

The Two Resurrections:

John 5:19-29 and Revelation 20:4-6

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The interpretive history of Revelation 20 is a virtual battleground for hermeneutical, theological and eschatological agendas.¹ Due in part to the Icarian rise of dispensational theology in post-war years of the early 20th century, no other single passage of Scripture has received as much hotly contested evangelical attention as the first ten verses of this apocalyptic chapter. The various interpretive debates, even at a popular level, present a compelling argument in favor of postmodernism's wholesale abandonment of recoverable meaning. Yet despite these stifling, nearly overwhelming discouragements, eschatology – the “systematic study of eventualities” as J. Oliver Buswell defines it² – is far from a mere peripheral disciple in the world of Christian theology. On the contrary, as Anthony Hoekema has written, “Eschatology must *not* be thought of as something which is found only in, say, such Bible books as Daniel and Revelation, but as dominating and permeating the entire message of the Bible.”³ “From first to last,” Moltmann declared, “and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present...It is the medium of the Christian faith...the key in which everything in it is set.”⁴

In light, therefore, of both the difficulties inherent and the necessities at stake, rather than trying to assess this embroiled chapter in its totality, particularly as it pertains to the all too often centralizing question regarding the millennium, my approach will be to address one issue – the nature of the two resurrections in v. 4-6 – and this tangentially, that is, through the didactic lens of John 5:19-29. V. 28-29, which close the pericope, are a favorite proof-text of both a- and postmillennialists alike. There Jesus states:

¹ Not to mention the often overtly, though sadly less exegetically driven, political agendas, national and international alike.

² Reymond, 980.

³ Hoekema, 3.

⁴ Ibid, 3.

John 5:28-29 ²⁸ Do not marvel at this, for *an hour* (ὥρα) is coming when *all* (πάντες) *who are in the tombs* will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out, those who have *done good to the resurrection of life*, and those who have *done evil to the resurrection of judgment*.

At first blush, the passage seems to suggest quite clearly that there will be but one singular and simultaneous eschatological resurrection of both “those who have done good...and those who have done evil” (29) – that is, as the passage bears out, of believers and unbelievers. Traditionally, non-premillennialists have focused upon the singular term *an hour* (ὥρα) in which *all* the dead will be raised through one divine announcement.⁵ This interpretation is reinforced by analogous texts like Acts 24:15, which also speaks of a future and (grammatically) singular resurrection “of both the just and the unjust” alike (ἀνάστασιν μέλλειν ἔσεσθαι δικαίων τε καὶ ἀδίκων).” Other Pauline passages suggest a similar timeline (2 Thess. 1:5-12). If this interpretation is not only plain but necessary, then John 5:28-29 undermines the so-called “linchpin of premillennialism”⁶ (Rev. 20:4-5) by ruling out the possibility of two separate bodily resurrections with a thousand-year millennial period intervening.

In addressing this passage, Wayne Grudem, a Reformed though self-professed historic premillennialist, calls his reader’s attention to the surprising fluidity of the term “an hour” both in the Johannine corpus as a whole and, more importantly, in its immediately surrounding context:

The fact that Jesus says..., “*The hour* is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice” does not require that both resurrections happen at the same time, for the word *hour* elsewhere in John’s gospel can refer to a long period of time; just three verses previously, Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.” (John 5:25). Here the ‘hour’ refers to the entire church age when those who are spiritually dead hear Jesus’ voice and come to life...In fact [far from supporting the

⁵ Strimple, 101. Hoekema: “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 to teach that an extremely long period of time will separate the resurrection of life from the resurrection of judgment” (240).

