

# Reconsidering the Relationship between Biblical and Systematic Theology in the New Testament

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## Revelation is One: Revelation 20 and the Quest to Make the Scriptures Agree

J. WEBB MEALY

### Remarks on the Impulse to Make Sense of “The Totality of the Bible”

Bob Gundry became my mentor as a biblical studies student the moment I stepped into his Introduction to the New Testament class at Westmont College in 1975. I have eagerly sought and appreciated his critique of my work down through the years, and am pleased to respond to some of his searching questions in the “Postscript on Some Theological Desiderata” in his *Jesus the Word According to John the Sectarian*.

The first thing that note as I read the Postscript is the fact that he is addressing his *Christian* readers as Christians: “As Christians, should we. . . .” To me, this immediately hints at the conundrum that he is going to pose. Scholars of the Bible have, over the past two and a half centuries or so, been enculturated into a schizophrenic sense of what they are and what they are doing in relationship to the Bible. The Enlightenment, along with its understandable skepticism in relation to the established church’s sometimes arbitrary and byzantine customs of Bible interpretation, also brought with it the ideal of science as the shining path to a humanly achieved golden age. It held aloft the ideal of the scholar (including the Bible scholar) as an objective, disinterestedly curious scientist. What it did not typically notice was that religion, as the realm of *faith*, implicitly embraces an epistemology with what might be called two standards of proof. People of faith – scholars and lay people alike – are not involved in a faith-based worldview and a faith-based community of worship for the purpose of expanding knowledge for its own sake, but for the sake of discovering, along that trajectory of faith, a deeper connection to life for themselves individually and as community. Thus, as a *Christian* interpreter of the Bible, I do not seek to discover the meaning of texts for the intellectual satisfaction of the literary-critical quest, but for the purpose of my own enlivening and the enlivening of my companions in religious faith.

My faith, informed by and continuously informative of my experience, holds that the scriptures are a channel of life-enhancing revelation from God via the thoughts and words of human beings. Consequently, my standards of proof in matters of scripture study and interpretation are not always going to be identical to those of a secular person who has not experienced the same power of life in relationship with God through Christ, through Christian community, and through the reading of scripture. The reality is that I am not studying the scriptures for the science of it, but for the *edification* of it. It is certainly worthwhile to bring to bear, in my interpretative efforts, as much relevant knowledge and critical thinking skills as I can muster. But as a person of faith, I cannot submit to the Enlightenment's (and now Postmodernism's) demand that I assert no claim that I would not be able to demonstrate to the satisfaction of anyone, whatever their rational posture towards my faith.

The quest to be “more scientific” in biblical studies can be seen as a major source of the impetus towards biblical theology on the one hand, and the eventual strangulation of biblical theology, on the other hand. Prior to the Enlightenment, systematic theology had traditionally helped itself quite unselfconsciously to text plots large and small, related and unrelated, nearby or distant in time or literary context. The Bible was universally acknowledged (within Christendom) to be a divinely inspired sourcebook, and the interpretative methods applied to it were various and permissive. Biblical theology, growing out of a scholarly tradition that increasingly stopped to examine the *particularity* of things, essentially stood up to say first, “An Isaiah (or a Mark or a Paul) is a theologian in his own right. Let us not simply co-opt his voice to create a systematic theological structure to please ourselves, but let us also attune our ears to his unique contribution to the whole that is scriptural revelation.” But there inevitably followed, in the same historical progression of thought in the scholarly community, the challenge, “How can you *really* listen to the uniqueness of Isaiah’s voice if you approach everything he says with the a priori conviction that he ultimately agrees with three dozen other people he never met, who lived in different (sometimes rival) nations and epochs?”

The answer to this question, for those enculturated into the ideal of the scholar as the objective-minded scientist, was “Obviously you cannot. You are bound to chop off a bit here and add a bit there, magnify this piece out of proportion and minimize that piece, resulting in a gross distortion of each individual’s perspective.” And of course, astute individuals (James Barr in particular comes to mind)<sup>1</sup> found it easy to demonstrate the perva-

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<sup>1</sup> James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: SCM Press/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961; repr. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004); *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999).

siveness of this kind of distortion. The resulting collective sigh of resignation in the scholarly community, and the profound publishing lull in its wake, came to be known as “the death of the biblical theology movement.”

At this point, rather than going on to generalize about the proposed revisionings of biblical theology spearheaded by figures like Brevard Childs, Krister Stendahl, and Henning Graf Reventlow, I want to turn a corner and characterize how I personally, as a reader and expositor of the Bible, respond to the challenge that critics like Barr have put forward.

First, I remain convinced that *all the writings of scripture* have something in common, some ability to speak together in ways that their authors sometimes anticipated, and sometimes did not. All texts have a potential life of their own that transcends their authors’ thoughts and intentions – the more so when we are talking about *oracles*, human messages that are purported to contain revelation from God. Millennia-long common experience convinces people of faith that the scriptures are nurtured by and useable by the Spirit of Truth for the edification and enlivening of human beings. Secondly, it is to be admitted that there will always be such a thing as *distorting* what any author writes. The very real risk exists that I, in my inordinate fondness for my own ideas and for my own preferred systemization priorities, will misunderstand and misrepresent what any or all of the scriptures say. I guard against this risk *not* by surrendering to the supposedly irreducible particularity of every text and every author’s perspective on faith, but by *making myself accountable* to the critiques of other scholars who look at the large and small scales of biblical materials through different eyes.

By positioning myself this way I find that I have answers for some of Professor Gundry’s questions. For example:

*Does the Bible present theological data to be organized neatly, or a range of canonical options to be kept discrete?* The business of trying to make edifying sense of the scriptures as a whole – or of as much of their witness as we can – is likely to remain central to the Christian quest to combine faith in God with knowledge of God’s ways. At the same time, our tradition holds that the scriptures present countless unique points of meeting with God’s revelation. It is clear that one portion of scripture can be used to overwrite another, to distort the interpretation of another. But faith insists that the Spirit can sensitize those who are teachable to the unique contributions of each inspired voice.

*Ought systematic theology to dominate biblical theology, or vice versa?* I am inclined towards Professor Gundry’s optional answer that they ought to form a “partnership of equals.” We have clearly learned from the rise and fall of the biblical theology movement that *systematic theology* and its assumptions should not dominate *biblical theology*. Indeed, Professor

Gundry's option of "going their separate ways" seems to imply that systematic theology, to the extent that it uses the Bible at all, can only set a bad example for biblical theology. I suppose the safest relationship would be for systematic theology to fortify itself with knowledge gained from biblical theology, but for biblical theology to be *very wary* of "homogenizing" tendencies within the systematic theology project.

