup>34</sup> See Mt. 10:8; 11:5; 14:2; 16:21; 17:23; 20:9; 26:32; 27:63; 28:6, 7; Mk. 6:14, 16; 12:26; 14:28; 16:6; Lk. 7:22; 9:7, 22; 20:37; 24:6, 34; Jn. 2:19, 22; 5:21; 12:1, 9, 17; 21:14; Acts 3:15; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30, 37; 26:8; Rom. 4:24, 25; 6:4, 9; 7:4; 8:11, 34; 10:9; 1 Cor. 6:14; 15 *passim*; 2 Cor. 1:9; 4:14; 5:15; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:20; 5:14; Col. 2:12; 1 Thess. 1:10; 2 Tim. 2:8; Heb. 11:19; 1 Pet. 1:21.

<sup>35</sup> The Hebrew verb *pāqad* has a range of meanings, but in this kind of context carries distinct connotations of divine judgment.

a slightly reorganized version of the same phrase about Gog—whom readers of Rev. 20:7-8 have reason to suspect may himself have just been released from the prison of the underworld.

### Excursus on Disparate Contextual Indicators in Ezekiel 38–39

Many interpreters, White among them, jump from John's reference to "Gog and Magog" in Rev. 20:8 to the idea that this scene must recapitulate 19:17-21, because John hears an angel in 19:17 invite the vultures and other carrion birds to feast on the bodies of those that will be slain, and that invitation closely parallels the similar invitation in Ezek. 39:17-20.<sup>36</sup> It is by no means as simple as that, however. Notice the context in Revelation. Jesus comes in glory (Rev. 19:11-21) to destroy the beast and all the nations who follow him after the beast has been successfully persecuting the faithful and/or leading them into captivity for three and a half years (13:5-10). An earlier reference to a faithful remnant of the Jewish people (11:1-2) appears to indicate that the beast and "the nations" will occupy Jerusalem for the three and a half years leading up to Christ's Parousia. In other words, non-believing Jerusalem will, according to John's visions, be in a state of foreign occupation until Jesus comes in glory, putting an end to the beast's career. This pattern (rescue from oppression and/or captivity in the context of a divine defeat of all the enemy nations) tracks very closely with the context-setting statements on either side of the "great sacrificial feast" section in Ezekiel 39 (vv. 17-20). For example:

And my holy name I will make known in the midst of my people Israel, and **I will not let my holy name be profaned anymore** (39:7). [Invitation to birds and beasts of the field, 39:17-20.] 22 The house of Israel shall know that I am the LORD their God, **from that day forward**. 23 And the nations shall know that **the house of Israel went into captivity for their iniquity**, because they dealt so treacherously with me that I hid my face from them and **gave them into the hand of their adversaries**, and **they all fell by the sword**. 24 I dealt with them according to their uncleanness and their transgressions, and hid my face from them. 25 "Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: **Now I will restore the fortunes** of Jacob and have mercy on the whole house of Israel, and **I will be jealous for my holy name**. 26 **They shall forget their shame and all the treachery** they have practiced against me, when they dwell securely in their land with none to make them afraid, 27 **when I have brought them back from the peoples and gathered them from their enemies' lands**, and through them have vindicated my holiness in the sight of many nations. 28 Then they shall know that I am the LORD their God, because **I sent them into exile among the nations and then assembled them into their own land. I will leave none of them remaining among the nations anymore**. 29 And I will not hide my face anymore from them, when I pour out my Spirit upon the house of Israel, declares the Lord GOD."

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<sup>36</sup> White, "Reexamining," 326-28.

