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AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF REVELATION, CHAPTER 20, IN THE
LIGHT OF THE BOOK AS A WHOLE.

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The twentieth chapter of the book of Revelation contains four visions, as follows: the binding of Satan (vs. 1-3); the souls of martyrs and confessors enthroned with Christ (vs. 4-6); the final battle between Satan and the saints (vs. 7-10); and the general resurrection and final judgment (vs. 11-15). The first three visions are closely connected, being tied together by the six times repeated expression, "a thousand years." Indeed, the first two visions—the binding of Satan and the enthronement of the martyrs—describe events that are synchronous. They are to be followed by the final onset between Satan and the saints, and this, in turn, will usher in the general resurrection and final judgment.

It is of the utmost importance that we have a clear conception of the nature of a vision. For not only is this twentieth chapter made up of visions, the whole book of Revelation is a stupendous and magnificent vision, or rather series of visions. The author describes his book for us in 1:19: "Write therefore the things which thou didst see—both the things which are and those which are destined to occur hereafter."

The aorist tense—"didst see"—refers to the definite time when the vision or visions came to John; and the "kai . . . kai"—"both . . . and"—indicates that the visions relate to the present and the future. Thus we see that the author himself claims that his book is a vision or series of visions, based upon events occurring in his own time, but having an outlook also upon the future. What then is a vision? It has been defined as "a projection or creation of the mind, analogous to the dream: the subject falls into a state of trance or ecstasy, in which the channels connecting the brain with external objects are closed: the conscious operation of the senses is consequently in abeyance: the power of the will to direct thought is relaxed: on the other hand the imagination, or faculty of combining into new forms images and ideas which have been previously apprehended, is abnormally active; and the pictures created by it stand out the more vividly. In other words, the vision may be described as a combination into new forms, under the influence of a determining impulse, of the images and impressions with which the mind, through its waking experience, is stored. In a prophetic vision, the determining impulse will have been due to the operation of the revealing Spirit."¹

The book of Revelation is a great prophetic vision, that is, a vision of a man of God under the influence of the Holy Spirit. It is a dream-book, if you please, a picture-book. It is filled with elaborate scenes and images painted by the brilliant Oriental imagination. Hence, in order to interpret it aright, we must take full account of its peculiar nature. It is supreme exegetical folly to attempt to interpret the imaginative, pictorial, symbolical dream-book known as the Apocalypse of St. John as we would interpret the logical formal treatise known as the Epistle to the Romans. The two writings belong to different species of literature, and the principles of interpretation are different. Every effort to give a definite significance to each detail in the gorgeous pictures of Revelation, or

¹S. R. Driver, *Camb. Bible, Joel and Amos*, p. 200.

to fasten a literal interpretation upon each feature of its images, or to regard the book as a chronology of church history, or to find in it definite predictions about the world war—every such effort is bound to end in dismal failure and lead to a *reductio ad absurdum*.

Furthermore, we should bear in mind that the book belongs not only to "vision" literature; it belongs also to apocalyptic literature. It is both Vision and Apocalypse. One outstanding feature of apocalyptic literature is that it seeks to express the truth in symbolic form rather than in simple narrative. Another distinctive feature is that it endeavors to give a spiritual conception of history, a heavenly view of events. In an apocalypse we look on the scenes of earth from the viewpoint of heaven. Hence the name "apocalypse," which means "removing the veil. An apocalypse removes the veil and permits us to see the inner meaning of things. We are carried into the spirit-world and through the opened door of heaven behold the throne of God and innumerable hosts of angels, and the general assembly, and church of the first born, and spirits of just men made perfect, and Jesus the mediator of the new covenant. This peculiar kind of composition arose in times of persecution, and these writings have well been called "tracts for bad times." Their supreme and sovereign purpose is to comfort and encourage those to whom they were addressed in the dark hours of persecution. In order to accomplish this purpose the authors hit upon the plan of employing not plain literal statements of fact and dogma, but symbols and pictures and figures which would at once reveal the truth to God's people and conceal it from their enemies. Hence it must follow that any one who insists upon foisting a literal interpretation upon every detail in the pictures and symbols of an apocalypse has missed the road to a right interpretation. On the other hand, the true message of an apocalypse is to be ascertained by studying the visions in their broad outlines, rather than in their minute details, and by regarding them as figurative and symbolic presentations of truth. Accordingly, in this study of chapter 20 of Revelation, the greatest of all the apocalypses, we shall

adopt this principle of interpretation and consider the visions as symbols or types of certain truths, which were of great value to the persecuted Christians of A. D. 95, for whom they were first written, and also full of blessing and power for us today.