The truth is that as a person of faith I often come to a biblical text with a predilection for one interpretative option and an antipathy for another. But what demonstrates my intellectual integrity is not some absence of a preconceived idea as to how I would like my investigation to turn out, but whether I am willing to look at the evidence honestly and modify or abandon my hypothesis as to the meaning of the text if the evidence contradicts it. This is where we biblical interpreters have become notorious. We share a tool bag of interpretative tactics that can, in a pinch, make almost any text amenable to a preconceived theological scheme. Techniques such as allegory, hyper-focus on tiny lexical or grammatical features, or a filibuster of tangential remarks, can be used to dispatch any troublesome text. The point, in my mind, is to catch ourselves and one another when we are doing these things: when we are resorting to casuistry because our interpretative hypothesis is not working well.

Happily for our common purpose in this book, I have long been interested in a classic *crux interpretum* that will put me and a well-known colleague through our paces as biblical interpreters and demonstrate – perhaps in both our cases – the precise temptation to over-harmonize that I have been discussing.

### Specific Problem: The Thousand Years of Revelation 20

In 1992 I published *After the Thousand Years: Resurrection and Judgment in Revelation 20*.<sup>2</sup> In it, I argued that John intended for his readers to recognize, in the attack of Gog and Magog in Rev. 20:7–10, the resurrection and annihilation of the unrepentant. Shortly afterwards Greg Beale, who was then in the process of writing *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*<sup>3</sup> and his hefty Revelation commentary for the NIGTC series,<sup>4</sup> wrote

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<sup>2</sup> J. W. Mealy, *After the Thousand Years: Resurrection and Judgment in Revelation 20* (JSNTSup 70; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> G. K. Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (JSNTSup 166; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999).

a full-length review article of my monograph.<sup>5</sup> In that review he acknowledges that the *prima facie* case I have made for seeing the resurrection of “the rest of the dead” in Rev. 20:7–10 is so strong that the burden of proof might now rest on those who wish to deny it.<sup>6</sup>

Beale and I have entirely different perspectives on the millennium of Revelation 20, but we do have one thing in common: each of us brings an external agenda to the passage. Beale’s agenda is to find an interpretation of the millennium that results in harmony with the eschatological scheme that he thinks characterizes the rest of the NT. My agenda is my motivation to discover a passage in Revelation that pictures the ultimate fate of the unrepentant as annihilation rather than endless torment. Each of us, it turns out, is looking for harmony, for a certain kind of *homogeneity* in the scriptures. From Beale’s point of view, nearly all NT passages look forward to a single general resurrection to judgment; a temporally bifurcated resurrection in Revelation 20 would break that pattern, and so is to be resisted as an interpretative option. From my point of view, the vast majority of scriptural passages, both OT and NT, threaten unrepentant created beings with being removed from existence, and so an interpretation of Revelation 20 consistent with this pattern is desirable. Scriptural self-consistency is a theological *a priori* – or at least a theological desideratum – for each of us.

## How I Came to My View of Revelation 20

My ideas are not timeless abstractions free from the limits of human subjectivity, but discoveries I made at specific points as I studied the Bible on the assumption that everything in it made sense *together*. I recall discovering numerous allusions by Jesus to the OT prophets that challenged the traditional – and, to me, theologically unacceptable – concept of a hell of everlasting torment.

Jesus’ single allusion to an “unquenchable fire” (Mark 9:43, 48) provides an apt example. When traced to its antecedents in OT prophecy,<sup>7</sup> this expression connotes a destruction that cannot be resisted by those whom it is sent to destroy, rather than a fire that miraculously burns forever. For those who know the prophets, “unquenchable fire” is *irresistible, inescap-*

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<sup>5</sup> G. K. Beale, “Review Article: J. W. Mealy, *After the Thousand Years*,” *EvQ* 66.3 (1994): 229–49.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 234, 248.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. 2 Kings 22:16–17 || 2 Chron. 34:25; Jer. 4:4; 7:27; 17:20; 21:10, 12, 14; Ezek. 20:47–48; Amos 5:6.

*able* fire, a fire that burns effectively until it finishes destroying what it is sent by God to destroy.

Related to this, Jesus' phrase "where their worm doesn't die, and the fire doesn't get put out" (Mark 9:48)<sup>8</sup> turns out to be an allusion to Isa. 66:24. There the fuel for the fire and the food for the worms is the *inert corpses* of those who have attacked the capital city of God's new creation (cf. Isa. 65:17–25; 66:22). The picture evoked in Isaiah 66 is that of a complete defeat followed by a complete and final destruction for God's eschatological enemies. The image is of a battlefield full of corpses that need to be buried (in the ground, where the worms are) or burnt, in order to prevent disease (cf. Isa. 9:5; Ezek. 39:11–20).

Similarly, Jesus' phrase "where people will be crying and grinding their teeth" (Matt 8:12)<sup>9</sup> alludes to (and in one place, Luke 13:28, explicitly carries forward) the OT theme that the unworthy will be excluded from the blessings of the kingdom of God, and, upon realizing their fate, will torment themselves with envy, remorse, and frustration (Isa. 65:11–15; cf. Ps. 112:9–10). What is the prospect ahead for these miserable and frustrated outcasts? "You shall leave your name to my chosen to use as a curse, and the Lord GOD will put you to death" (Isa. 65:15).

Through avid reading of the prophets of the OT, I came to realize that much of the NT language popularly understood as descriptive of everlasting torment was nothing of the sort. I began to ask whether the pattern that I was seeing made sense of yet more passages. For example, I noted that the rich man in Jesus' parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus is experiencing torment in *Hades*, imagined by Jesus and his contemporaries as the realm of the spirits of the dead awaiting resurrection. The rich man's brothers, after all, are still living ordinary (mortal) lives in the current age (Luke 16:27–31). Unpleasant as it is, the rich man's state in Hades appears by its very nature to be temporally bounded, not everlasting.<sup>10</sup> The man's eventual resurrection to judgment would presumably result in a sentence of Gehenna, which is to say, the penalty of complete destruction of body and soul (e.g. Matt. 10:28; Luke 12:4–5).

I was struck by Jesus' frequent warnings that the coming of the new age of God's kingdom would result in the *exclusion* of many who assumed they would be *included*. He often pictures apparent insiders being kicked out, as well as people outside (and fully expecting to be invited in) being

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<sup>8</sup> This and all NT quotations in this article are from J. Webb Mealy (trans. and ed.), *The Spoken English New Testament* (Oakland: SENT Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> See also Matt. 13:42; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; esp. Luke 13:28.

<sup>10</sup> Here assuming a belief in resurrection for the unrepentant on the part of Jesus and writers of the NT. Explicit evidence for this belief is slim, occurring only in John 5:28–29; Acts 24:15; Rev. 20:11–15.

refused entry.<sup>11</sup> In one key saying (Luke 20:34–36), Jesus frames the matter of inclusion in and exclusion from the age to come in terms of *resurrection*:

<sup>34</sup>And Jesus said to them, “The people of this age marry and get married. <sup>35</sup>But those who’ve been considered worthy to take part in that age, and in the resurrection from among the dead – they don’t marry, and they don’t get married. And they can’t die anymore. <sup>36</sup>Because they’re like angels, and they’re God’s children. They belong to the resurrection.