All the bolded items above explicitly resume the same tight complex of themes from Ezekiel 36, which speaks of the restoration of the captive people of Israel, God's vindication of his name, and their re-establishment in their land—leading to the peace and everlasting security of the messianic reign of Ezekiel 37. The moment of judging the enemies and the occupiers of the land is, at the same time, the moment of the restoration of the fortunes of those who have—up to that moment—been under God's chastisement; the moment when the Israelites, who have not—up to that moment—known it, “shall know that I am the LORD their God”; the moment at which God, who—up to that moment—has been hiding his face from the Israelites, will no longer hide his face; and the moment when God, who has—up to that moment—been allowing his name to be disrespected, will defend his honor.<sup>37</sup>

But now notice that *not one* of these themes is active in Ezek. 38:1-16. Instead, the explicit and many-times-repeated setting for the implicitly predicted—but not narrated—attack of Gog in these sixteen verses is that the restoration referred to in Ezekiel 36–37 has happened some time well in the past, and that the people have become well established in peace, safety, and prosperity in the messianic kingdom just promised in Ezekiel 37. The contextual indicators in Ezekiel 38 are unmistakable:

8 After many days you will be mustered. In the latter years you will go against **the land that is restored from war, the land whose people were gathered from many peoples** upon the mountains of Israel, which had been a continual waste. **Its people were brought out from the peoples and now dwell securely, all of them.**

10 “Thus says the Lord GOD: On that day, thoughts will come into your mind, and you will devise an evil scheme 11 and say, ‘I will go up against the land of unwallled villages. I will fall upon **the quiet people who dwell securely, all of them dwelling without walls, and having no bars or gates,**’ 12 to seize spoil and carry off plunder, to turn your hand against the waste places that are now inhabited, and **the people who were gathered from the nations, who have acquired livestock and goods,** who dwell at the center of the earth. 13 Sheba and Dedan and the merchants of Tarshish and all its leaders will say to you, ‘Have you come to seize spoil? Have you assembled your hosts **to carry off plunder, to carry away silver and gold, to take away livestock and goods, to seize great spoil?**’ 14 “Therefore, son of man, prophesy, and say to Gog, Thus says the Lord GOD: On that day **when my people Israel are dwelling securely,** will you not know it?

The peaceful, prosperous, post-return, post-restoration context here is stated *five or six times*. A person reading Ezekiel serially up to the end of 38:16, or, for that matter, all the way through 39:16, would encounter no reason at all to suppose that the oracle beginning

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<sup>37</sup> See the full list of explicit parallels in J. Webb Mealy, “Revelation is One: Revelation 20 and the Quest to Make the Scriptures Agree,” in *Reconsidering the Relationship between Biblical and Systematic Theology in the New Testament* (ed. B.E. Reynolds, B. Lugioyo, and K.J. Vanhoozer; WUNT, 2.369; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2014), 143-44.

at Ezek. 38:1 might concern the moment of salvation from enemies *that leads up to* the inauguration of the messianic kingdom prophesied in 37:22-28.<sup>38</sup> To the contrary, the unmistakable sense of Ezek. 38:1-16 is that the regathered exiles have previously received, and have for some indefinite time enjoyed, the good things prophesied in chs. 36 and 37. This makes these sixteen verses a perfect match for Rev. 20:7-10, which comes in the context of the completion of a thousand years of blessed, priestly reign with Messiah Jesus,<sup>39</sup> while making them a stark mismatch for Rev. 19:17-21, which narrates the end of the three-and-a-half-year period of the beast's all-out (and successful) persecution against the faithful. What, then, will John have made of the two distinct and non-matching contexts visible in Ezekiel 38–39 without an unambiguous point of transition? My sense is that he would probably have found 38:17 to be the transition-point, the hinge, between the post-restoration context, which has explicitly controlled in 38:1-16, and the pre-restoration context, which only manifests itself explicitly at the end of chapter 39, but which may also be compatible with everything from 38:18 onwards. In 38:17, God rather cryptically hints that Gog and his nations are in some way identical with the nations whom the prophets down through the years predicted would be defeated by God at the moment of judgment for the apostates of Israel and salvation for the faithful remnant:

Thus says the Lord GOD: Are you he of whom I spoke in former days by my servants the prophets of Israel, who in those days prophesied for years that I would bring you against them?

