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# Hermeneutical Challenges for a Premillennial Interpretation of Revelation 20

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There are few, if any, passages of Scripture whose interpretation has been more intensely debated than the twentieth chapter of Revelation. In this chapter, we find the only explicit scriptural reference to a one thousand year reign of Christ with his saints. While there are many competing views regarding the correct interpretation of Revelation 20, the so-called 'premillennial' interpretation seems to be the most popular interpretation within evangelical circles. The premillennial view suggests that the binding of Satan in vv. 1–3, as well as the reign of Christ with his saints in vv. 4–6, are future events to be realized subsequent to the bodily return of Christ to earth. Moreover, on the basis of vv. 4–6, the premillennial interpretation maintains that upon Christ's return he will raise departed saints with glorified, resurrection bodies and they will reign with him on earth for one thousand years.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation has many able defenders both past and present and is considered a theologically acceptable interpretation for evangelical Christians.

The premillennial interpretation, however, is not without serious difficulties. More significantly in our estimation, criticism of the premillennial interpretation has often ignored some of the most significant objections and instead has focused on anomalies that might be considered peculiar or odd. For example, a major criticism of the premillennial position is that in the millennium there will be both glorified, resurrected bodies and non-glorified, natural bodies dwelling on the earth at the same time.<sup>2</sup> Now, while this indeed may be considered

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- 1 Some premillennial interpreters view this as a literal one thousand year period, while others view it as symbolizing a long, complete period of time. See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1112, 1131; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 1220; Craig A. Blaising, 'Premillennialism', in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, edited by Stanley N. Gundry and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 226; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 356–59.
  - 2 Blomberg offers 'two very pointed challenges to premillennialism' which include the following: 'First, is not a return to earth to live in a wonderful but still imperfect world a huge anticlimax for those who have already died and gone to heaven? Second, is

strange and therefore unlikely, the strangeness of a position does not necessarily make it unbiblical or incorrect. Furthermore, premillennial interpreters have offered reasonable explanations of such difficulties. It is our position that such arguments should not be offered as compelling reasons against the premillennial view.

In what follows, we seek to demonstrate that the traditional premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20, particularly vv. 4–6, has implications that are logically exclusive or contradictory with the most straightforward interpretation of clearer passages in the New Testament. First, we will bring to the surface four implications of the traditional premillennial interpretation, after which we will highlight multiple passages in the New Testament that appear to be mutually exclusive with those implications. We will then suggest two hermeneutical principles for harmonizing inconsistent interpretations, using James 2 and Romans 3 as examples. Finally, we conclude that because we have a much higher degree of interpretive confidence in the texts that logically preclude the traditional premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20, such an interpretation should be rejected in favour of an alternative view.

## I. Four implications of the traditional premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20

It seems that the traditional premillennial exegesis of Revelation 20 necessarily implies at least four corollary commitments. That the following commitments are implied by a premillennial exegesis of this passage is agreed upon explicitly or implicitly by virtually all traditional premillennial interpreters.<sup>3</sup> Because these commitments necessarily result from a coherent premillennial exegesis, any arguments weighing against these implied commitments will also count as arguments against the premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20.

First, from a premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20 it follows that the

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not the notion of people with glorified, resurrected bodies mixing together with the unbelievers still alive at the parousia, still in their old sin-prone bodies, more the stuff of science fiction than of anything credible?' (Craig L. Blomberg, 'Posttribulationism of the New Testament: Leaving "Left Behind" Behind', in *A Case for Historical Premillennialism: An Alternative to 'Left Behind' Eschatology*, edited by Craig L. Blomberg and Sung Wook Chung [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009], 85). We contend that such criticisms of premillennialism are hardly 'pointed challenges' but represent some of the weaker challenges. Blaising notes, 'Amillennial and postmillennial rejections of premillennialism traditionally have had more to do with a preunderstanding of what is "proper," "fitting," or "plausible" in relation to their traditional expectations about eternal life than with any specific biblical teaching contradicting the premillennial coming of Christ' ('Premillennialism', 160).

3 It is important to remember that throughout this essay, we are addressing the *traditional* premillennial view (whether specifically identified or not). We acknowledge that some premillennialists will not affirm all of the following implications but such alternate views are not what most people acknowledge as 'the premillennial view'.

present earth will endure far beyond the return of Christ.<sup>4</sup> Life during the millennium will be better than it is now, but it is still not the perfected state. This is because the renewal of the earth does not occur until after the thousand years has ended. Furthermore, we are explicitly told in Revelation 21 that when the heavens and earth are renewed, sin and death will be no more. Since both sin and death are present in the millennium, it is very difficult to see how it could take place on the renewed earth. Thus, premillennial interpreters are committed to believing that the present earth will endure past Christ's return.