⁶ Grenz, 128.

amillennialists' claim that there is only one resurrection] John 5 does hint at the possibility of two resurrections.⁷

While differing with Grudem in the implication of his conclusion, two points of substantial agreement will form the crux of my argument in favor of an amillennialist reading of John 5 and in turn an amillennialist reading of Revelation 20. First, Grudem asserts that there are in fact two resurrections in the John 5:19-29 pericope, just as there are clearly two resurrections in Revelation 20:4-6. Second, he claims that the word hour, in typical Johannine fashion, can and often does refer to a "long period of time" as opposed to a mere moment. Moreover, Grudem states that in John 5:25 the "hour that is now here" refers in fact to "the entire church age when those who are spiritually dead hear Jesus' voice and come to life." As Grudem appears to hint at, this last statement is precisely what amillennialists argue concerning the nature of the first resurrection in Revelation 20:4: "They [believers] came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years [i.e. 'the entire church age' or an 'hour']." In light of what some might call Grudem's "spiritualized" interpretation of John 5:25, the parallels between Revelation 20:4-6 and John 5:19-29 become pronounced and, in fact, quite striking. In order to establish these parallels and draw out their implications, we need first to outline briefly the overall aim of John 5:19-29 and then walk through a number of the pertinent texts giving special attention to the various references to "resurrection" in verses 21, 24, 25 and lastly 28-29. Once the plain meanings of these texts are established, we can then turn to examining whether or not the two resurrections in John 5:19-29 may function as a commentary on the two resurrections in Revelation 20:4-6.

Setting and Theme

Set within the larger context of a rising Jewish opposition to Jesus' ministry, John 5:19-29 deals in particular with Jesus' unique self-identification as the Son of God. As a response to the accusations in v. 18 that Jesus was "not only breaking the Sabbath but even calling God his own Father, making himself equal to God," v. 19 is both a critique of that view – "the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing" – and an admission of its

⁷ Grudem, 1119.

accuracy – “For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.” To illustrate the latter of these two points, Jesus ascribes to himself two OT prerogatives that were exclusively Yahwehistic: resurrection and judgment.

Throughout the ensuing discourse, Jesus interweaves the imminent with the eschatological. This interplay between the hour that is coming and the hour that is now here establishes an exegetical as well as theological foundation for reading the two resurrections in Revelation 20 as an apocalyptic rendering of the two resurrections in John 5. Admittedly, the resurrections in John 5 are clearly distinguishable in both their natures and extents. Nonetheless, in keeping with the overarching theme of the periscope – “whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise” – they are both resurrections in the fullest *literary* and therefore *literal* sense of the word. In line with the *analogia fidei* of traditional Protestant hermeneutics, my contention is simple: “No single statement or obscure passage of one book can be allowed to set aside a doctrine which is clearly established by many passages.”⁸ In other words, if a didactic passage such as John 5 speaks clearly of two resurrections and, in light of them, two subsequent and corresponding deaths then this reading should inform and guide our reading of apocalyptic texts like Revelation 20, which also speaks of two resurrections in conjunction with two, corresponding and subsequent deaths. In response to traditional premillennialist’s hermeneutical tendency to do just the opposite, Robert Strimple has written:

[It] is indeed an amazing statement – that “the basic structure,” the foundation and overarching design of the entire eschatological edifice, is to be drawn from one passage, and that a passage in an apocalypse, somewhat enigmatic and highly symbolical, and thus subject to more variety of interpretation in the history of the church than any other New Testament book.⁹

John 5:21 For as the Father raises (ἐγείρει) the dead and gives them life (ζωοποιεῖ; makes alive), so also the Son gives life to (ζωοποιεῖ; makes alive) whom he will.

The first of the so-called “greater works than these” (v. 20) that the Son shares in common with the Father is resurrection. The verse’s “for as...so also [ὡςπερ γὰρ...οὕτως καὶ]”

⁸ Osborne, 11.