Notice that God is not suggesting that the implicitly predicted *attack* of 38:1-16 is the same as the *attack* predicted numerous times by the prophets, but rather, hinting that *the personnel* may be the same.<sup>40</sup> And this is very well aligned with the reading that John's literary clues have led us to follow in Revelation 19–20. Aside from the beast and the false prophet, who were immediately thrown into the lake of fire at Christ's Parousia (Rev. 19:20), all the rebellious personnel of the battle of Har Magedon, including the devil himself, are present in the resurrected mob of Rev. 20:8. The beast's former followers, even in resurrection, display the same willingness to believe the devil's lies and the same rebellious belligerence as they did in mortal life. When these come on the scene in 20:8, the readers will not have detected the slightest hint that there has been anything other than peace and blessing during the thousand-year reign of the vindicated witnesses (Rev. 20:4-6); to the contrary, the faithful witnesses have had the whole world to themselves, reigning as priests with Christ in his glorious kingdom for that age—as they will continue to do

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<sup>38</sup> White rightly notes the relationship between the earthquake and hail described in Ezek. 38:20-22 and the same elements in John's vision of the seventh bowl of wrath in Rev. 16:18-21 ("Reexamining," 237). This helps solidify the probability that John would have regarded everything from Ezek. 38:18 through the end of ch. 39 as belonging to the context of the Parousia. This observation does nothing to push Ezek. 38:1-16 out of its native context of the glorious kingdom.

<sup>39</sup> Jesus says of himself in Revelation that he "has the key of David" (3:7), and that he is called "the root of David" (Rev. 5:5; 22:16) and "the descendant of David" (22:16). The Jesus revealed in Revelation would certainly have us understand that he is the "David" of Ezek. 34:23, 24; 37:24, 25.

<sup>40</sup> Ezek. 38:18–39:29 can thus be read (and I believe was probably read by John) as a fresh salvation-from-the-oppressor-nations oracle in the standard pattern.

throughout “the ages of the ages” in the Paradise of the new creation (cf. Rev. 20:4, 6; 22:3-5).

Ezek. 38:1-16 presents an oracle of outlying enemy nations being sovereignly drawn by God (38:4, 8) to see the faithful living in peace, prosperity, and security in the holy land, and finding themselves under temptation to attack and despoil them (38:10-11, 13-14). By contrast, Ezek. 38:18–39:29, after a mysterious transition verse (38:17), presents an oracle of God destroying Gog and all Israel’s far-flung enemies (39:6-7) and thus bringing an end to Israel’s exile, disgrace, and rejection by God, and signaling the incipient *inauguration* of a time of peace and security (39:22-29). It seems eminently reasonable to allow the possibility that Revelation 19–20 refers to these separate and incompatible contexts in its narrative of the Parousia in 19:17-21 and the attempted attack of the devil and the human rebels in 20:7-10. John’s allusion to Ezek. 39:17-19 in Rev. 19:17-18 and his allusion to Ezek. 38:2 in 20:8 do not prejudice the question of whether Rev. 20:7-10 recapitulates 19:11-21.

### **The End of the Devil**

As serial readers, we had been led to expect that the devil, after a brief moment of freedom to deceive the nations again, would meet his final end (Rev. 20:2-3; cf. Isa. 27:1). This we now see:

10 and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

The co-imprisonment and co-release reading of Rev. 20:1-3, 7-10, fortified by John’s allusions to Isaiah 24–27, not only works smoothly, but also results in a dramatic and satisfying story of the end of the devil and all rebellious human beings. Their judgment takes place at Christ’s coming in glory, and their punishment is imprisonment together for the whole millennial age in the abyss. They do not come out of the abyss to be judged and punished for their behavior prior to Christ’s coming; instead, they come out to face a test of whether their incarceration, and the truth about themselves that they have involuntarily faced, have led them to repent of their ways. John’s visions reveal that it is foreknown—and thus predestined—that they will not fundamentally change. Given a renewed opportunity to fall into deception, they will do so. No mere re-imprisonment in Hades awaits the rebels, but rather devouring fire, as prophesied in the Isaiah Apocalypse (cf. Isa. 26:9-11 and 27:1-5, both quoted below).

Let us look at Rev. 20:11 and see whether this reading strategy continues to work.