I.

The reign of the martyrs and confessors, as pictured in vs. 4-6, is located in heaven and not upon the earth.

We begin with this point because it is the most obvious. There are some things in this chapter about which we cannot be certain; but there is one thing concerning which we have a right to be unyielding and dogmatic, and that is, the scene of the reign of these martyrs and confessors is in heaven. "St. John does not commit himself to a reign on earth," declares Dr. H. B. Swete.² Dr. Warfield says: "What is meant to be conveyed to us by this beautiful description of the holy peace of Christ's saints is probably not a prophetic knowledge of an episode in the earthly history of the Church, but a deeper sense of the bliss of Christ's people "safe penned in Paradise!"³ Let us note one or two reasons why we are compelled to locate the enthronement of the martyrs and confessors in heaven.

1. The thrones on which they sit are erected in heaven. "And I saw thrones," says John, "and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus . . . and they reigned with Christ a thousand year" (vs. 4). The word "throne" occurs 45 times in Revelation and in all but two passages the throne is in heaven. The two exceptions are 2:13 and 16:10, where we have the throne of Satan and the throne of the beast, referring to Pergamum as the centre of Caesar worship in the province of Asia. Deducting these two, we have 43 "throne" texts, of which we know that 42 refer to a

²H. B. Swete, *Apoc. of St. John*, p. 265.

³B. B. Warfield, *Princeton Theo. Review*, 1904, p. 599.

throne in heaven. Hence it is highly probable that the 43rd text, in 20:4, relates to the martyrs and confessors enthroned in heaven. And so the burden of proof rests on the exegete who denies that these thrones are in heaven. In this very 20th chapter we have three references to a throne. In vs. 11 we read: "And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat upon it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away." In vs. 12 we read: "And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne: and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of the things which were written in the books, according to their works." In these two passages the reference is to a throne in heaven. Hence we infer that in the third passage also (vs. 4) the thrones on which the martyrs sit are in heaven and not on the earth.

2. In 6:9-11 we have another description of these same martyrs and confessors, and here John specifically locates them in heaven. "And when he opened the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of them that had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held: and they cried with a great voice, saying, How long, O Master, the holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on earth? And there was given them to each one a white robe; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little time until their fellow-servants also and their brethren, who should be killed even as they were, should have fulfilled their course." Observe that John sees these martyrs "beneath the altar." As the context clearly reveals, the altar is in heaven. Looking through the opened door of heaven John saw an altar close to the throne of God and at the foot of the altar the souls of the martyrs. "The altar here in view," says Swete, "is the counterpart of the Altar of Burnt Offering and the victims which have been offered at it are the martyred members of the Church, who have followed their Head in the example of his sacrificial death. Their souls are seen "under the altar," because in the Levitical rite, the blood, which is

the soul (Lev. 17:11), was poured out at the foot of the altar (Lev. 4:7)."⁴

3. There is still another passage, one of the most beautiful and familiar in the entire book, where these same martyrs are described as reigning with Christ, and here again the scene is placed in heaven. I refer to 7:13-17: "And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, these that are arrayed in the white robes, who are they, and whence came they? And I say unto him, my Lord, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they that came out of the great tribulation, and they washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God; and they serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall spread his tabernacle over them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun strike upon them, nor any heat; for the Lamb that is in the midst of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them unto fountains of waters of life: and God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes." Comment on this beautiful passage is unnecessary. It gives us a picture of the glorified state of the martyrs and confessors, who have passed through the great tribulation unto the safety and bliss of heaven. They are reigning with Christ and serving him in heaven.