⁹ Strimple, 263, in response to Craig Blasing’s statement: “As we will see, the basic structure of premillennial belief is taken from John’s visions of the return of Jesus and a Millennium subsequent to that return in the book of Revelation” (263).

construction creates what C.K. Barrett calls an “exact parallelism between the Father and the Son.”¹⁰ D.A. Carson begins his comments in precisely the same manner:

That the Son does whatever the Father does...is nowhere better seen than in the perfect parallelism expressed here: *just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it...*The first two clauses of this verse are so parallel that “raises the dead” must in the first instance refer to the same thing as “gives life.”¹¹

What was to his listeners an exclusively divine prerogative, Jesus ascribes to himself. In light of the Jewish expectation of a resurrection in the age to come, this verse “inevitably... assigns *eschatological* resurrection to Jesus.”¹² This futurist element is picked up and explained more fully in v. 28-29. At the same time, however, “Jesus’ authority to ‘give life’ on the last day cannot be abstracted from the spiritual life he provides immediately to those who hear his word and believe him (*cf.* vv. 24, 25; 3:15, 16, 36).”¹³ Therefore, both an eschatological and an immediate resurrection are “contextually required.”¹⁴ George Beasley-Murray’s remarks likewise agree with this assessment:

The inclusive language of vv 21-23 embraces resurrection, judgment and honor due to the Son, *alike in the present and the future*, but the context has the present primarily in mind. With the advent of the Son of God, the new age has come; hence he brings men the life of the new age in the present.”¹⁵

V. 21 in essence sets the tone for what is to follow, asserting foremost that the power to raise the dead belongs to Jesus by virtue of his divine sonship. In turn, this resurrection reaches *both* into the present and into the hereafter. This duality “demands that we see in the life the believer may now obtain from Jesus not only a foretaste and an anticipation of the resurrection, but something of its *real substance*.”¹⁶ Writing on verse 21, Leon Morris calls attention to both the parallelism between the Father and Son as well as to the *present* implications of Christ’s resurrecting power: “Just as the Father takes dead bodies and raises them into new life, so the

¹⁰ Barrett, 260.

¹¹ Carson, 253.

¹² *Ibid*, 253.

¹³ *Ibid*, 253.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 253.

¹⁵ Beasley-Murray, 76.

¹⁶ Carson, 253.

Son takes men who, though their bodies are alive, are yet in a state of death, and raises them into spiritual life."¹⁷

In other words, the new, spiritual life Jesus imparts to believers at their conversion is just as real a resurrection as the new, physical life He will impart to them at the final resurrection. Far from overstating the case, both John and Paul alike consistently apply the imagery of resurrection to both the experience and effects of regeneration (Jn. 6:63; 1 Jn. 3:14; Rom. 4:17, 6:1-8, 8:11; Eph. 2:1-10; Col. 2:12). Moreover, in the followings verses, Jesus unpacks what this resurrecting power means for both the present and future age. In each instance, equally radical language is employed to describe both the resurrection to come and the resurrection that is now.

John 5:24 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life (ζωὴν αἰώνιον). He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life (ζωήν).

While v. 21 mixes the present implications of Christ's life-giving power with its eschatological corollaries, v. 24 focuses exclusively upon the believer's present condition. In keeping with the passage's driving motifs, this condition is described in both judicial and vivacious terms. Just as it is no longer necessary for the believer to "come into [eschatological] judgment" to experience real vindication, neither "is it necessary for the believer to wait until the last day to experience something of the resurrection life: the believer *has eternal life* and *has crossed over from death to life* (cf. Col. 1:13)."¹⁸ As Beasley-Murray writes, "The promise [of life] becomes immediately effective; the hearer-believer has eternal life *now*...he has crossed over from the realm of death into the sphere of divine sovereignty, the characteristic of which is life for all who enter it."¹⁹ Put more succinctly, just as the believer has been justified by Christ, so too has he resurrected them as well.

¹⁷ Morris, 315.

¹⁸ Carson, 256.

¹⁹ Beasley-Murray, 76.

Far from being uncertain or ambiguous, the believer's passage from "death to life" has occurred definitively in the present through the vehicle of faith. In order to stress the reality of this passing, Christ employs language that, at first glance, may seem too strong or misleading. Believers, after all, are clearly not physically immortal. Faith in Christ does not exempt a person from the trials and woes of mortal suffering. How is it then that those who possess this so-called "eternal life" still experience physical death the same as everyone else?