Second, it follows from the premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20 that unbelievers will endure beyond Christ's return without being judged.<sup>5</sup> This applies not only to those unbelievers present on earth when Christ returns, but also to the unrighteous dead in Hades. According to the premillennial view of Revelation 20, neither group of unbelievers are judged at the return of Christ, and therefore, both groups continue to exist un-judged far beyond Christ's return. This commitment needs little defense because it is simply an implicit aspect of the premillennial view. However, we can buttress this commitment by pointing to the fact that Revelation 20 places the so-called great judgment after the millennium (vv. 7, 11–15), which indicates that unbelievers must be present during the thousand year reign of Christ with his saints.

Third, a premillennial exegesis of Revelation 20 implies that individuals in natural, perishable bodies will endure past the return of Christ and inhabit the earth during the millennium.<sup>6</sup> This is necessitated by a premillennial exegesis because of the rebellion mentioned at the end of the millennium (vv. 7–9). If there are only saints in glorified, resurrection bodies, then it becomes theologically difficult to explain how such a rebellion could occur. Indeed, it seems that such a rebellion would introduce a 'second fall' into redemptive history: a fall of saints in glorified, resurrection bodies. Thus, for the premillennial interpreter, individuals in natural bodies must be present during the millennium and consequently, natural bodies must endure beyond the return of Christ.

Finally, it follows from the premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20 that

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4 This is either stated explicitly or clearly implied in Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1127–31; Blaising, 'Premillennialism', 192–227; Russell Moore, 'Personal and Cosmic Eschatology', in *A Theology for the Church*, edited by Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 910–12; George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 263–65, 272.

5 So Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1112, 1142; Moore, 'Personal and Cosmic Eschatology', 911; Ladd, *Revelation*, 268. Grudem explains that *after* the millennium 'Christ will then raise from the dead all the unbelievers who have died throughout history, and they will stand before him for final judgment' (1112). Similarly, he writes, 'The final judgment will occur after the millennium' (1142).

6 So Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 702–03; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1120, 1127–31; Moore, 'Personal and Cosmic Eschatology', 911; Blaising, 'Premillennialism', 200–04; Ladd, *Revelation*, 268; Mounce, *Revelation*, 361. Based on his interpretation of Isa. 65:20, Grudem maintains that 'death and sin will still be present' during the millennium (1127).

there will be an offer for individuals to repent and receive salvation after the return of Christ.<sup>7</sup> Premillennial interpreters seem to be firmly committed to this idea, and for good reason. As mentioned above, during the millennium the earth will be inhabited by individuals in natural bodies who endure past the return of Christ. Those in perishable bodies, however, will continue to reproduce and have children during the millennium. Thus, it seems that an offer of salvation beyond the return of Christ is required in order for those born into the millennium to be saved.

To summarize then, the traditional premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20 plausibly commits its interpreters to four further claims: (1) the present earth will endure far beyond the return of Christ, (2) unbelievers, both living and departed, will not be judged until long after the return of Christ, (3) individuals in natural, perishable bodies will endure far beyond the return of Christ, and (4) the offer of salvation will still exist during the millennium.

## II. Four inconsistencies with the traditional premillennial interpretation

### 2.1 Inconsistency with cosmic-redemption passages

First, the premillennial commitment to the idea that the present earth will endure far past the return of Christ is inconsistent with the rest of Scripture. For example, consider how 2 Pet. 3:10–13 characterizes the timing of the earth's renewal:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then *the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved*, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. (11) Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, (12) waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, *because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!* (13) But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.<sup>8</sup>

Recall that Peter's discussion here immediately follows his discussion of Christ's

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7 So Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1111–12, 1120–21, 1127–31; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1218; Moore, 'Personal and Cosmic Eschatology', 911. Explaining the premillennial view, Grudem notes, 'Of the unbelievers who remain on earth, many (but not all) will turn to Christ and be saved' (1112). He later adds, 'No doubt millions of people will become Christians during that time' (1120). However, it is the view of some that only Jewish people will come to faith in Christ during the millennium. Regardless of whether salvation is available to Jews only or to both Jews and gentiles, our argument is whether salvation is available to any.

8 Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations come from the English Standard Version. All emphasis has been added.

impending return. According to Peter then, the earth will be renewed on ‘the day of the Lord’ when the ‘heavens will pass away with a roar’ and ‘the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved’. Furthermore, we are to wait for and hasten ‘the coming of the day of God’ because on that day ‘the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!’ The most straightforward interpretation of this passage suggests that the present earth will not endure beyond Christ’s return.<sup>9</sup>

In Romans 8:18–23 – another passage related to the renewal of the earth – Paul personifies the earth’s present condition and desire for restoration.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (19) For the creation waits with eager longing for *the revealing of the sons of God*. (20) For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope (21) that the creation itself will be *set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God*. (22) For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. (23) And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, *the redemption of our bodies*.