## The Final Trial and its Disposition

And I saw a great, white [or *shining*]<sup>41</sup> throne, and the One who sat on it—he from whose presence [lit. *face*, as in OT parlance] earth and heaven fled, and no place was found for them.<sup>42</sup>

It is very common for contemporary translators to understand that John is narrating that he sees heaven and earth fleeing from the Enthroned One. But that is not what the grammar indicates. John sees him from whose face (οὗ ἀπὸ [τοῦ] προσώπου) earth and heaven fled, back in the sixth seal and seventh bowl visions:<sup>43</sup>

12 When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, 13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. 14 The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. (Rev. 6:12-16)

18 And there were flashes of lightning...thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake. ... 20 And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found. 21 And great hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, fell from heaven on people... (Rev. 16:20-21)<sup>44</sup>

It is completely standard for John to reintroduce a character into his narrative by describing that character with a relative pronoun (such as ὅς/οὗ) followed by salient characteristics or actions that the readers have witnessed in previous vision scenes.<sup>45</sup> This means that upon reading 20:11, John's readers do not know whether they are about to see, for example, something that happens after the demise of the devil and all the resurrected unrepentant, or a recapitulation of the glorious Parousia of God and the Lamb, who also sits on the throne (cf. 3:21; 5:13; 6:17; 11:15), or, perhaps, a recapitulation of the judgment scene they just have just witnessed in battle imagery in 20:7-10. After all, according to the reading strategy we have been exploring, the judgment of Christ's Parousia in glory is first presented in battle imagery in Rev. 19:11-21 (+20:1-3), then it is almost immediately recapitulated, i.e. elaborated, in Rev. 20:4-6, this time in courtroom imagery that parallels Daniel 7. Let us

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<sup>41</sup> The Greek adjective λευκός can mean either white or shining. See LSJ, BAGD.

<sup>42</sup> Gr. καὶ εἶδον θρόνον μέγαν λευκὸν καὶ τὸν καθημένον ἐπ' αὐτὸν οὗ ἀπὸ [τοῦ] προσώπου ἔφυγεν ἡ γῆ καὶ ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ τόπος οὐχ εὗρέθη αὐτοῖς.

<sup>43</sup> Richmond Lattimore's (*The Four Gospels and Revelation* [New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979]) and Willis Barnstone's (*The New Covenant: Commonly Called the New Testament* [New York: Riverhead Books, 2002]) translations of this verse agree with mine, as do nearly all the ancient versions. For detailed analysis and argumentation on this issue, see *ATY*, 159-67.

<sup>44</sup> Given the fact that John's cosmology has an icy ceiling to the human world, which is also an icy floor of the heavenly realm, it is tempting to think that the giant hailstones are chunks of the "expanse" of heaven (the *rāqia* of Gen. 1:6; cf. Rev. 4:6; 15:2), which is disintegrating and falling to the earth because the whole cosmos is dissolving. The removal of the heavenly sea also means that God, and the Jerusalem above, can come down out of heaven and reside on earth as the cosmos is re-created (Rev. 21:1-2).

<sup>45</sup> Some examples of this may be found in Rev. 4:1; 10:5, 8; 12:5; 13:2; 17:2, 8b; 19:2, 20.



see what happens in Rev. 20:12-15, now that the scene has been set in front of God's great, shining throne.

12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. 13 And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake [or pool<sup>46</sup>] of fire.

The first, default, reading approach just mentioned, that of taking what happens in this scene as something that is to take place after the scene of Rev. 20:7-10, clearly does not work. We have already seen the resurrection and final judgment of the "rest of the dead" in 20:7-10, so there is no place for any subsequent resurrection and judgment of the unrepentant. This scene, therefore, following on from 20:7-10, effectively reprises the battle-courtroom pattern established by Rev. 19:11-21 and 20:4-6.<sup>47</sup> Revealed here, in the idiom of a courtroom proceeding, is the same the same resurrection, judgment, and fiery final destruction of those whose names are not written in the Book of Life—which is to say, all those who are not listed in the citizen-rolls of "the New Jerusalem that comes down from heaven from my God" (Rev. 3:12; cf. 3:5; 2:11; 21:27).<sup>48</sup>