By “that age” (οἱ αἰώνι ἐκείνος, v. 35), Jesus means the age to come. A general judgment of humanity is indicated by the phrase “those who’ve been considered worthy to take part in that age,” and the implication is that some *will* be considered worthy, and some *will not* be considered worthy. Looking more closely at this phrase, I realized that my (typical Christian) assumption that “the dead” referred to “the state of death” was *incorrect*. The Greek substantive νεκρός means “dead person” or “corpse,” and “the dead” in the expression “the resurrection from among the dead” (ἡ ἀνάστασις ἡ ἐκ [τῶν] νεκρῶν) is *plural*, referring to the people who are dead.<sup>12</sup> If a person rises from (among) the dead, they come back to life, leaving the rest of the dead people . . . *dead*. Although this teaching does not give any indication of what happens *after* “that age” in the case of those who are *not* considered worthy of rising to participate in it, Jesus does unambiguously paint a picture of a *partial, selective resurrection* for those judged “worthy” at the transition point between this age and the age to come.<sup>13</sup>

Fastening onto the phrase “from the dead,” I was pleased to discover that Paul uses it in a way that is concordant with how Jesus uses it: Paul’s ardent personal hope is that he can “somehow make it to the resurrection from among the dead” (Phil. 3:11). It is no comfort to Paul that he is destined rise from the grave as such – he appears to believe that he will rise to face judgment whether he is destined for eternal life or not.<sup>14</sup> He is hoping to participate in the selective resurrection *to eternal life* that happens at the

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<sup>11</sup> Matt. 7:21–23; 8:11–12; 13:40–43; 22:2–14; 24:45–51; 25:1–13; 25:1–30; 25:31–46; esp. Luke 13:23–30.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. 1 Pet. 4:6, in which “the dead” get the gospel preached to them, and Col. 1:18 and Rev. 1:5, in which Jesus is characterized as “the firstborn (πρωτότοκος) from the dead,” implying that other individuals who are dead will be “born” to resurrection life after him.

<sup>13</sup> You simply can’t have a resurrection “from among the dead” if all the dead are being raised at the same time. My searches of Koine Greek texts have not turned up a single instance of the expression ἐκ [τῶν] νεκρῶν in which a general resurrection or a resurrection to judgment (rather than life) is in view.

<sup>14</sup> Here trusting the characterization of his beliefs in Acts 24:15. Paul never explicitly refers to a resurrection of the unrepentant in his letters.

glorious coming of Jesus (cf. 1 Cor. 15:21–23).<sup>15</sup> Paul’s strong affirmation of resurrection to life for “those who belong to him” on the one hand, and his sketchy assignment of everyone else to “then (comes) the end” (*εἶτα τὸ τέλος*), on the other hand, leaves the question of the ultimate (resurrected?) fate of the unrepentant just about as murky as Jesus leaves it in the Synoptic Gospels.

In John 5:21–29 I found some potential tension with this model of a delayed resurrection for the unrepentant:

<sup>21</sup>Because just as the Father raises the dead, and brings them to life, so the Son also brings to life whoever he wants. . . . <sup>25</sup>I'm telling you very seriously: There's a time<sup>16</sup> coming – and it's here now – when the dead are going to hear the voice of the Son of God. And the ones who've heard are going to live. . . . <sup>28</sup>Don't be shocked by that. Because a time<sup>17</sup> is coming when all those who are in their graves are going to hear his voice, <sup>29</sup>and they're going to come out. Those who've done good things are going to come out for a resurrection of life; those who've done bad things are going to come out for a resurrection of judgment.

On balance, the wording of Luke 20:34–36 seemed clear enough to me to rule out the idea of a single general resurrection, whereas John 5:21–29 did not rule out the idea of a temporally bifurcated resurrection. After all, Jesus doesn't specify in the John passage that all of the dead are going to come out of their tombs at the same moment. He says (1) that they will *all* come out, (2) that the moment<sup>18</sup> for them to start coming out is *right now*,<sup>19</sup> (3) that they will all come out *because they are going to hear his voice*, and (4) that the outcome of the dead being called forth from the tombs is *going to differ*, depending on what individuals have done in their mortal lives.

I learned later that it was simply *not done* in NT scholarship to mix and match materials from the Synoptics, Acts, Paul, and the Gospel of John in the hopes of creating a theologically pleasing synthesis of “what the New Testament teaches.” And I hadn’t yet been exposed to redaction criticism, which would have transformed the words “worthy to take part in that age, and in the resurrection from among the dead” (Luke 20:35) from a sort of brute Bible fact into an intriguing puzzle: Is the M or L version of this Q saying likely to be the more original? What is Luke’s reason for forming it

<sup>15</sup> Cf. also 1 Thess. 4:13–18. Paul says he got his beliefs about the resurrection of believers from Jesus (1 Thess. 4:15). Cf. also the Didache, one of the very earliest Christian books outside the NT, which explicitly affirms a resurrection restricted to the faithful at Christ’s coming (16:6–8).

<sup>16</sup> Lit. "an hour."

<sup>17</sup> Lit. “an hour.”

<sup>18</sup> The normal Greek expression for this idea is ὥρα ("the hour").

<sup>19</sup> The Gospels record three instances of Jesus raising people from the dead: Jairus's daughter (Matt. 9:18–26; Mark 5:21–43; Luke 8:40–56), the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11–17), and his friend Lazarus (John 11:1–45). See also Matt. 27:50–53.

in this particular way? And so on. But for the moment I was a faith-oriented reader seeing what appeared to be a meaningful pattern, and following the scent of a promising alternative to the theologically troublesome model of everlasting torment. Perhaps, I thought, the punishment that lies ahead for those who live a lifetime of unrepentant sin is exclusion from the joy of participation in the resurrected life of the age to come – i.e. exclusion from “eternal life” (*ζωὴν αἰώνιος*, in its most literal sense). It seemed that a sentence of age-long and miserable imprisonment in Hades, the fiery dungeon for the spirits of the unrepentant and unresurrected dead, made better sense not only the words of Jesus in Matt. 25:41 (*τὸ πῦρ τὸ αἰώνιον*) and 25:46 (*κόλασις αἰώνιος*), but also of his famous warning in another place that ends with the words, “you will not get out of there until you have paid the last cent.”<sup>20</sup> Could an age-long-delayed resurrection signal the completion of an “eternal punishment”? If so – that is, if the unrepentant would come forth for resurrection having paid the penalty for their sins through an age-long period of incarceration – then in what sense were they destined to “come forth to a resurrection of judgment” (John 5:29)? Wouldn’t they already have been judged – together with the faithful – at the great world-transition pictured in Daniel 7 and Matt. 25:31–46? Wouldn’t they already have been “assigned their recompense” at “the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Cor. 5:10)? It seemed to me that only one basis for judgment would remain, upon their being granted resurrection: *their conduct in their new, resurrected state*. Would these probationers, these parolees, prove themselves reformed, or would they turn around and immediately re-offend, proving themselves incorrigible?