What does this passage tell us about the renewal of the earth? According to Paul, the present decaying earth is longing and waiting for a particular event; namely, ‘the revealing of the sons of God’. Apparently, the revealing of the sons of God will bring about the end of the earth’s groaning and set it free ‘from its bondage to corruption’. This is the view of Schreiner, who writes: ‘The creation anticipates the revelation of the children of God because that is the day when it shall be liberated from its own futility and decay.’<sup>10</sup> Most scholars agree that the ‘revealing of the sons of God’ refers to the day when believers will receive glorified resurrection bodies.<sup>11</sup> This interpretation finds emphatic confirmation in Paul’s further suggestion that believers, like creation, are awaiting ‘the redemption of our bodies’.

Regardless of one’s view of Revelation 20, most interpreters agree that the resurrection bodies promised to the faithful will be granted to them *at the return*

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9 See Peter H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 283; Gene L. Green, *Jude and 2 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 329–30; Robert B. Strimple, ‘Amillennialism’, in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, edited by Stanley N. Gundry and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 107; Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 2003), 383. After noting that ‘the day of the Lord’ (2 Pet. 3:10) most likely refers to the second coming, Schreiner maintains that the details of the passage ‘will occur when the day arrives, and all of them together indicate that the physical world as we know it will be destroyed’ (383).

10 Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 437.

11 E.g., Schreiner writes, ‘What the creation waits for is the revelation of God’s children, that is, their future glorification’ (*ibid.*, 435).

of Christ to earth. However, if the revealing of the sons of God, which will occur at the return of Christ, is temporally contiguous with the liberation of the earth from its bondage to decay, then it follows that the present earth will *not* endure beyond the return of Christ. If it did, how could we plausibly explain why the earth is personified as waiting with eager longing for the bodily redemption of the faithful? Is it not clearly because it too will be renewed at that time? It seems then, that there are at least two passages indicating that the present earth will *not* endure past the return of Christ, a proposition that is mutually exclusive with the first of four implications of Revelation 20 as interpreted by premillennialists.

### 2.2 Inconsistency with *parousia*-judgment passages

Second, the premillennial commitment that unbelievers, living and departed, will not be judged until long after the return of Christ is inconsistent with the rest of Scripture.<sup>12</sup> First, consider what 2 Thess. 1:6-10 says about the judgment of the unrighteous:

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you (7) and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen *when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.* (8) He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. (9) They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (10) *on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed* (NIV).

For Paul, the answer to when the wicked will be judged seems clear: it will occur at the return of Christ. When we reflect on this passage, we should ask ourselves, if Paul was actually trying to communicate that the wicked will be judged at the time of Christ's return, could he have made it any clearer? Paul says that the wicked will be judged 'when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire', 'on the day he comes', when he comes 'to be glorified in his holy people', and when he is 'marveled at among all those who have believed'. Notice that Paul links the judgment of the wicked not to Christ's presence on earth, but to his *coming when he is revealed from heaven*. Surely Paul's intention was to communicate that Christ will punish the wicked at the time of his coming. Therefore, it follows from this that unbelievers will *not* endure beyond the return of Christ without judgment.<sup>13</sup>

Second, while Rev. 19:17–21 does not speak of judgment *per se*, it does seem to speak of the total destruction of everyone not aligned with Christ at his coming.

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12 See Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 287, 294; Charles A. Wanamaker, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 225, 230; Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 255–56, 260–61; Strimple, 'Amillennialism', 102–03.

13 See Vern S. Poythress, '2 Thessalonians 1 Supports Amillennialism', *JETS* 37.4 (1994), 533.



Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, 'Come, gather for the great supper of God, (18) to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and *the flesh of all men*, both free and slave, both small and great.' ... (21) And *the rest were slain* by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

Even premillennial interpreter George Ladd admits:

It is obvious that in its context, 'all men' designates *those who have accepted the mark of the beast* and have chosen allegiance to Antichrist rather than humble their hearts in response to the judgments of God which they have suffered and acknowledge the sovereignty of Christ. The details in the description are meant to designate *the totality of the overthrow of evil and of evil men*.<sup>14</sup>

This interpretation, while the most straightforward, results in awkwardness for Ladd who must somehow explain the reappearance of the 'nations' in Revelation 20 who rebel against the camp of the saints. If this passage indicates total annihilation of the unrighteous, then we have good reason to believe that all unbelievers will be judged at Christ's return. But if this is the case, then we have two further reasons for believing that the traditional premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20 cannot stand.

### 2.3 Inconsistency with bodily-resurrection passages

Third, the idea of natural, perishable bodies enduring beyond the return of Christ seems inconsistent with the larger testimony of Scripture.<sup>15</sup> Consider, for example, what Paul says in 1 Cor. 15:50–52:

I tell you this, brothers: *flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God*, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. (51) Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed, (52) in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, *at the last trumpet*. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

Here in the context of personal eschatology Paul reminds his readers that 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God'. While the context is clearly referring to the resurrection of believers, it is also clear that those in natural, corruptible bodies cannot enter into the eternal kingdom that Christ will inaugurate when he returns. Verbrugge explains:

What Paul means by 'kingdom' here is not what the Gospels mean by the

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<sup>14</sup> Ladd, *Revelation*, 257; emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup> Because evidence supporting the idea that unbelievers will be judged at Christ's return also counts as evidence that natural bodies will not endure beyond his return, the arguments in the previous section could also apply here.