What is to be made of the fact that the judgment is said in 20:12 to be based on what is written in the divine record books, which contain the record of people's deeds in mortal life, whereas in 20:13 people are only said to be judged based on their deeds? I think that most natural reading sees 20:12 as a recapitulation of the negative side of 20:4-5. This verse elaborates the reason why "the rest of the dead" were refused resurrection (and hence sentenced to incarceration in Hades) for a thousand years at Christ's coming in glory: their behavior in mortal life, recorded in heaven, made them unworthy of resurrection (cf. Lk. 20:35-36). Rev. 20:13-15, correspondingly, recapitulates and elaborates the resurrection and final fiery judgment of 20:7-10 in courtroom terms. In 20:12 the unrepentant dead appear before the throne in the realms of the dead while their crimes in mortal life are reviewed, then in 20:13a they are drawn out of the prison of the underworld by resurrection, with the implicit requirement of future worthy behavior. Then, in 20:13b, the parolees are judged by their behavior as resurrected people ("they were each judged according to their works"), and they are all consigned to the pool of fire based on this resurrected behavior. In this reading, Rev. 20:13-15 maps exactly to 20:7-9. The deluge of fire that falls upon and incinerates the would-be attackers of the faithful in 20:9-10 is of a piece with the pool

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<sup>46</sup> λίμνη can mean lake, but it most familiarly connotes a pool of water that remains after some kind of overflow of water—such as a rainstorm, a river overflowing its banks, or a receding tide (see LSJ *in loc.* and Song 7:4; Ps. 107:35; 114:8 LXX). We of course have just seen a deluge of fire in 20:9.

<sup>47</sup> The readers were given a clue in the pre-announcement of Rev. 11:18 that Christ's and his Father's Parousia would have the characteristics of both a battle and a trial.

<sup>48</sup> So, e.g., H.B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John* (London: Macmillan, 1906), 269.

of fire into which those condemned for their misdeeds are cast. This incineration is explained as “the second death” (20:14). Attentive readers would already have understood the incineration of the resurrected “rest of the dead” in 20:9 as “the second death” that 20:5 had led them to expect in their case. The difference between the two scenes (20:7-10; 20:13-15) thus becomes recognizable one of focus, not content: the first focuses on corporate judgment (as in 19:15-21), and reveals this judgment as a battle; the second focuses on individual judgment, and reveals the judgment as a divine courtroom proceeding. This final encounter between God and the persistently unrepentant has the character both at the same time.

To summarize the flow of the narrative as we have been reading it, the theme of judgment announced in Rev. 11:18 works itself out completely in 19:11–20:15. The faithful are judged, vindicated, and rewarded; the unrepentant are judged, condemned, and punished by a thousand years of co-incarceration (cf. Isa. 24:21-22; Rev. 20:1-3, 5), and then, “after many days” (cf. Isa. 24:22), they are released on parole/probation, and are found to be persistent in their evil and self-deceived ways. They have been forced to see the error of their sins, but neither the force of the truth nor the suffering of just punishment in the underworld has engendered in them a genuine repentance towards living in peace and love with their fellow created beings. They prove to be hardened criminals and recidivists. According to God’s loving, just, and merciful wisdom, they are shown what the everlasting and glorious life of the faithful looks like,<sup>49</sup> but they do not want to share in it; they want to despoil it. They are irrevocably removed from the realm of the living for the protection of the faithful. Isaiah foresees this movement of mercy and judgment in his Apocalypse:

9 ...[W]hen your judgments are in the earth,  
the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.  
10 If mercy is shown to the wicked,  
he does not learn righteousness;  
in the land of uprightness he deals corruptly  
and does not see the majesty of the LORD.  
11 O LORD, your hand is lifted up,  
but they do not see it.  
Let them see your zeal for your people, and be ashamed.  
Let the fire for your adversaries consume them. (26:9b-11)

At the end of the Isaiah Apocalypse, the voice of God himself testifies about this final moment in the lives of the unrepentant, including the devil himself:

In that day [cf. Isa. 26:19-21] the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword  
will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and  
he will slay the dragon that is in the sea.

2 In that day,

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<sup>49</sup> Paul says something remarkably similar: “What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy...?” (Rom. 9:22-23).