4. We shall give only one more passage where the reign of the martyrs and confessors is specifically located in heaven. In 14:1-5 we read: "And I saw, and behold, the Lamb standing on the Mount Zion, and with him a hundred and forty and four thousand, having his name, and the name of his Father, written on their forehead. And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters . . . and the voice which I heard was as the voice of harpers . . . and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders, and no man could learn the song save the hundred and forty and four thousand, *even* they that had been purchased out of the earth. These are they that were not defiled with wo-

⁴H. B. Swete, *Apoc. of St. John*, p. 90.

men; for they are virgins. These are they that follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were purchased from among men, to be the first fruits unto God and unto the Lamb. And in their mouth was found no lie; they are without blemish." Observe in this description that they sing their new song "before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders." But chapter four makes it perfectly plain that the reference is to the throne of God in heaven (4:1, 2, 4). Again observe, they are standing with the Lamb on Mt. Zion, which can be none other than the heavenly Mt. Zion, as we read in Hebrews: "Ye are come unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and the innumerable hosts of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant" (Heb. 12:22-24).

5. We have reserved for the last the strongest proof that the enthronement is in heaven, and that is this: John says he saw the *souls*, the disembodied spirits, of the martyrs and confessors. Not their bodies, not even their redeemed spirits clothed in their resurrection-bodies, but simply their *souls*. And, of course, the only proper place for the discarnate spirits of the faithful is in heaven.

Manifestly all these passages (20:4-6; 6:9-11; 7:13-17; 14:1-5) must be regarded as relating to the same class, namely the martyrs and confessors. For frequently the very same descriptive language is employed, and where the phraseology is changed the underlying thought remains the same. Besides, the unity of Revelation proves that in these passages John has the same persons in mind. In spite of its elaborate structure Revelation possesses a most marvelous and compact unity. Of it we can assert what Marcus Dods affirmed of the Fourth Gospel: "From the first word to the last there is no paragraph, sentence or expression which is out of its place, or with which we could dispense. Part hangs together with part in perfect balance." On this point hear the testimony of Dr. Warfield, one of the truly illuminating writers on New Testament topics:

"We would remark that the elaborate, artistic and even artificial plan of the book demonstrates its original unity . . . Just consider for a moment the artificiality of the numerico-symbolical scheme which underlies the whole book—its seven great divisions, each subdivided into seven subsections; its complications of caesura-like pauses amid these, separating them into fours and threes; its solemn delays of the end here and there by the insertion of inter-scenes between the sixth and seventh subsections; its repeated traversal of the same ground in obedience to its system of parallelism, and yet in such a way as not only not to introduce inconsistencies, but to mark each successive section as a distinct advance on its predecessor, both in matter revealed, clearness of revelation, and grandeur of the poetic imagery and apocalyptic symbolism clothing the revelation. The Apocalypse is probably the most artistically and elaborately constructed book extant; its every part is bound to each of its fellows and to the whole by innumerable bands of adamant. It is an organism; part answering to part, and the whole is fitly framed and knit together through the mutual interworking of each separate portion in its due measure."⁸

The manifest unity of the book demands that these passages (20:4-6; 6:9-11; 7:13-17; 14:1-5) be taken as referring to the same class throughout. The moment you regard them as relating to different classes you destroy the unity of the book; and on the other hand when you consider them all as slightly varying descriptions of the same class, the whole book stands before you in all its marvelous unity with no part lacking or dislocated or any such thing.

II.

The souls who are reigning with Christ are the martyrs and confessors of the Neronian and Domitian persecutions.

"I saw," says John, "the souls of them that had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus, and for the word of God, and such as worshipped not the beast, neither his image, and

⁸B. B. Warfield, *Presbyterian Review*, Vol. 5, p. 259.