'kingdom of God' (which essentially means the fact that God reigns). Rather, 'kingdom' here denotes the eternal kingdom that Christ will usher in at his second coming and hand over to his Father.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, Paul explains why it is necessary for believers to be transformed ('changed') in order to enter God's kingdom at 'the last trumpet' when Christ returns (cf. 1 Thess. 4:16). Therefore, these verses provide strong evidence that natural bodies will not endure beyond the establishment of Christ's kingdom at his coming.<sup>17</sup>

Premillennialists may respond by noting this verse only applies to believers since they affirm that unbelievers will be resurrected for judgment only after the millennium. Our response to this objection is twofold. First, as we already established in the previous section, 2 Thess. 1 teaches that the unrighteous are eternally condemned upon Christ's return. This truth, combined with the fact that believers will be granted glorified, resurrection bodies (1 Cor. 15:51–52), leaves no place for natural bodies subsequent to Christ's return. Second, Paul indicates that the perishable, mortal body 'must' (δεῖ) be clothed with an imperishable, immortal body (v. 53). But this would not be necessary if believers were merely entering a millennial period in which they remained on the present earth along with unbelievers who had natural bodies. Paul argues that the resurrection is necessary in order for believers to enter the eternal kingdom, and he links the timing of the resurrection with Christ's return. The inference of the premillennial view is that the resurrected body actually will only be needed a thousand years later. Such an interpretation seems forced.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, in John 5:28–29 Jesus states that the 'hour' is coming when both 'those who have done good' and 'those who have done evil' will be resurrected. In this text there is no hint of a delay between the resurrection and judgment of believers and that of unbelievers. Indeed, Jesus indicates that it will all occur at the same 'hour' or at the same time.<sup>19</sup> Hoekema concludes:

The clear implication seems to be that at a certain specific time, here called the coming 'hour', *all* who are in their graves will hear the voice of Christ and be raised from the dead. There is no indication here that Jesus intends

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16 Verlyn D. Verbrugge, '1 Corinthians' in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, volume 11 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 404.

17 See also Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 797–801; David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 741–42.

18 Some premillennialists point to 1 Cor. 15:23–24 as evidence for a significant temporal gap between those raised at Christ's coming and 'the end' just as there is a temporal gap between Christ's resurrection and his coming (e.g., Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1130). However, at the very most these verses *allow* for a significant temporal gap but certainly do not offer a positive argument for one. Rather, these verses give us the order of relevant events, not information about the temporal intervals between them.

19 See also Acts 24:15 where Paul declares that he has 'hope in God... that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.' Here Paul indicates that there will be just one resurrection (ἀνάστασιν = singular) that includes everyone ('the just and the unjust').

to teach that an extremely long period of time will separate the resurrection of life from the resurrection of judgment.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, when interpreted most straightforwardly, both 1 Cor. 15:50–51 and John 5:28–29 suggest that no natural bodies will be present beyond the return of Christ, a conclusion that is mutually exclusive with the third implication of the premillennial view.<sup>21</sup>

#### 2.4 *Inconsistency with gospel-cessation passages*

The New Testament seems to suggest that the opportunity for individuals to repent and receive salvation will terminate at the return of Christ. This cannot be the case with the traditional premillennial view of Revelation 20 because during the millennium the earth must be populated in part by sinful individuals in need of redemption. Furthermore, children will be born to these individuals and, as previously mentioned, it seems biblically inconsistent to suggest that they will not have an opportunity to repent and believe. Therefore, we must address whether or not a gospel offer extends beyond the return of Christ.

Second Peter 3:9 indicates that there will be no opportunity to repent and believe beyond the return of Christ. Discussing the scoffers who will come in the last days doubting the reality of Christ's promised return, Peter presents the following hope: 'The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance' (NIV). Here Peter provides us with the reason for the Lord's delay; namely, his desire that all those who are to receive salvation do in fact attain that end. In other words, Christ is delaying his return to allow ample time for all his sheep to realize their salvation. But if the reason for the delay of Christ's return is his desire to further extend the opportunity of the gospel, does it not follow that when he comes that opportunity will be terminated?<sup>22</sup> Alternatively, if Christ's desire to extend the gospel offer explains his delayed return, will his eventual return not indicate that he no longer has such a desire? How could Christ's delay plausibly be explained by appealing to his desire for more people to be saved when individuals can still be saved *after* he returns? Surely Kistemaker is right to say that 'Jesus will return when God's patience has ended, when the time allotted has expired, and when the last believer has accepted Christ as Savior'.<sup>23</sup> In light of this passage then, it is very difficult to see how individuals could still accept Christ as Savior hundreds of years after his return.