This sort of question, of course, betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the verses before us. As Grudem and other premillennialists have explained, the resurrection presented here is spiritual, not physical. Nonetheless, as verse 25 will confirm, it is still a *resurrection* in the fullest literary sense of the word. Echoing both Carson's and Beasley-Murray's comments above, F.F. Bruce explains, "Believers need [not] wait for the last day to experience the essence of resurrection; here and now they have 'passed out of death into life.'"²⁰

As noted above, the continuity/discontinuity between these resurrections should be explained by the unusually high degree of realized eschatology present in the verses themselves. Carson and other commentators have called significant attention to this feature, noting, "This is perhaps the strongest affirmation of inaugurated eschatology in the Fourth Gospel."²¹ In light of this, the life we as Christians experience with Christ is both now and not yet. However, despite this feature (or rather, because of it), we may with full certainty affirm that death and judgment truly do lie behind the believer while nothing but life and righteousness lie ahead. We have both *been raised* and *will be raised* and although the first is clearly spiritual in nature while the latter is physical, this does not mean that the latter alone deserves to be called a resurrection proper. The language of both v. 24 and 25 is far too strong to allow such a modernistic and Enlightenment-influenced interpretation to hold sway.

John 5:25 Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live (ζήσουσιν).

²⁰ Bruce, 131.

²¹ Ibid, 256. Köstenberger: "This pronouncement represents one of the strongest affirmations of realized eschatology in John's Gospel" (188). Beasley-Murray: "This is the strongest affirmation of realized eschatology applied to the believer in the NT" (76).

Like v. 24, v. 25 also begins with Christ's often-repeated "double 'Amen, amen' [ἀμήν ἀμήν] expression,"²² rendered by both the NAS and ESV as "Truly, truly, I say to you." Interestingly, this is the only place in any gospel that it is employed back to back in a single discourse. The effect then is to stress the importance of both v. 24 and 25 marking them out as the heart and summary of the John 5:19-29 pericope. Both verses reiterate the same basic theme: the coming, eschatological and physical resurrection of the righteous is now a present, imminent and spiritual reality that may be experienced only through the life-giving voice (or words, Jn. 6:63) of God's Son Jesus Christ. As Carson explains, "Here [in verse 25] the coming hour already is: the resurrection life for the physically dead in the end time is already being manifest as life for the spiritually dead."²³

Much of what has already been said concerning v. 24 could also be said of v. 25. If anything, the language in v. 25, particularly the phrase, "an hour is coming, and is now here," serves to heighten (or intensify) the already thick presence of inaugurated eschatology. Picking up on this phrase, Beasley-Murray notes:

The "hour" that is coming is that of the eschatological future, to which the resurrection of the dead belongs; but it has already entered the present, since the Christ who raises the dead is here. His voice sounds out...that the "dead" (the mass of humankind, who exist in a condition of spiritual death) may live.²⁴

Likewise, Morris goes so far as to say:

We might understand it of the raising of the dead at the last day were it not for the "and now is." This shows that what is primarily in mind is the present giving of life that characterizes the ministry of the Son. In him the last age is vividly present...Those who are spiritually dead hear His voice, and those who have heard it live.²⁵

These interpretations agree wholeheartedly with Grudem's earlier comments: the "hour" is certainly "the entire church age" during which the voice of Christ sounds forth throughout the entire world while the resurrection applies to those who, though spiritually

²² Carson, 162.

²³ Ibid, 256.

²⁴ Beasley-Murray, 76-7.

²⁵ Morris, 318.

dead, hear Jesus' voice and come to life.²⁶ Even the *New Scofield Bible* calls this hour the "hour of spiritual regeneration [that] has already lasted for over nineteen [and now over twenty] centuries." Here again, as with v. 24, the language of resurrection is applied vividly to those who, though still susceptible to physical death, are nonetheless said to be truly raised.

John 5:28-29 ²⁸ Do not marvel at this, for *an hour* (ὥρα) is coming when *all* (πάντες) *who are in the tombs* will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out, those who have *done good to the resurrection of life*, and those who have *done evil to the resurrection of judgment*.