received not the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand" (20:4). "The souls of them that had been beheaded" evidently describes those that had suffered martyrdom. The phrase, "and such as," seems to introduce a second class of persons, who, while not suffering actual martyrdom, yet possessed the martyr spirit, and endured reproach, boycotting, imprisonment, loss of goods, and other hardships rather than worship the beast and his image. They are known in church history as "confessors," and are defined in the Century Dictionary as "those who having been persecuted and and tormented were permitted to die in peace." Note, then, we have here two classes—the martyrs and the "confessors" who possessed the true martyr-spirit, suffered persecution, yet died in peace. Who are these martyrs and confessors? Modern scholarship with the aid of the vastly increased light that has been thrown upon the book of Revelation in recent years makes the unanimous answer: They are the victims of Nero and Domitian. The verdict of modern investigation is indicated in the following statement of Harnack: "That the beast (13:1, 17:3) is the Roman Empire; that the seven heads are seven emperors; that the woman (17:3-9) is the city of Rome; that the ten horns (13:1; 17:3-12) are imperial governors—all this is now beyond dispute."⁶ "We may feel satisfied," declares Dr. L. A. Muirhead, "that the first beast is in general the Roman Empire embodied in the person of the Emperor, while the second (the lamb that spake as a dragon) is the priesthood of the Imperial Cultus. We may be satisfied also that under the imagery of the first beast the author must have thought of both Nero and Domitian. It was under Domitian that persecution of the Christians became a part of the Imperial policy."⁷

In the Apocalypse there are six references to a "book of life" (3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27). God is represented as having a register of his redeemed and accepted people. Only those whose names are in this book have any right

⁶Quoted by M. Dods, Intro. to N. T., p. 239.

⁷Dic. of Apos. Ch. Art. Apocalypse.

to enter into the city of God (21:27). All whose names are not in this book shall worship the beast and be cast into the lake of fire (20:15). Not one whose name is in the book shall worship the beast or his image or receive his mark upon their forehead and hand (3:5; 13:8; 17:8). In other words, John believes that the persecutions of his day will sift the false church members from the true, and that not one genuine Christian shall worship the emperor's image. Combining these "book of life" texts with the statement in 20:4, "and such as worship not the beast," we conclude that in this fourth verse we have a comprehensive description of all the faithful of John's day, some of whom actually suffered martyrdom, while others, although enduring manifold persecutions, were permitted to die in peace. This conclusion has an important bearing on the meaning of "the rest of the dead" in vs. 5, which we consider later.

The word translated "beheaded" means to have the head cut off with the pelekus, or axe, "the traditional instrument of capital punishment in Republican Rome, which, though under the Empire superseded by the sword, still lingered in the memory of the provincials."

In 6:9-11 these martyrs are spoken of as those "that had been slain for the word of God; and for the testimony which they held"; they had been killed and their blood cries out to God for vengeance. In 13:15-18 we are informed that all who refused to worship the image of the beast were decreed to be killed. "And he (the beast) causeth all, the small and the great, the rich and the poor, and the free and the bond, that there be given them a mark on their right hand, or upon their forehead; and that no man should be able to buy or sell, save he that hath the mark, even the name of the beast or the number of his name . . . and his number is 666." 666 is undoubtedly a symbol for the Emperor Nero; for the Hebrew letters for "Neron-Caesar" make 666. And Nero here stands for the persecuting power of Rome, for it was he who began the policy of persecution and was himself the embodiment of its worst features, and his evil spirit reappeared in Domitian.

In Revelation we have 30 references to a blood-thirsty beast of irresistible strength and cruelty who has caused an image of himself to be erected in the provinces, and all who refuse to worship the image shall suffer boycott, loss of property and death. A careful study of these references forces us to the conclusion that the beast is the persecuting Roman government under Nero and Domitian. This conclusion is confirmed by the testimony of Irenaeus (180 A. D.) and many others that the apostle John wrote Revelation in the closing years (90-95 A. D.) of the reign of Domitian. "So far as we can discover, no persecution was directed against the Christians as Christians till Domitian's time."⁸ Indeed, many modern scholars believe there is sufficient evidence to fix the date of the book definitely between 93 and 95 A. D. The "beast from the sea" of chapter 13 represents the persecuting Roman government; while the "beast from the land" of the same chapter is the native council of Asia, which executes the commands of the "beast from the sea." "The false prophet" is perhaps not to be regarded as an individual but as a class or system, and represents the religious policy and power of the native council of Asia. About these details we cannot be dogmatic, but we can accept with assurance the general statement that the martyrs and confessors whom John saw enthroned in heaven were the victims of Nero and Domitian. The Christians in Asia in 90-95 A. D. to whom John writes were distressed by the delay of Christ's second coming, by the bitter hostility of the Jews, by their own low spiritual vitality, by pagan persecution here and there even unto death, and by the dark prospect of greater persecution ahead. John's immediate purpose was to encourage and strengthen these Christians in their trials, and he accomplished his purpose by giving through the opened door of heaven pictures of the glorified state of those who were faithful even unto death. The vision in chapter 20 of the martyrs and confessors reigning with Christ is one of these pictures, of which there are many scattered throughout the book.