“A pleasant vineyard, sing of it!  
 3 I, the LORD, am its keeper;  
 every moment I water it.  
 Lest anyone punish it,  
 I keep it night and day.<sup>50</sup>  
 4 There is no wrath in me.<sup>51</sup>  
 Will someone bring me thorns and briers in battle?  
 I will march against them,  
 I will burn them all up together.  
 5 Instead, let them lay hold of my protection!  
 Let them make peace with me.  
 Let them make peace with me!”<sup>52</sup>

Let us review the success of this strategy for reading Rev. 19:11–20:15. By paying attention to John’s indications that the underworld of Hades *and* the abyss are places of imprisonment (cf. Rev. 1:18; 9:1-2; 11:7; 13:1, 3, 14), and taking note of the fact that he consigns both the devil and those slain at Christ’s coming in glory to the underworld, we came to the provisional understanding that the co-imprisonment of the devil with his former followers was to be understood as the specific means by which he would be kept from deceiving them any longer (20:3). We looked at Isa. 24:21-23 and discovered a biblical-prophetic precedent for the idea of angelic and human rebels being co-imprisoned in the underworld (“the pit”) for a long time at the glorious Parousia of God, and we also found a suggestive example of what might be called the psychology of reputation-deflation in the underworld in Isa. 14:3-29. Our provisional reading seemed to have clear potential. As we worked it through, we found that Rev. 20:4-6 recapitulated the Parousia, which had been presented in battle imagery in 19:11–20:3, in *courtroom/trial* imagery. We then found the

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<sup>50</sup> From this point to the end of v. 5 the text is my own slightly more literal translation. ESV reads:

4 I have no wrath.  
 Would that I had thorns and briers to battle!  
 I would march against them,  
 I would burn them up together.  
 5 Or let them lay hold of my protection,  
 let them make peace with me,  
 let them make peace with me.”

<sup>51</sup> It is often asserted that since Rev. 15:1 says God’s wrath is going to be completed (ἐτελέσθαι, a prophetic aorist of τελέω) in the outpouring of the seven bowls (16:1-21), a further wrathful encounter between God and the unrepentant after the Parousia (portrayed in the seventh bowl, 16:17-21) would be incongruous. On this model, however, God’s wrath is fully satisfied between the mortal punishments meted out at the Parousia and the lengthy sentence of incarceration in Hades that goes along with it (Rev. 20:5; cf. 1:18). God thus has no residual wrath against those whom he resurrects a thousand years after the Parousia. Losing their lives and losing out on the first glorious age of the Kingdom, and *knowing* that they have lost out, constitutes their just and adequate punishment. It is only their actions—or, to be precise, their attempted actions—as resurrected people that will stir up fresh trouble with God (cf. Isa. 27:4; 66:22-24; Rev. 20:7-10).

<sup>52</sup> For a similar meditation, which also contains a distinctive repeated offer of peace, but predicts refusal, cf. Isa. 57:15-21.

battle–trial pattern repeated in the double presentation of the last encounter between God and the unrepentant after they were released from long imprisonment in the underworld by resurrection (20:7-10 || 20:13-15). In the section Rev. 19:11–20:15, the theme of judgment as corporate victory and individual judicial vindication for the faithful, and of corporate defeat and individual judicial condemnation for the enemies of the faithful, was thus fully worked out in visionary form using two major recapitulations. As serial readers looking forward from the end of Rev. 20, we will be wondering if, after this section concentrating on the wrapping up of the themes of positive and negative judgment, John will finally see visions of the promised wedding of the Bride, the New Jerusalem (3:12; 19:5-9) and the promised return of Paradise (2:7).