I carried this unresolved puzzle somewhere in the back of my mind for a time. Then one day it dawned on me as I read Rev. 20:7–10: John intended this to be read as a vision of the *resurrection* of unrepentant humanity and their judgment, along with the devil and his angels, all of them having spent a thousand-year age imprisoned together in the underworld (cf. Matt. 25:41, 46; Isa. 24:21–27:5; Heb. 10:27; Rev. 19:17–20:10).<sup>21</sup> I wrote up this discovery in a paper for the Johannine Literature class I was then taking under professor Gundry at Westmont. I pointed to John’s pre-

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<sup>20</sup> Matt. 5:23–26; Luke 12:57–59; cf. Matt. 18:21–35. This is a strong saying that advocates of everlasting torment must interpret non-literally.

<sup>21</sup> I found out much later that others had come to this insight before me, e.g. J. Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 3 Vols. (Philadelphia: W.W. Woodward, 1811 [1746–48]), 3.863 (on Rev. 20:8); U. Smith, *The Prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing, 1972 [1881]), 749; W. Metzger, “Das Zwischenreich,” in *Auf dem Grunde der Apostel und Propheten. Festschrift Bischof T. Wurm*, ed. M. Loeser (Stuttgart: Quell-Verlag der Evangelische Gesellschaft, 1948), 110–18 at 109.

cise repetition of the phrase ἅχρι τελεσθῆ τὰ χίλια ἔτη, “until the thousand years are finished,” when he described the delay of the resurrection for the “rest of the dead” in 20:5b, after having just used it to characterize the time of Satan’s imprisonment in the abyss in 20:3. I also pointed to the nearly identical phrase ὅταν τελεσθῆ τὰ χίλια ἔτη, “when the thousand years are finished,” which John used to describe Satan’s release *and* his immediate gathering of the hordes of “Gog and Magog,” the legendary evil marauder nations from Ezekiel 38–39. I believed that I had found an interpretative paradigm that tied together many difficult-to-understand and difficult-to-reconcile eschatological prophecies and teachings of the Bible into one meaningful pattern. The search for an overarching and unifying story of “the end” had effectively prompted me to read individual passages *more* attentively on their own terms, rather than manhandling them in order to make them fit together with others. In my 1992 monograph, *After the Thousand Years*, I made the case by focusing strictly on the literary functioning of Rev. 20:1–15 in the context of Revelation as a whole. Last year I published another monograph, *The End of the Unrepentant*,<sup>22</sup> this time ranging throughout the scriptures from Genesis to Revelation, and proving that most unstylish thing for a scholar to prove: that all the eschatological scriptures can be read together, resulting in a coherent and theologically meaningful synthesis.

### Webb Mealy and Greg Beale on the Apocalypse and Biblical Eschatology

It will be useful to observe the dialogue between Greg Beale’s and my approaches to the millennium in Revelation, because our differences expose the presence of different schools with different fundamental ways of thinking about the task of interpreting Revelation. On Beale’s approach, which he shares with amillennialism in general, the first and controlling question is how to interpret Rev. 20:1–10 so that it makes sense in the light of the overall pattern of NT eschatology outside of the Book of Revelation. On my approach, which I share with premillennialism in general, the first and controlling question is how Rev. 20:1–10 functions organically within a larger vision narrative with deep intertextual connections to the visions of the OT literary prophets.

Let us begin with some criticisms that Beale puts forward in his review of *After the Thousand Years*, together with some responses.

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<sup>22</sup> *The End of the Unrepentant* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2013).

### *On the Phrase “After the Thousand Years”*

Beale argues that John’s plotting of the delayed resurrection of the “rest of the dead” (20:5b) at the same time as the release of Satan and the attack of Gog and Magog (20:7–10) does not force the reader to conclude that Gog and Magog are the “rest of the dead” who have returned to life. After all, he says, the resurrection and last judgment of 20:13–15 also happens after the thousand years. Why can’t that be the fulfillment of 20:5b?<sup>23</sup> True enough, it does indeed fulfill 20:5b. But according to my analysis, the vision of Rev. 20:13–15 pictures the fulfillment of Rev. 20:5b *for a second time*, in a judicial setting, just as the vision of Rev. 20:4–6 pictures the fulfillment of the repeated promises to the holy ones that they will have victory with Christ at his coming *for a second time*, in a judicial setting, after the vision of Rev. 19:11–21 has pictured the fulfillment of those promises in a battle setting. Just as I demonstrate in the case of many other visions in Revelation, these are stereoscopic presentations of eschatological realities. In any case, my point about the almost immediate fulfillment of Rev. 20:5b in vv. 7–9 does not arise from the temporal coincidence between the release of Satan and the predicted resurrection of “the rest of the dead”: it arises from John’s pointed way of *expressing* the temporal plotting. By this point in *After the Thousand Years*, I have already adduced an extensive sequence of precedents in Revelation for this literary technique, by which John constantly guides the readers in how to make sense of the complex vision-narrative as it unfolds. Close verbal correspondences in Revelation repeatedly have the function of telling the reader, “Heads up: this is something that I saw or spoke about earlier.” Beale’s criticism that I “insist on an overly precise time scheme”<sup>24</sup> misses the force of the argument.

### *On the Parallels Between Revelation 20 and Isaiah 24–27*

Beale takes exception to my appeal to Isa. 24:21–23, and its prediction,

On that day the LORD will punish the host of heaven in heaven, and on earth the kings of the earth. They will be gathered together like prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished.

He counters that other interpreters “see that Satan, his angels, and their earthly representatives underwent inaugurated judgment at the cross and resurrection, and will experience consummated judgment at the eschaton.”<sup>25</sup> But trying to interpret Isaiah 24 as a prophecy of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ seems like a very rocky row to hoe. Isaiah proph-

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<sup>23</sup> Beale, “Review,” 235.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 236.

esies the painful demise of all but a tiny remnant of humanity, on an earth devastated by withering drought and human pollution (Isa. 24:1–6, 13; cf. Rev. 11:18c). The physical structure of the earth itself seems to collapse (Isa. 24:1, 17–19; cf. Rev. 6:12–15; 11:16–19; 16:20; 20:11). John presents these radical world traumas in connection with the coming Parousia of God and Jesus Christ, not as having happened in the past, in connection with the cross and resurrection.