⁸R. H. Charles, Art. "Revelation," *Encycl. Brit.*

III.

"The thousand years" of Revelation, chapter 20, indicates the period from 100 A. D. to the second coming of Christ.

There are those who hold the view that "the thousand years" as used here expresses the idea of completeness, and not time at all. Accordingly, they claim, the binding of Satan for a thousand years simply means that he was completely bound, and the reigning of the martyrs with Christ for a thousand years expresses the thought of the completeness and glory of their reign. However, we are compelled to insist that the reference is to a period of time. The phrase "a thousand years" occurs six times in this chapter, and only the sense of a time-period will suit all six occurrences. What period then is indicated? Are we to take it literally as a thousand actual years? I am not aware that it is ever so used in Scripture. In Ps. 90:4 it is used of a relatively long period. "For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is passed, and as a watch in the night." It is employed in precisely the same way in 2 Pet. 3:8: "One day is with the Lord as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day." So we are prepared in advance to expect that John uses it in the same general sense of a long period of time, and when we closely examine his use of it we find that no other meaning will suit the context. John employs it to express a great epoch in human history; a long, but not endless, period. It will cover many centuries, but will certainly come to an end some day; hence John employs as the symbol of such an era a large but definite number of years. While long, it is limited.

The *terminus ad quem* of this period is unmistakably marked for us by John himself. It is the general resurrection and final judgment at the end of the world. "And when the thousand years are finished, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, and shall come forth to deceive the nations . . . to gather them together to the war . . . And they went up over the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city: and fire came down out of

heaven, and devoured them. And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where are also the beast and the false prophet. And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat upon it, from whose face the earth and heaven fled away . . . And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne; and the books were opened . . . and the dead were judged out of the things which were written in the books. . . . And the sea gave up the dead that were in it; and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them; and they were judged every man according to their works. Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire" (20: 7-14). Thus the close of the thousand year period carries us to the end of the present age.

What can be said of the *terminus a quo* of this period? The beginning of the thousand years is marked by two outstanding events: (a) the binding of Satan (vs. 1-3), and (b) the enthronement of the martyrs and confessors (vs. 4-6). The enthronement of the martyrs takes place, as we have already seen, at the end of the first Christian century, when these victims of Nero and Domitian sealed their testimony with their blood; and, consequently, it seems that we should date the beginning of the thousand year period at the same time. Is there any possible sense in which Satan can be said to have been bound at the beginning of the Christian era? There is. Just before his death Jesus said: "Now is the judgment of this world; now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto myself. But this he said, signifying by what manner of death he should die." (John 12:31-33). In his farewell discourse with the disciples on the night before he suffered, Jesus speaking of his death and ascension said: "The prince of this world *hath been judged*" (John 16:11). When the seventy returned from their preaching tour and reported their victory over the demoniacs, Jesus said: "I beheld Satan fallen as lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:18). With the triumph of Christ on the cross, Satan received a blow from which he will never recover. That marked the beginning of the end of his kingdom. That was the battle

of the Marne. Then Satan was bound but not destroyed; his power checked but not annihilated. Paul expresses the same idea, when, speaking of the victory of the cross over the evil powers, he declares: "Having despoiled the principalities and the powers he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it (the cross)." Col. 2:15. The vision of the binding of Satan is, we take it, only a symbolic expression of the truth clearly taught elsewhere in the New Testament that Satan has been increasingly checked and hindered ever since the signal victory of Christ on the Cross.