In v. 28-29, Christ's focus shifts from the present hour that "is now here" to a purely eschatological hour that "is [still] coming." First, he instructs his hearers not to marvel at what he has just said, namely, "that the Son of man even now judges and quickens the spiritually dead," for he himself will be the agent of the final resurrection and judgment as well.²⁷ Second, he explains how the coming hour stands both in continuity and in discontinuity with the hour now at hand. In each, Christ is sovereign. Acting as the Father's agent, He alone calls forth the dead and announces their ultimate fate. However, while in v. 24-25 this resurrection is a present, spiritual reality, in v. 28-29 "the future, final apocalyptic resurrection is in view."²⁸ V. 28-29 therefore present what may usefully be called the *second resurrection* in the John 5 pericope and while it differs in kind from the first resurrection, there is still continuity "between those who experience spiritual life now and those who *will rise to live* at the last day."²⁹

The fact that this second resurrection is physical in nature and universal in scope is established by the viscerally descriptive phrase "all who are in the tombs will...come out," as opposed simply to "the dead" in v. 25.³⁰ Reading v. 25 as a commentary on v. 24, the "dead" who hear the voice of the Son of God and experience the first resurrection in v. 25 are the same people who "hear my [Jesus'] words and believe him who sent me" in v. 24. The scope is therefore limited in v. 24-25 to regenerate believers. By contrast, in v. 28-29 no such limiting

²⁶ Grudem, 1119.

²⁷ Barrett, 263.

²⁸ Carson, 258.

²⁹ Ibid, 258.

³⁰ Barrett, 263.

categories are present. "All who are in the tombs," as Jesus continues, clearly includes "those who have done good" and "those who have done evil." It is, in other words, a universal and indiscriminate resurrection. The subsequent judgment, however, is anything but indiscriminate.

However, if the first "hour" is a long period of time what is to keep this second hour from likewise being a long period of time. Would not such an interpretation favor the traditional premillennialist view? First, the traditional premillennialist view does *not* posit the physical resurrection of believers and unbelievers *over* a long period of time. They are rather two, separate and instantaneous events *divided by* a long period of time. For the second hour of John 5 to favor such an interpretation, v. 28-29 would have to read something like, "An hour is coming when during the first minute the righteous will be raised and then during the last minute the unrighteous will be raised." Instead, the raising of the dead, all the dead, takes place, as was just pointed out, indiscriminately. Second, to force some sort of reigning-millennial period into the second hour would mean reading Revelation 20 back into not only John 5:28-29, but Acts 24:15 – "a resurrection (singular) of both the righteous and the wicked" – and 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12. While such a period may fit, at first glance, awkwardly into John 5:25, the elongation of the first "hour" by the phrases "is coming and is now here" makes exegetical room for it, while nothing in 5:28-29 hints at such a possibility.

The oddity of one-person experiencing two resurrections has led some to argue that the resurrection envisaged here does not include believers. "This," as Carson explains, "will not do...It is precisely they who enjoy eternal life now, by faith in Jesus and in the one who has sent him, whom Jesus will raise to life at the last day."³¹ In contrast, those who have not experienced the first resurrection exempting them from the judgment to come will be raised not to the "resurrection of life" but rather to the "resurrection of judgment." This second resurrection may therefore be understood as a physical and eternal realization of each person's present, spiritual state: "That believers who already experience eternal life must rise on the last day is

³¹ Carson, 258. Beasley-Murray: "The spiritually dead who 'hear' the voice of the Son of God in the days of their flesh and are raised by him to life will hear that voice, calling them to enter upon the fullness of resurrection life for the kingdom of glory" (77).

not incoherent: their new, resurrection-life existence will be the ratification and confirmation of the life and freedom from condemnation they already enjoy.”³²

Keeping in mind the driving parallelism established in v. 21 – “as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will” – when we lay v. 24-25 side by side with v. 28-29, we are forced to conclude that, as Grudem alluded to earlier, there are in fact two resurrections in the John 5:19-29 pericope. However, contra Grudem’s conclusion, the first resurrection spoken of in verses 24-25 is a resurrection from spiritual death to spiritual life, particular only to believers while the second resurrection in verse 28-29 is a physical and universal one. What we have then are two resurrections, each within three verses of the other, which describe, in both realized and wholly eschatological terms, one resurrection that is spiritual in nature and a second that is physical.