### **The New Creation and the Bride of Christ, the New Jerusalem**

The following sections (21:1-8, recapitulated in 21:9–22:5) will abundantly fulfill all these hopes. For the sake of conciseness I will not exposit this material; I will simply affirm—along with all amillennialists—that the new creation and the coming to earth of the New Jerusalem belong, without a doubt, at the Parousia of the Father and the Son. The dissolution of the present cosmic order is clearly pictured in Rev. 6:12-16 and 16:20-21, and it is referenced in 20:11. Without strong and specific evidence to the contrary, the assumption must be that the dissolution of the cosmic structure at Christ’s Parousia makes way for the immediate renewal, rebirth, resurrection of the cosmos as a new heavens and a new earth. Christ is the resurrection of the faithful, and not of the faithful only, but of the world itself (cf. Mt. 19:28; Rom. 8:18-23; 2 Pet. 3:7-13; Isa. 65:17-25). Thus Rev. 21:1-7 brings into John’s vision sequence the glorious Parousia-wedding that was announced in 19:5-7, and 21:9–22:5 serves as recapitulation, which is to say, elaborative re-presentation, of the narrative topic of the wedding of the Bride and the Lamb. Looking back on Rev. 20:4-10, it seems perfectly natural to see “the Beloved City” of 20:8 as the New Jerusalem, the Bride whose glorious attributes would be elaborated in 21:1–22:5.

### **Conclusion:**

#### **Proper Sensitivity to Recapitulation Yields New Creation Millennialism**

This entire reading of Rev. 19:11–22:5 *works*. It flows, and the narrative story that it discovers makes both theological and psychological sense.<sup>53</sup> It connects closely with the promises and announcements made previously in Revelation, and it connects intimately with the Isaiah Apocalypse (Isa. 24–27) and with Isa. 66:22-24, which John clearly knows well. The recapitulations, following the pattern that recurs in Revelation from 4:1 onwards, make sense and are revealed by John’s specific verbal cross-references within his own text and within the canon of OT prophecy, specifically Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. By contrast,

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<sup>53</sup> The persistence of evil motivation is not only explicitly affirmed in Scripture (e.g. Isa. 57:15-21, quoted below), but it is one of the grievous facts of life that is easily observed in the world.

trying to read Rev. 20:7-10 as a recapitulation of Rev. 19:11-21 runs into several independently fatal difficulties, as I have demonstrated in detail elsewhere.<sup>54</sup>

The specific recapitulative model of Revelation 19–22 that I have demonstrated here, new creation millennialism, will be unfamiliar to many readers, but its main outlines are not new. In fact, the earliest known commentary on Revelation, by Victorinus of Pettau (d. 303 CE), affirms both that the thousand years of Rev. 20:1-10 begins when Jesus comes in glory *and* that the new creation and the coming to earth of the New Jerusalem also attend his coming in glory.<sup>55</sup> John Gill, the most famous scholarly Bible commentator of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, affirmed not only that both the millennium and the new creation commence with Christ's Parousia, but also that the attempted attack of Gog and Magog in Rev. 20:7-10 represents the belated resurrection of "the rest of the dead" (20:5) and their final judgment and perdition in the lake of fire.<sup>56</sup> Revelation commentator Sylvester Bliss in the 19<sup>th</sup> century followed Gill,<sup>57</sup> and Wolfgang Metzger in the late 1940s, and I in the late 1980s, both independently of one another and of Gill and Bliss, came to the same conclusions about the recapitulative relationship between the Gog and Magog vision and the Great White Throne vision, the inauguration of the thousand years with Christ's Parousia, and the new creation and New Jerusalem vision of Rev. 21:1-7 recapitulating the Parousia.<sup>58</sup> More recently, evangelical New Testament scholars Eckhard Schnabel and Thomas Schreiner have espoused the new creation millennialism paradigm after reading my work.<sup>59</sup>

The most interesting thing about the new creation millennialism paradigm is not the fact that it works better as a reading strategy than either historic (and dispensational) premillennialism or amillennialism, but that it opens a fresh way of thinking theologically about the meaning of ultimate perdition. God's self-revelation through the prophets and Jesus and the apostles is that he is compassionate (Heb. *raḥûm*, Gr. *oiktirmōn*), merciful

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<sup>54</sup> See Mealy, "Revelation is One," 147-51 and, more recently, Chapter 3 in Mealy, *New Creation Millennialism*, 92-106, "Insurmountable Problems with Amillennialism." Chapter 2 in that volume, "Insurmountable Problems with Historic Premillennialism," also presents a thorough refutation of standard (historic and dispensational) premillennial models.