I observe in *After the Thousand Years* that Rev. 19:11–20:10 parallels Isa. 24:1–27:5 in six significant ways.<sup>26</sup> Beale does not deny the parallels, but merely claims that “the parallels also fit easily into other schemes.”<sup>27</sup> What is wanted following such a claim is an exposition of the parallels that is more plausible, more elegant, and more responsive to the details of the texts under consideration. But Beale’s actual citations of Isaiah 24–27 in his Revelation commentary make it clear that the *connected story* of the end in the Isaiah Apocalypse is not on his radar screen at all.<sup>28</sup> In my view, he has missed one of the most dramatic prophetic parallels in Revelation.

#### *On Ezekiel 38 and 39 as Prophetic Parallels to Rev. 20:7–10 and 19:11–21*

Beale argues that the prophecies of Ezekiel 38 and 39 appear to refer to one single eschatological battle at the transition point to the age of renewal; ergo the battle of Rev. 20:7–10 recapitulates the battle of Rev. 19:11–21, and is to be understood as occurring at the Parousia, at the transition to the coming age. I make it clear in *After the Thousand Years* that there is sufficient evidence in the text of Revelation itself for seeing resurrection and judgment in Rev. 20:7–10, and that my argument does not even slightly depend on the relationship between Ezekiel 38 and 39.<sup>29</sup> However, since other reviewers have also disputed my claim that Ezekiel 38 and 39 prophesy two *different* battles (at least in John’s eyes), this criticism deserves some careful attention.

The great battle and defeat of the nations in Ezekiel 39 brings back the context of exile and desolation from Ezekiel 36. As can be seen from the passages below, God’s rescue of Israel from Gog and his marauding hosts brings to an end a period of shame and punishment, and inaugurates a period of security and peace.

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<sup>26</sup> Mealy, *After the Thousand Years*, 100–101.

<sup>27</sup> Beale, “Review,” 237.

<sup>28</sup> The same observation goes for Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament*.

<sup>29</sup> See Mealy, *After the Thousand Years*, 130 fn. 2.

## Ezekiel 36

<sup>6</sup>Thus says the Lord GOD: I am speaking in my jealous wrath, because you [the mountains of Israel] have suffered the insults of the nations; <sup>7</sup>therefore thus says the Lord GOD: I swear that the nations that are all around you shall themselves suffer insults. <sup>8</sup>But you, O mountains of Israel, shall shoot out your branches, and yield your fruit to my people Israel; for **they shall soon come home**. <sup>9</sup>See now, I am for you; I will turn to you, and you shall be tilled and sown; <sup>10</sup>and I will multiply your population, the whole house of Israel, all of it; **the towns shall be inhabited and the waste places rebuilt**; <sup>11</sup>and I will multiply human beings and animals upon you. They shall increase and be fruitful; and I will cause you to be inhabited as in your former times, and will do more good to you than ever before. Then you shall know that I am the LORD.

## Ezekiel 39

<sup>21</sup>I will display my glory among the nations; and all the nations shall see my judgment that I have executed, and my hand that I have laid on them. <sup>22</sup>**The house of Israel shall know that I am the LORD their God, from that day forward.** <sup>23</sup>And the nations shall know that the house of **Israel went into captivity for their iniquity....**

<sup>25</sup>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.

<sup>26</sup>**They shall forget their shame, and all the treachery they have practiced against me, when they live securely in their land with no one to make them afraid,** <sup>27</sup>when I have brought them back from the peoples and gathered them from their enemies' lands.... <sup>28</sup>Then they shall know that I am the LORD their God because I sent them into exile among the nations, and then **gathered them into their own land.**

Set alongside this common context, the prophecy against Gog in Ezek. 38:1–16 simply pops out to an attentive reader. It refers to the regathering of the exiles as an event *far in the past*, repeatedly setting a context in which the recently-promised state of blessing and safety from enemies has been in effect for an indefinitely long period:

<sup>8</sup>After many days you shall be summoned;<sup>30</sup> in the latter years you [Gog] shall go against a land restored from war, a land where people were gathered from many nations on the mountains of Israel, which had long lain waste; its people were brought out from the nations and now are living in safety, all of them.

<sup>11</sup>You [Gog] will say, ‘I will go up against the land of unwalled villages; I will fall upon the quiet people who live in safety, all of them living without walls, and having no bars or gates’; <sup>12</sup>to seize spoil and carry off plunder; to assail the waste places that are now inhabited, and the people who were gathered from the nations, who are acquiring cattle and goods, who live at the centre of the earth.

<sup>14</sup>Thus says the Lord GOD: On that day when my people Israel are living securely, you will rouse yourself. . . . <sup>16</sup>In the latter days I will bring you against my land, so that the nations may know me, when through you, O Gog, I display my holiness before their eyes.

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<sup>30</sup> NRSV has translated נִזְבֵּן as “you shall be mustered.”

There is no reference in these three context-setting statements to the shame of Israel, to the iniquity of Israel, or to God sending Israel into exile as a punishment for their sins. In fact, there are ten or more distinctive themes and terms that combine to create a tight contextual relationship between Ezekiel 36–37 and Ezekiel 39. Not one of these is paralleled in Ezek. 38:1–16. For example:

- Israel “will know that I am the LORD” (36:11; 39:22, 28)
- God will act to protect his name from being profaned (36:20–23; 39:7)
- The people of Israel went into exile because of their sins (36:17–19; 39:23–24)
- God will restore the fortunes of Israel (36:36–38; 39:25)
- God will give the Spirit to Israel (36:26–27; 37:14; 39:29)
- “I have spoken!” (36:36; 39:5, cf. 39:7)
- “I will do it”/“I have done it” (36:22, 27, 32, 36; 37:14, 22; 39:21, 24)
- “The House of Israel” (36:10, 17, 21, 22, 32, 37; 37:11, 16; 39:12, 22, 23, 25, 29)
- Israel’s “iniquity” (36:31, 33; 39:23)
- Israel’s “shame” (36:31–32; 39:26)

Beale takes note of some of this. He says,

The concluding mention of restoration at the end of Ezekiel 39 is a flashback to other hopes recorded earlier in Ezekiel 34–37. Such kinds of flashbacks are characteristic of Ezekiel and prophetic literature. Ezek. 39:1–8ff. is most naturally taken as a continuation of the narrative in chapter 38. There is no break between the two chapters to hint at the kind of temporal dislocation that Mealy wants to see.<sup>31</sup>

Beale makes a fair point here. Then again, it is quite possible that John understood Ezek. 38:17 as the key contextual divider within the broader section, Ezek. 38:1–39:29.

<sup>17</sup>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?