Revelation 20:4-6 ⁴ They *came to life* (ἐζήσαν) and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. ⁵ The rest of the dead did not come to life until the (ἐζήσαν) thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. ⁶ Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

G.K. Beale, in his commentary on John’s Revelation, which Carson praises, begins his comments on the two resurrections of Revelation 20:4-6 by recording:

One of the most substantial arguments in favor of the premillennial interpretation is based on the fact that the coming to life of the “rest of the dead” mention in v 5a is clearly a physical resurrection (on this all commentators apparently agree). If the physical resurrection of the wicked in v 5a is described with “they came to life” (ἐζήσαν) and the identical word is used of the resurrection of the saints in v 5, then the resurrection in v 4 must also be a physical resurrection.³³

As Henry Alford is so often quoted in connection to these seemingly identical resurrections, “If, in a passage where *two resurrections* are mentioned...[if] the first resurrection may be understood to mean *spiritual* rising with Christ, while the second means *literal* rising from the grave; – then there is an end of all significance in language, and Scripture is wiped out as a

³² Ibid, 258. Bruce: “That [final, judicial] decision will simply be the ratification of a decision made in this life” (133).

³³ Beale, 1003-4.

definite testimony to anything."³⁴ This, however, by nearly all exegetical accounts, is precisely what takes place in John 5:19-29. Interestingly, Beale, mustering a cumulative defense against the traditional premillennialist reading of the two resurrections in Revelation 20, calls attention to both John 5:24-29 and Romans 6:4-13, citing them as decisive examples that "elsewhere in the NT ἀνάστασις and ζάω (or the cognate noun ζωή, 'life') and synonyms are used interchangeably of both spiritual and physical resurrection *within the same immediate contexts*."³⁵ While these observations "do not demonstrate that the same words are used in Rev. 20:4 and 6 of both spiritual and physical resurrection"³⁶ they do demonstrate the *possibility* and even the *probability*, in light of the clear parallels between Revelation 20 and John 5, that the two resurrections in Revelation 20 need not be of like kind. As Beale continues:

It is clear that the "second death" in v 6 is the spiritual death of the unrighteous, involving conscious, eternal suffering. On the other hand, the death of the righteous in v 4 (e.g. "the souls of those *beheaded*") is literal, physical death. Therefore, there is a *first death* of believers that is physical and different in nature from the *second death* of unbelievers, which is spiritual. If there are thus two different kinds of deaths, it is plausible that the corresponding resurrection would also differ. The resurrection of believers is spiritual, whereas the resurrection of unbelievers is physical.³⁷

Strimple, likewise calling attention to the relationship between the both the two resurrections and the two deaths, explains, "The reference to the first resurrection implies a second, true – a second resurrection for the same people! Similarly, 'the second death' (v. 6) implies a first death – but also for the same people, the unbelievers."³⁸ What Alford and other premillennialists present as the decisive, exegetical argument for two physical resurrections in Revelation 20 is hardly as decisive as many have assumed. Moreover, when read in light of the two resurrections in John 5, the amillennialist reading of Revelation 20 becomes not only plausible but preferable.

³⁴ Ibid, 1004.

³⁵ Ibid, 1004-5.

³⁶ Ibid, 1005.

³⁷ Ibid, 1005.

³⁸ Strimple, 127.

What then are we to make of the strong parallelism between John 5 and Revelation 20? At the very least, it is clear that the language of resurrection is far more malleable, particularly in Johannine literature, than many may be inclined to think. Moreover, as numerous commentators and the above exegesis have shown, we are faced with a very real eschatological predicament. Either Jesus (as remembered by John) and Paul (Acts 24:15 and 2 Thess. 1:5-12) were misled (or misleading) in their complementary understanding of the end times or the pre-millennialist's conclusions regarding the nature of the two resurrections in Revelation 20 is misled.

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