In addition to 2 Pet. 3:9, the parable of the Ten Virgins in Matthew 25 also offers us insight regarding just how long the opportunity to repent and believe will

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20 Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 240. Emphasis original.

21 See Poythress, '2 Thessalonians', 533.

22 See Hoekema, *Bible and the Future*, 219.

23 Simon J. Kistemaker, *James, Epistles of John, Peter and Jude*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 334. See also Davids, *Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, 282.

extend. This parable comes on the heels of faithful and wicked servants who are tasked with feeding the household of the 'master' while he is away. Eventually the master will return at an unexpected hour and render each servant according to their conduct. Thus, the 'at that time' (NIV; τότε) in Matt. 25:1 refers to the return of the master, or the return of Christ. In the parable, ten virgins go out to meet the expected bridegroom. Verse 5 tells us that the bridegroom was a long time in coming but that eventually, at midnight, the cry rang out: 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him' (v. 6). While five of the virgins were wise and brought oil for their lamps, the five foolish virgins did not. Because of this, the foolish virgins were forced to go off and buy more oil. Verse 10 then reports that the bridegroom came while the foolish virgins were away. Moreover, upon his return, the wise virgins went with him into the wedding banquet and the door was shut. When the foolish virgins finally arrived and requested to be allowed into the wedding banquet, the bridegroom solemnly replies, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you' (v. 12).

While we may gather many helpful truths from this parable, one truth that seems clearly communicated is that there will be no offer of salvation beyond the return of Christ. When the bridegroom returns, those who are prepared will enter with him into the wedding banquet, after which the door will be shut and no one else allowed to enter. In light of this, the parable urges people to be properly prepared for Christ's return because they 'know neither the day nor the hour' (v. 13). It seems then that post-*parousia* salvation is ruled out by the parable of the Ten Virgins. The bridegroom will not delay forever, and at his return anyone not prepared to enter with him into the wedding banquet will be shut out.<sup>24</sup> If this is true, then we have two passages that suggest that there will no longer be an opportunity to repent and receive salvation subsequent to the return of Christ. But this is an unwelcome conclusion for most premillennial interpretations of Revelation 20 which affirm an offer of salvation for constituents of the millennium.

The table on the next page summarizes our discussion to this point.

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24 So D. A. Carson, 'Matthew' in *Expositors Bible Commentary*, volume 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 514. Morris writes that the unprepared virgins 'exclude themselves from any place among the people of God. The Savior cannot recognize them among the saved. While there was time they shut themselves out. There is no way by which they can now come in' (Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, PNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992], 625). Similarly, France writes, 'But this has become, like so many of the other parables, a story of insiders and outsiders, of the saved and the lost, and the closing of the door symbolizes that final division at the last judgment, as we have seen it in 13:30, 48; 21:31, 41; 22:8-10, 13' (R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 950).

Premillennialism		Non-Premillennialism	
Textual Evidence	Implications	Implications	Textual Evidence
Rev. 20:1-6	The present earth will endure past the bodily return of Christ.	The present earth <i>will not endure</i> past the bodily return of Christ.	2 Pet. 3:10-13 Rom. 8:18-23
	Unbelievers will endure beyond the return of Christ without being judged.	Unbelievers <i>will not endure</i> beyond the return of Christ without being judged.	2 Thess. 1:6-10 Rev. 19:17-21
	Natural bodies will be present after the return of Christ.	Natural bodies <i>will not be present</i> after the return of Christ.	1 Cor. 15:50-51 John 5:28-29
	There will be an opportunity to repent and receive salvation after Christ has returned.	There <i>will not be</i> an opportunity to repent and receive salvation after Christ has returned.	2 Pet. 3:9 Matt. 25:10-13

### III. The problem of harmonization

We have completed a brief survey of some New Testament evidence that relates to the four implications of the traditional premillennial view. In each case we have found multiple passages that, when interpreted most straightforwardly, rule out all four implications of such an interpretation. However, because we are committed to inerrancy and realize that Scripture does not actually contradict itself, we must somehow harmonize Revelation 20 with the rest of the New Testament. But what is the best way to go about this process? What follows is a brief discussion of what seems to us the most plausible approach.

#### 3.1 Two kinds of harmonization

Sometimes the most straightforward readings of two passages may initially seem to be at odds with each other, but upon further reflection can be reconciled (where ‘reconciled’ refers to a simple ‘both-and’ reconciliation of the two passages). Take for example, the variant accounts of the fate of Judas. Matthew 27:5 reports that he hanged himself while Acts 1:18 testifies that he fell headlong and his insides burst forth. These two accounts are commonly reconciled by saying that Judas hanged himself and then when the rope (or branch) broke and his body fell on the field, his insides burst forth.<sup>25</sup> In this way, both passages are

25 See Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 1012; D. A. Carson, ‘Matthew’, 628; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 49; John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC 26 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 92–93.

given their most straightforward interpretation but are viewed as simply reporting different aspects of the same event. Thus, both verses are true and accurately describe the fate of Judas. We may call this method of textual reconciliation 'simple harmonization'.