Verse 17, speaking in the voice of God, mysteriously raises the question of how the prophetic oracle just delivered in vv. 1–16 – with its central idea of outlying nations massing for attack in the context of an established messianic<sup>32</sup> age of peace – relates to an older, traditional prophetic theme. More precisely, it asks “Gog,” the target of the oracle, whether he is the entity referred to in the older, traditional prophecies. The traditional prophetic theme envisions an attack by many nations at the great transition point when God relents from judging and punishing Jerusalem, finally

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<sup>31</sup> Beale, “Review,” 240–41.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. the immediately preceding section, Ezek. 37:23–28.

turning to forgive, accept, and protect Jerusalem.<sup>33</sup> This transition involves God's miraculous defeat of a host of attacking nations, and leads to an age of renewal and permanent peace for the people of God. The oracle of Ezek. 38:1–16 assumes conditions well into the future from that hoped-for transition, conditions of an age of established peace in which defenses such as city walls are no longer even needed (e.g. 38:11). *The oracle in Ezek. 38:1–16 does not match the familiar paradigm.* However, the one that follows, Ezek. 39:1–29 (or possibly 38:18–39:29), sits comfortably within that paradigm.

When faced with this kind of puzzle, readers of Ezekiel *as scripture* have two options.<sup>34</sup> We can choose to overlook the unique elements of the “outlier” prophecies and lump them together with the mainstream ones, essentially deciding that the scriptures fit into an overall pattern better when we stop paying such close attention to the details. This could be caricatured as the “bed of Procrustes” approach. Alternatively, we can pay even closer attention to the details in the hope of finding that everything in the scriptures is there for a reason. This approach seems far more in tune with the mind-set of John, a most passionate and astute reader of the prophetic scriptures. I advocate for the latter approach.

Given that many earlier prophecies predicted a universal attack on a Jerusalem beleaguered and suffering under divine chastisement, *can we find a vision that (1) purports to be from prophet of “former days,” and (2) matches Ezekiel 38 in predicting a universal attack in the non-standard context of a future age of peace and blessing under God’s rule?* We can, and dramatically so, if we are willing to imitate John in assuming that the visions of the OT prophets are to be read together, so that they can reveal complementary angles on the same eschatological realities. Note the following comparisons.

Isaiah 24:21–23; 26:10–11

Ezekiel 38:8, 17–19

<sup>21</sup> On that day the LORD will punish the host of heaven in heaven, and on earth the kings of the earth.

<sup>22</sup> They will be gathered together like prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be

<sup>8</sup> After many days you shall be summoned;

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<sup>33</sup> E.g. Pss. 79:1–13; 110:5–6; Isa. 13:1–14:2; 17:1–14; 34; Jer. 10:10, 22–25; 25:15–38; Ezekiel 36; Joel 3; Habakkuk 3; Zephaniah 3; Zechariah 14.

<sup>34</sup> Those without a prior commitment to treat the text as a unity have more options – such as theorizing that the text has been compiled from disparate sources and reshaped by one or more variously competent editors.

summoned.<sup>35</sup>  
 [Heb. וּמְרַב יְמִים יִפְקֹדוּ]  
<sup>23</sup> Then the moon will be abashed,  
 and the sun ashamed;  
 for the LORD of hosts will reign  
 on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,  
 and before his elders he will manifest his  
 glory.

...  
<sup>10</sup> If favor is shown to the wicked,  
 they do not learn righteousness;  
 in the land of uprightness they deal per-  
 versely  
 and do not see the majesty of the LORD.  
<sup>11</sup> O LORD, your hand is lifted up,  
 but they do not see it.  
 Let them see your zeal for your people  
 [Heb. קָנָתָֽעַם], and be ashamed.  
 Let the fire [Heb. שָׁאָלָֽא]<sup>36</sup> for your  
 adversaries consume them.

[Heb. מִימִים רַבִּים תִּפְקֹד]  
 in the latter years you [Gog] shall go  
 against a land restored from war. . . .

<sup>17</sup> Thus says the Lord GOD: Are you he of  
 whom I spoke in former days by my serv-  
 ants the prophets of Israel, who in those  
 days prophesied for years that I would  
 bring you against them? <sup>18</sup>On that day,  
 when Gog comes against the land of Israel,  
 says the Lord GOD, my wrath [Heb. אָפִי]  
 shall be aroused. <sup>19</sup>For in my jealousy  
 [Heb. קָנָתִי] and in my blazing wrath  
 [Heb. אָשָׁעָרְתִּי] I declare. . . .

The insane and immediately repulsed attack by God's enemies described in Isa. 26:10–11 comes *after* the complete environmental collapse of the earth and the demise of humanity (24:1–20), *after* the inauguration of the universal Kingdom of God on Mt. Zion (24:23; 25:6–10), *after* the promise that there will be no more death for the participants in that kingdom (25:7). I propose that John was intimately familiar with the texts of both Isaiah 26 and Ezekiel 38, and that he read them both as prophesying the resurrection and judgment of the unrepentant enemies of God and his people. I also propose that he composed his vision of the millennium and its aftermath with the intention of pointing his readers to these two passages as key prophetic background to his vision.

It is convenient that when I am talking about the Book of Revelation in a scholarly context, I can hide my own unstylish scripture-harmonizing tendencies behind those of John, the consummate melder-together of OT prophetic traditions and language. The truth is that talking about the scriptures – including scholarly talking – is a social game. It is a game with conventions, and if you want to be accepted as a bona fide player of the game, you have to follow those conventions – or, like Professor Gundry, show that you have enough independence and toughness to do things your own way and weather the social consequences. Often it is not just how you

<sup>35</sup> NRSV has “summoned” here, masking the presence in both passages of the verb תִּפְקֹד.

<sup>36</sup> As a non-expert in Hebrew, I can't tell if John would have been tempted – based on the parallel in Ezek. 38:18 – to understand this phrase as “Wrath of fire . . .” rather than (or in addition to) the more normal, “Indeed, fire. . . .”

play, but your opinions themselves, that are stylish or unstylish, *de rigueur* or *outré*. I suspect that in Beale's case, the Augustinian and Reformed view of amillennialism counts as the obligatory eschatological paradigm.

### Beale on Revelation 20:1–10

We come now to the matter of how Beale deals with the texts of Revelation 20 in his promotion of what he prefers to call “inaugurated millennialism.” Beale begins his exposition of Rev. 20:1–10 with these markedly unenthusiastic words:

The only hope of obtaining any clarity about this segment is to interpret it primarily in the light of its closest parallels elsewhere in the Apocalypse and, secondarily, other parallels in the NT and OT.<sup>37</sup>

The passage, he implies, does not make any sense on its own. Apparently this is because (1) on a common-sense reading Rev. 20:1–10 appears to interpose a thousand-year gap between the resurrection of the holy ones and the resurrection of the unrepentant, (2) the rest of the NT knows of no such gap, and (3) we (are supposed to) know that scripture *always* agrees with itself. Beale is going to have to help the passage to make sense – which is to say, help it conform to what he thinks the rest of the NT says. He puts forward two central interpretative proposals, which together assist Rev. 20:1–6 in coming into alignment with the majority NT view. Let us look at them in turn, and consider their consequences, both for the internal literary workings of Revelation, and for Revelation's relationship with the rest of the NT.