<sup>55</sup> Victorinus, of course, is the interpreter who first developed and named the concept of recapitulation in Revelation. For the story of how his commentary got edited to teach amillennialism rather than new creation millennialism, see F.F. Bruce, 'The Earliest Latin Commentary on the Apocalypse', *EvQ* 10 (1938), pp. 352-66. Other texts of the patristic period that set the millennium in the new creation are *Ep. Barn.* 15:4-5 (Pseudo-Barnabas seems not to be aware of Revelation); *Apoc. Elij.* 5:36-39; Methodius of Olympus, *Banq. Virg.* 9; *De Res.* 9.

<sup>56</sup> See the comments on Rev. 20:8 and 21:1-2 in Gill's "Exposition of the Revelation of St. John the Divine," in *id.*, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, III (1748), Accessed 11/26/2019 at <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/revelation-20-8.html>, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/revelation-20-9.html>, and <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/revelation-21-1.html>.

<sup>57</sup> S. Bliss, *A Brief Commentary on the Apocalypse* (2nd edn; Boston: J. V. Himes, 1853), 350-67. Accessed 11/26/2019 at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/26639>. Bliss does not cite Gill, so it is conceivable that he comes to his view independently.

<sup>58</sup> See W. Metzger, "Das Zwischenreich," in *Auf dem Grunde der Apostel und Propheten* (Festschrift Bischof T. Wurm; ed. E. Loeser; Stuttgart: Quell-Verlag der Evangelische Gesellschaft, 1948), 100-18. See also the in-depth discussion of this article in Mealy, *ATY*, 47-57.

<sup>59</sup> Eckhard Schnabel, *40 Questions about the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012); Thomas Schreiner, *Revelation* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023).

(Heb. *ḥanûn*, Gr. *eleēmōn*), tolerant (Heb. *ʾerek ʾappîm*, Gr. μακρόθυμος), and desirous that sinners would turn from their wicked (which is to say, *destructive*) ways and live.<sup>60</sup> Perceptive readers of scripture must find it strange that the popular story of the final judgment of the unrepentant has God judging, condemning, and endlessly punishing the “unsaved” without compassion and without mercy, without any offer of reconciliation, and without offering any opportunity to repent and live. But in *this* story, God through Christ judges and condemns the stubbornly unrepentant at Christ’s Parousia, “the judgment of the living and the dead,” sentencing them to a lengthy but circumscribed period of punishment (cf. Mt. 5:26; Lk. 12:59; Mt. 18:34; 25:41, 46), but then God grants them all the undeserved gift of resurrection, and, along with it, an opportunity to turn over a new leaf. It is what the resurrected unrepentant do with that last opportunity that determines their irreversible fate:

- 4 ...Will someone bring me thorns and briars in battle?  
I will march against them,  
I will burn them all up together.  
5 Instead, let them lay hold of my protection!  
Let them make peace with me,  
Let them make peace with me!” (Isa. 27:4-5; cf. Isa. 57:18-21)

In this story of the end, the loving *and* just, merciful *and* protective, character of God reveals itself. It is neither the mercilessness of God, nor God’s unwillingness to reconcile with some of his creatures, that leads to their irremediable perdition, but the fact that they prove themselves adamant in their enmity towards God—and towards God’s faithful ones. On this matter the New Testament and the Old testify as one. The only questions that remain are these: Can God really be this loving, this generous, this merciful, even to the worst of sinners? Can human beings really be as wicked as this, to throw the undeserved grace of resurrection life back in God’s face by trying to attack the community of his faithful ones? And finally, would any person formed into the merciful, compassionate, tolerant, forgiving character of God, as revealed to Moses on Mount Horeb and to us in Jesus Christ, object if God were to conduct the administration of his final justice towards the unrepentant in this way?

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<sup>60</sup> Esp. Exod. 34:6-7; Ps. 145:8-9; Isa. 45:22; 55:1-9; Ezek. 18:23, 32; 33:11; Mt. 18:13; Lk. 15:7, 10; 1 Tim. 2:3-4; 2 Pet. 3:9.