Sometimes, however, the most straightforward interpretation of a passage is logically or mutually exclusive with the most straightforward interpretation of other passages. Take for example, two key references to justification in the New Testament. James 2:24 reads: 'You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone' which can be contrasted with Rom. 3:28: 'For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.' If the corresponding words in each sentence are interpreted identically, then a logical contradiction results (i.e., it is *not* the case that we are justified by faith apart from works and it is the case that we are justified by faith apart from works). Thus, in order to maintain inerrancy, one verse must be interpreted *in light of the other* and some kind of nuance in meaning, linguistic or other, must be realized in order to maintain logical coherence.<sup>26</sup> This kind of reconciliation is notably different from the harmonization mentioned above because one verse must actually *inform* the interpretation of the other, whereas in simple harmonization both passages may speak independently of each other without concern for logical contradiction. We may call this method of textual reconciliation 'nuance harmonization'. Realizing the distinction between these two kinds of harmonization is crucial.

Assuming that the traditional premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20 is the most straightforward, in light of its necessary implications, we are left with a need for nuance harmonization since the most straightforward interpretations of all the passages cited above are logically exclusive with the implications mentioned earlier.

### 3.2 Two hermeneutical principles of harmonization

#### 3.2.1. Principle one

The almost universal position in hermeneutics is that more obscure passages should be interpreted in light of clearer passages. This is another way of saying that we should interpret passages whose meaning we are unsure of in light of passages in which we have a higher degree of interpretive confidence. Plummer speaks for the majority when he says that 'passages of Scripture that are less clear should be interpreted with reference to those that are more transparent in meaning.'<sup>27</sup> This principle seems to be particularly valuable in the case of pas-

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26 At the very minimum, to say that B is interpreted in light of A in the case of apparent logical inconsistency is to say that A reveals how B is *not* to be interpreted. When this is the case, A may not help us understand the meaning of B, but it does show us what B *cannot* mean. Oftentimes A may actually clarify the meaning of B, but this may not always be the case.

27 Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 97.

sages that appear logically inconsistent. Therefore, we should begin with this fundamental principle.<sup>28</sup>

### 3.2.2 Principle two

A second hermeneutical principle is that in the case of an isolated passage that seems inconsistent with other passages, we should favour the interpretation that is consistent with the greater amount of biblical support. As Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard state: 'Isolated texts cannot be construed to overturn well-established teaching. The parts and the whole comprise one piece.'<sup>29</sup> Because of this, when our initial interpretation of a passage is inconsistent with the overarching witness of Scripture, we should take a second look at how we have approached the passage and reevaluate our initial conclusion. We see this principle at work particularly in the harmonization of Rom. 3:28 and Jas. 2:24 where James is interpreted in light of the Pauline doctrine of justification.

### 3.2.3 Applying the principles

Now that we have two solid hermeneutical principles for interpreting apparently inconsistent passages, the question becomes how these two principles inform the apparently contradictory interpretations regarding the traditional premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20. Starting with the second principle, we may say that in terms of quantitative biblical support, there are many more passages that, when interpreted most straightforwardly, rule out the premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20. In fact, it seems that, for many interpreters, their entire premillennial doctrine rests on their interpretation of this one passage.<sup>30</sup> Against the premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20, however, we have considered no less than eight other passages in the wider context of the New

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28 Cf. 'Doctrines should not be built on a single passage but rather should summarize all that Scripture says on that topic' (G. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006 second edition], 28). 'We must allow the clearer texts to take precedence over the more obscure. In practical terms, we cannot allow a point of doctrine to be established on an apocalyptic vision against clear statements to the contrary in the epistolary material of the New Testament' (Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Gospel in Revelation in The Goldsworthy Trilogy* [Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2000], 162). It is 'risky to settle on a doctrine that rests solely on a point allegedly made in a parable, an allegory, a type, a so-called *sensus plenior*, or an uncertain textual reading' (Walker C. Kaiser and Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 205). We should 'interpret the obscure in the light of the clear' (R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977], 78). Also see Louis Berkof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 715; Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, (Chicago: Moody, 2009, rev. and exp.), 85, 261.

29 William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 113.

30 Ladd admits, 'this is the only passage in the entire Bible which teaches a temporal *millennial* kingdom' (*Revelation*, 267). Blomberg writes that Ladd, 'liked to say in class that he could have been an amillennialist if it were not for Revelation 20' ('Posttribulationism', 67).

Testament. Thus, our second hermeneutical principle seems to suggest that we should interpret the isolated Revelation 20 passage in light of the larger body of New Testament evidence.<sup>31</sup>

But what about the first principle? Is Revelation 20 the clearer text that should inform our exegesis of all other relevant passages in the New Testament, or is the larger witness of the New Testament the clearer testimony that should inform our exegesis of Revelation 20? We should begin by noting that Revelation 20 appears in a book which is prophetic, highly symbolic, replete with unique imagery, and very difficult to understand.<sup>32</sup> In fact, many scholars throughout history have considered Revelation to be the most enigmatic book in the Christian canon. However, just because a book as a whole is obscure does not mean that certain passages within it cannot be quite clear. Is this the case with Revelation 20?