#### *Beale's First Proposal: Satan is Only Bound (20:1–3) in a Narrow and Particular Sense*

Since he wants to see the thousand years as co-extensive in time with the current age, Beale, like many before him, has to find a sense in which Satan is *currently* bound, despite the fact that he is plainly regarded as present and active in the sphere of human beings not only in Revelation itself, but also in many NT texts.<sup>38</sup> In other words, Beale has to generate one kind of disharmony in order to relieve another. He attempts to negotiate this disharmony by ignoring the forceful visual drama of the Rev. 20:1–3 narrative, in which an angel (1) *grabs* Satan, (2) *chains* him, *throws him into*

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<sup>37</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 972.

<sup>38</sup> E.g. Acts 5:3; 1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Cor. 4:3–4; 11:14; Eph. 6:10–12; 1 Thess. 2:18; 2 Tim. 2:26; 1 Pet. 5:8–9; 1 John 4:4; 5:19; Rev. 2:10, 13; 12:9–18.

*the abyss*, (3) *locks it*, and (4) *seals it* over him. Instead, he focuses in tightly on two textual facts: (1) the stated reason for Satan's imprisonment is so that he will be prevented from deceiving the nations (20:2), and (2) the stated result of his release in vv. 7–9 is that he deceives the nations into mounting an all-out attack on the camp of the holy ones. Therefore, Beale proposes, Satan is only bound in relation to his ability to deceive the nations into mounting a total war on the holy ones. We are supposed to accept the idea that being locked and chained in the prison of the abyss with a seal over him does not prevent Satan from deceiving people in general and persecuting and killing Christians, as long as the deception and war against Christians is not on a universally-coordinated and worldwide scale. This is a frankly unattractive solution, but maybe we can live with it, if it helps to make better sense of the whole Revelation + NT Gestalt than the alternative. Let us see what he does with it. He says,

Most commentators agree that the beast ascends from the abyss of 11:7 directly before Christ's second coming. This ascent should probably be identified with Satan's ascent from the abyss in 20:3b, 7, which further confirms that Satan's ascent is prior to the final coming of Christ.<sup>39</sup>

This reading is unfortunately going to result in an out-and-out contradiction with the textual data of Rev. 20:4–5. Let's assume, for the sake of argument, Beale's proposal that 20:4–5 pictures the vindication and reign of the martyred holy ones in heaven throughout the current age,<sup>40</sup> during the period *before* the beast rises from the abyss. When we are introduced to the beast in Revelation 13, we find that his career as Satan's agent begins in earnest when he rises from the abyss, convinces "the whole earth" (13:3–4) to worship Satan, and proceeds "to make war on the holy ones and to conquer them" (13:7; cf. Dan. 7:21–22). There is, in other words, every reason to imagine that the brief period following the beast's ascent from the abyss is to be the period not only of Satan's *greatest and last deception of the whole world*, but also of Satan's *greatest and last success in gathering the whole world to make war on the holy ones* (e.g. 16:12–16). But given that the period of Satan's imprisonment corresponds to the period of the reign of the holy ones in 20:4–6, this reading leads us to the conclusion that the holy ones previously said to have been killed by the beast

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 987.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 991, 995–1007. We must, for these purposes, overlook not only the prima facie evidence that the verb ἐζησαν ("they came to life") refers to physical resurrection, but also the more or less complete clash between the passive picture of the slain martyrs in 6:11, who are told "to rest a little while longer until the full number both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were to be killed as they themselves had been killed," and the active picture of the slain holy ones in 20:4–6 who come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years.

(20:4) have to the contrary lived, died, and been resurrected to heavenly life and rulership *before the beast ever comes on the scene to attack them*. The narrative puzzle pieces do not fit together here at all. It appears that Beale's solution to this difficulty is to maintain that in some sense the beast's three-and-a-half year career *also* lasts the whole of the church age. He expands rather vaguely upon the statement quoted above:

Just as the beast represents Satan's authority throughout history in 13:1–2 (cf. 12:3), so the beast's ascent at the end of history can be spoken of in 20:3, 7 as the dragon's ascent because the former again represents the latter.<sup>41</sup>

Beale seems to have a notion of a long and low-intensity period of activity in which the beast and Satan are both in some sense present, but in some sense simultaneously imprisoned in the abyss. He is mapping the three and a half years of Rev. 12:6, 14; 13:5 (cf. "time, times, and half a time," Dan. 7:25; 12:7) onto the whole current age of the church, reserving a tiny sliver of time at the end of the age for the period of total deception and total war. There is a simple problem with this idea of a long (but figuratively short) cold war capped off by a (literally) short hot war: there is nothing whatever in the text of Revelation to hang it on. As John hears in Rev. 12:12, "Woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, knowing that his time is short!" Does this sound like a long period of low-intensity activity that could be metaphorically characterized as imprisonment in chains? Starting with 12:13, everything in the text signals us that Satan is going to be *hyperactive* from now on – both in attacking the holy ones, and in deceiving and gathering the unrepentant together to destroy the holy ones. Satan's "short time" mentioned in 12:12 is soon thereafter made equivalent to the three and a half years of the beast's career (cf. 12:13–13:5), and the beast, working with the authority of Satan and the assistance of the false prophet, is plainly given authority to make all-out war on the saints for that entire period (13:7–8).

Beale's prior assumptions as to what the text of 20:1–10 must mean have forced him to put forward an exposition of John's visions that ranges between the dubious and the completely impossible. He is forced to rely on cloudy and textually unsupported concepts in order to keep the text from contradicting itself. The fact that he is unable to form a clear exposition is a sure sign that something is wrong with the assumptions he is bringing to the text.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 987.

*Beale's Second Proposal: The Fall of Satan from Heaven (Rev. 12:7–12) is to be Equated with the Imprisonment of Satan in the Abyss (Rev. 20:1–3)*

In Revelation, the surface story of the defeat and demise of Satan has three key events separating four conditions or states of activity:

Condition 1: Satan has access to heaven, and “accuses our brothers and sisters day and night before our God” (Rev. 12:10).

Event 1: Satan and his angels rebel in heaven, and are cast out of heaven to earth (12:7).

Condition 2: Satan is restricted to the earth, and goes about in a fury to persecute those who belong to God, characterized as “the woman” and her “other children” (12:13–17 and implicitly chs. 13–19). In this condition, Satan “knows that his time is short” (12:12).

Event 2: Satan gathers the kings of the earth and their armies to a great battle against Jesus Christ at his coming, and his armies are totally defeated. Satan is captured and expelled from the earth (16:13–14; 19:11–20:2).

Condition 3: Satan is powerless to deceive the nations, being chained up in the prison of the abyss for a thousand years (20:3).

Event 3: Satan, released from the prison of the abyss, leads a great horde against the camp of the holy ones. He and his horde are wiped out, and he is cast into the lake of fire (20:9–10).