Despite the fact that Revelation 20 lacks references to animals covered with eyes and other bizarre imagery seen elsewhere in Revelation, it is difficult to say that Revelation 20 qualifies as a 'clear' passage. This is primarily because the apocalyptic symbolism that permeates the majority of Revelation is also found in Revelation 20. Even within the first three verses we are presented with a symbolic key, a symbolic chain, a symbolic pit, and a symbolic dragon. Then in vv. 4–6 we find a thousand year period which many commentators agree figuratively represents a long, complete period of time. Here we find the only biblical mention of a 'first' resurrection along with a figurative spiritual death that holds no power over participants in the first resurrection. Finally, symbolic imagery is also found in v. 14 when at the great judgment 'Death and Hades' are thrown into the lake of fire.

In light of such symbolism, to say that this apocalyptic, prophetic vision is lucid and transparent in meaning seems to us to be an overly bold assertion.

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31 'We have to state that there is not one passage in the Old or the New Testament that clearly and plainly teaches two resurrections, separated by an interval of one thousand years, with the possible exception of one verse in the twentieth chapter of Revelation... The anomaly confronting us here is that one can read the whole Bible without discovering an inkling of this doctrine until he arrives at its third from the last chapter. If, on coming to that chapter, he shall give a literal interpretation to one sentence of a highly symbolical passage, he will then find it necessary to retrace his steps and interpret all the eschatological teachings of the Bible in a manner agreeable to this one sentence. The recognized rule of exegesis is to interpret an obscure passage of Scripture in the light of a clear statement. In this case, clear statements are being interpreted to agree with the literal interpretation of one sentence from a context replete with symbolism, the true meaning of which is highly debatable' (George L. Murray, *Millennial Studies: A Search for Truth* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1948], 153–54).

32 'Is it not a valid principle of biblical interpretation that less clear, more difficult portions of the Bible are to be interpreted in the light of the more clear portions, ... the figurative in light of the literal? ... [We question] whether we should be willing to set aside the entire New Testament, or force it into artificial interpretations, on the basis of one brief passage in an apocalypse that is admittedly highly figurative, rich in symbols, and therefore somewhat difficult' (Strimple, 'Amillennialism', 119–20).



While it is clear that Revelation 20 depicts a reign of Christ with his saints, his victory over Satan, and the termination of death, a high degree of interpretive confidence concerning the exact nature of the secondary details is difficult to attain. Some premillennialists have responded by saying that they do not find the passage obscure at all and that only when the text is interpreted in a less than straightforward fashion does any obscurity emerge.<sup>33</sup> But we must ask, is it really clear that vv. 4–6 describe an earthly scene when every relevant use of ‘throne’ (θρόνος) in Revelation refers to a heavenly scene?<sup>34</sup> Is it clear that John is referring to physical bodies coming to life when he sees ‘souls’, souls that may be the same souls crying out under the altar in chapter 6? Even if John sees a physical resurrection, it must be remembered that such imagery is at the ‘visionary level’ (i.e., what John actually saw). It is also necessary to interpret apocalyptic literature at the ‘referential level’ (i.e., the historical referent) as well as the ‘symbolic level’ (i.e., what the symbolic imagery actually connotes about its historical referent).<sup>35</sup> Is it clear that the nature of the ‘first resurrection’ is the same as the second when the nature of the ‘second death’ is clearly different from the first?<sup>36</sup> Or is it even clear that the events of Revelation 20 are chronologically subsequent to those of Revelation 19?<sup>37</sup> Regardless of one’s conclusions, these are difficult questions that require thoughtful answers that are not arrived at easily.<sup>38</sup> This does not excuse us from the task of responsible interpretation, but does caution us to tread very carefully and hold our conclusions tentatively.

Much more important, however, than whether or not Revelation 20 is a clear

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33 Astonishingly, Grudem asserts, ‘In response to the allegation that the passage that teaches a millennium is obscure, premillennialists respond that they do not find it obscure at all’ (*Systematic Theology*, 1117).

34 See Leon Morris, *Revelation*, TNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 230.

35 See Vern S. Poythress, ‘Genre and Hermeneutics in Rev 20:1–6’, *JETS* 36.1 (1993), 41–54. Poythress comments, ‘Many premillennialists... neglect the possibility of the presence of a visionary and a symbolic level. Instead they move almost immediately from the linguistic level [i.e., the textual record itself] to the referential level’ (46).

36 To see the most forceful and persuasive presentation of this line of reasoning, see Meredith G. Kline, ‘The First Resurrection’, *WTJ* 37 (1975), 366–75.