Condition 4: Satan is in the lake of fire forever (20:10).

This sequence will not work for Beale as it stands, without some kind of telescoping. In order to have the resurrection and judgment of Rev. 20:11–15 occur at the Parousia of Christ, he needs the battle of Rev. 20:7–10 to be identical with the battle of Rev. 19:11–21. His solution is to read the expulsion from heaven (Event 1) as identical with the imprisonment of Rev. 20:1–3. This splits the elements of Event 2 above (final battle; capture and imprisonment of Satan) into two pieces that are no longer temporally connected. This isn't impossible on the face of it; let's see where it leads when we take it to Revelation 12. Beale says,

The parallels between chs. 12 and 20, though the chapters are not identical at every point, suggest that they depict the same events and mutually interpret one another.<sup>42</sup>

He goes on to set up a table of correspondences. Rather than presenting his table, here is mine:

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 992.

Revelation 12:1–17		Revelation 20:1–3
Who	The devil, Michael and his angels	The devil, an angel from heaven
What	A battle and defeat of Satan. Expulsion from heaven to earth.	A capture, chaining, and imprisonment of Satan in the abyss.
Where	In heaven, then on earth.	Under heaven (“I saw an angel coming down from heaven with a chain,” 20:1), then under the earth (in the abyss, 20:3).
When	“A short time” (12:12) before the Parousia of Christ, which appears to be the 3½ year period referred to in 12:6, 14; 13:5.	“A thousand years” before the battle of 20:7–10.
Why	Satan appears to be expelled so that he will not be able to accuse the holy ones any longer (12:10). Or because he has rebelled in heaven (12:7–8).	So that he will no longer be able to deceive the nations (20:3).
What Results	Satan goes off to make war against the holy ones on earth (12:12–17) <sup>43</sup>	Satan sits in chains in the abyss (20:3).

It seems clear enough that if we confine ourselves to what the text actually says, the only thing that is the same between these two columns is Satan’s involvement. And that is because the two passages narrate *successive stages* in the story of his ultimate defeat. There is no way to expect a reader to equate two episodes that are narrated with markedly different, seemingly incompatible, and independently meaningful characterizations of the “who,” “what,” “where,” “when,” “why,” and “what results” of those two events – which is to say, each and every one of the elements that could potentially have signaled that we’re now seeing an additional viewpoint on something we’ve already seen. In other words, unless an interpreter has become committed a priori to the idea that these two episodes *must* be identical, it will remain impossible to conclude from the actual verbal data that they are intended to be taken as identical. Beale’s need to resort to this highly implausible equation goes a long way towards disproving his amillennial theorem.

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<sup>43</sup> Beale (*Ibid.*) attempts to draw a parallel between the reign of the saints in 12:11 and 20:4–5. This, however, is not a verbal parallel. The saints win the battle with Satan by dying for their faith. They are pictured in 12:11 as soldiers fighting for their King, not kings ruling. The natural reading is to take the announcement of the coming of God’s kingdom and the authority of his Messiah as proleptic (12:10; cf. 5:9–10; 11:18; 19:6–8), since the implication is that Satan is losing the war, and only a short while remains before he is defeated altogether (12:11–13).

*General Remarks on Beale's Commentary on Rev. 20:1–10*

Beale has been praised for mounting the best presentation of amillennialism that has appeared to date.<sup>44</sup> But something is not right here. In trials, the judge often gives the jury this instruction:

The production of weaker evidence, when stronger might have been produced, lays the producer open to the suspicion that the stronger evidence would have been to his prejudice.

Since Beale believes that Revelation is the work of an inspired and literally gifted prophet, he has the opportunity to exposit the text of Rev. 20:1–10 step by step, showing how the narrative works, how it achieves the sense of an unfolding story. He declines to do this. In his section on Rev. 20:1–10, he instead spends nearly seventy pages in a dense and vigorous defensive battle with nearly all known criticisms of amillennialism. In all those dozens of hard-fought pages, he never steps out of his armor long enough to offer a simple, straightforward, and positive exposition of the text as a narrative. This amounts to a tacit admission that, on the assumption of amillennialism, this inspired text of Scripture does not make sense as it stands.

### Concluding Remarks

What is at stake here? Why are people of the Christian faith such as Greg Beale and me so obsessed with making all scriptures agree with one another that we are sometimes tempted to disfigure the passage that fails to conform to the pattern we think we see in the others? I can think of one reason at least: we want to believe that God has chosen to speak to us in the scriptures, and we want to believe that God is the One who holds the key to the meaning of everything. We resist contradictions in Scripture because it would be nightmarish if God's words to us were contradictory. I am not denying that, in addition to our desire, we have rational reasons for believing that God is true and that God has spoken to us in the scriptures. But it is the *wanting* that we have to be careful of, because we know that it sometimes outstrips our patience as students of God, sometimes outstrips our intellectual humility, sometimes outstrips our faith. And it does indeed require an exercise of *faith* to apply our intellect with equal consistency and openness to questions in which some preferred belief seems to hang in the balance.

To admit to the existence of this kind of challenge is to open a helpful way of approaching the questions with which we started. The conscien-

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<sup>44</sup> For example, see A.B. Luter's review in *JETS* 43.2 (2000): 329–31 at 330.

tious Christian theologian, no less than the Bible scholar, is always striving towards a deeper, and more refined, understanding both of the Bible's individual theological voices and the Bible's chorus of theological voices. Can such a process of understanding and refinement, in the words of Professor Gundry, really form a "partnership of equals" with the systematic theology project, which strives to form the broadest possible synthesis of Christian faith? From my perspective, the flow of information always has to be from the specific and revelatory to the general and synthesizing. Thus, whereas (at least for theologians who regard Scripture as revelatory) systematic theology ought to include the insights of biblical exegesis and biblical theology within its hermeneutical circle, biblical theology on the other hand ought to resist the tendency to adjust its understanding of the individual theological thinkers within the scriptures by reference to an *a priori* assumption that they all embraced the same "big picture." We may *want* individual biblical writers to show evidence of knowing everything that (we think) we know, but none of them ever made a commitment to satisfy us in that way. And we do violence to them when we fall into the temptation of helping them to help us in our quest for a pleasing synthesis of "biblical doctrine" or Christian belief. The unique value of each biblical writer's contribution to the body of revelation lies in the fact that it is *their* contribution. Each writer's take on God and the faith is God-breathed, edifying, revelatory, incisive, and authoritative for the faithful (2 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 4:12; 1 Pet. 1:19-21). And for all that, it is limited, partial (in both senses), and temporary (1 Cor. 13:12). The challenge is to hold the two sides of this paradox with equanimity, which requires of us humility, faith, and breadth of mind – three characteristics that I am thankful to have had modeled for me by my friend and mentor Bob Gundry.