37 See R. F. White, ‘Reexamining the Evidence for Recapitulation in Rev 20:1–10’, *WTJ* 51 (1989), 319–44; idem, ‘Making Sense of Rev 20:1–10? Harold Hoehner Versus Recapitulation’, *JETS* 37 (1994), 539–51; idem, ‘On the Hermeneutics and Interpretation of Revelation 20:1–3: A Preconsummationist Perspective’, *JETS* 42 (1999), 53–66; Dave Mathewson, ‘A Re-examination of the Millennium in Rev 20:1–6: Consummation and Recapitulation’, *JETS* 44 (2001), 237–51; Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 200–02.

38 The primary goal of this essay is not to engage directly with premillennial exegesis of Revelation 20 but to point out hermeneutical difficulties that arise from it. For a more thorough critique of premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20 as well as the book of Revelation as a whole see G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2001), and William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967).

text is whether it is a *clearer* text than the other texts we have surveyed. According to our first hermeneutical principle, passages upon which we have a firmer grasp should be used to inform instances where our interpretive confidence is lower. Recall that the passages we surveyed appeared in non-prophetic books (with the exception of Revelation 19), contained little to no symbolic imagery, and were not a record of an apocalyptic vision (though one was a parable). Furthermore, the passages we surveyed seemed to use fairly plain language and were consistent with, and in some cases supportive of, one another. Ultimately then, to say that the witness of Revelation 20 is clearer than the testimony of the rest of the New Testament is hardly convincing. Consequently, if what we have said up to this point is correct, then it follows that we should interpret Revelation 20 in light of the clearer and larger witness of the New Testament and that therefore, the traditional premillennial interpretation should be rejected.

#### IV. Conclusion

Because we have structured our argument in a deductively valid form, those attempting to escape the conclusion *must explicitly deny* one or more of the argument's premises. First, one could object to the first premise and say that the four commitments implied by a traditional premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20 are not necessarily implied after all.<sup>39</sup> This would entail admitting that (1) the millennium will occur on the new earth, (2) the unrighteous will be judged at the return of Christ, (3) no natural bodies will be present in the millennium, or (4) those in the millennium will have no opportunity to repent and receive

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39 Schnabel's version of Premillennialism, which is *not* the traditional premillennial view, seems to deny that these four implications are necessary (Eckhard J. Schnabel, *40 Questions About the End Times* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011], 267–78). First, he affirms that life on earth during the millennium is essentially the same as life on the new earth. He states that 'we should not make a hard and fast distinction between life during the millennium and life on the new earth' (277). Second, he acknowledges that unbelievers will be judged at Christ's return. He writes, 'Jesus' second coming marks God's judgment on the forces of evil and on the ungodly' (275). Third, he confirms that natural bodies will not be present during the millennium. He comments that such a view raises 'the difficult question of how the resurrected believers who have new, glorified, and incorruptible bodies can live side by side during the millennium with unregenerate unbelievers who still have mortal bodies' (277). Fourth, by the fact that there are no unbelievers on earth because they have already been judged, he would also admit that there is no offer of the gospel during the millennium. One might wonder where the rebellion comes from at the end of the millennium if only resurrected believers dwell on the earth. Schnabel's view is that the rebellion will come from unbelievers who have (along with Satan) been confined to Hades (the Abyss) but who come back upon the earth after the millennium (276). Schnabel's positions are consistent with those of J. Webb Mealy, *After the Thousand Years: Resurrection and Judgment in Revelation 20*, JSNTSup 70 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992). For a critique of Mealy's interpretation, see G. K. Beale, 'Review Article of J. W. Mealy's *After the Thousand Years*', *EQ* 66 (1994), 229–49.

salvation. Second, one could escape our conclusion by denying that the most straightforward interpretation of the passages surveyed are mutually exclusive with the implications of Revelation 20 as interpreted by premillennialists. These interpretations must be as, or more, plausible than those offered earlier, not simply *possible*. Third, one could dispute one or both of our hermeneutical principles and insist that they are either malformed or just misguided. Finally, one could object to our application of the two hermeneutical principles either by arguing that the overarching New Testament evidence is not as clear as Revelation 20, or by arguing that our principles of harmonization should not be allowed to adjudicate this particular need for textual reconciliation. Based on these factors, we submit that the traditional premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20 should be abandoned in favour of a more consistent interpretation.

### Abstract

The traditional premillennial view of Revelation has implications that are contradictory to the most straightforward interpretation of clearer passages in the New Testament. These implications include: (1) the present earth will endure far beyond the return of Christ; (2) the unrighteous will not be judged when Christ returns; (3) natural bodies will be present during the millennium; and (4) people will have the opportunity to receive salvation during the millennium. The most straightforward interpretation of texts surveyed to disprove these premillennial implications must be rejected by Premillennialists in favour of the more obscure and enigmatic text of Revelation 20. But in rejecting the straightforward reading of these texts, Premillennialists are also rejecting two key principles of hermeneutics: (1) the more obscure passages should be interpreted in light of clearer passages and (2) the interpretation that is consistent with the greater amount of biblical support should be favoured.