Chapter 12 of Revelation supplies another proof that there is a sense in which we may say that Satan was bound at the beginning of the Christian era. That chapter opens with an account of the birth of Christ, born of the church, which is symbolized as a woman with child. In vs. 5 we read: "And she was delivered of a son, a man child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God and unto his throne." Here we have a reference to the ascension of the Saviour from the cross to the throne of God. Now what follows? "And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels going forth to war with the dragon . . . And the great dragon was cast down . . . and his angels were cast down with him." (12:7-9.) That is to say Satan was cast down into a lower place in the spirit world; he lost some of his former power; he was henceforth checked and hindered. And observe that this occurs just after the ascension of Christ at the beginning of the Christian era. All of which reminds us of what Christ himself said when speaking of his death and ascension: "Now shall the prince of this world be cast out" (John 12:31).

That we should date the beginning of the thousand years at the first century of the Christian era is further shown by a consideration of the main thought of 20:1-10. Observe that these verses open with a vision of a partial and temporary victory over evil, as symbolized in the binding of Satan (vs. 1-3), and close with a vision of complete and final victory as set forth in the devil being cast into the lake of fire. In other words,

the central and reigning conception is that the church is to win ever-increasing conquests over Satan until at last her victory is complete and final. Now we know that the church began her world conquest when her Lord said: "Go ye into all the world and make disciples of all the nations." And she is never to cease her warfare until the kingdom of the world has become Christ's kingdom and he shall reign forever and ever. The thousand years of Revelation, chapter 20, stretch from the first partial victory over Satan on to the final complete victory, and mark the whole period of the church militant.

We have still another strong reason for beginning the thousand year period at the first Christian century. I refer to a striking literary device of John's, by which he carries his readers right up to the Second Coming and the end of the world, then he returns to the beginning and, passing over the same ground again, once more brings us to the end. This he does again and again. We may describe the whole book of Revelation as a number of moving picture reels, each reel giving a panorama of the conflicts and struggles of the church, and each reaching from the beginning to the end of the conflict. These reels are not successive but synchronous, yet not in mere repetition of each other, but ever drawing nearer to the end, as the succeeding waves of the sea climb up higher on the shore.⁹ One of these reels ends with chapter 19, where we have a vision of the Second Coming; and we are prepared to expect a new reel to begin with chapter 20. And precisely this do we find when we examine that chapter. John starts over again with the binding of Satan at the first Christian century and carries us on to the end when the devil is cast into the lake of fire. Chapter 20 is a complete reel in itself, reaching from the beginning to the end of the conflict, from 100 A. D. on to the final judgment.

I am aware that some may seek to evade the force of the argument we are now making by declaring that the analysis by

⁹Dr. D. N. McLaughlin, of Norfolk, Va., tells me that A. B. Davidson compared the visions of Revelation to a telescope, the various sections of which slide and unfold within or over one another.

which one of these reels is made to end with chapter 19, and a new one begin with chapter 20 is purely an arbitrary arrangement, with no valid reasons to support it. Another, it may be said, will work out a different analysis, in which chapter 20 is made to be simply the culmination of the events described in the preceding chapters, and not a new and complete reel in itself. In reply it should be said that a true analysis can never be an arbitrary affair, but is an unbiased and careful attempt to reveal the real organic structure of a book. We claim that the true analysis of Revelation will show that the position of chapter 20 in the organism of the book as a whole is itself a strong reason for regarding the thousand year period as a designation for the entire Christian era. We have not here the space to vindicate our analysis of the book. We simply give it without proof for what it is worth, allowing it to stand or fall on its own merits, only asking the reader to give it a fair trial before rejecting it.

We find in the book only three main divisions: The discipline of the church, or Christ as Prophet, chs. 1-3. The conflict of the church, or Christ as Priest, chs. 4-20; and the victory of the church, or Christ as King, chs. 21-22. The age-long conflict of the church, chs. 4-20, is set forth in six series of visions, *each series of which reaches from the beginning of the conflict to the victorious end.* These visions are not successive but synchronous, yet not in mere repetition of each other, but ever giving a more spiritual conception of history and ever drawing nearer and more visibly to the end, just as the succeeding waves of the sea climb higher on the shore. Chapters 4 and 5 are preparatory to the conflict, while chapters 6-20 describe the conflict itself. These six series of visions, each series, remember, reaching from 100 A. D. to the Second Coming, are as follows:

1st Series, Seven Seals, 6:1-8:1.

2nd Series, Seven Trumpets, 8:2-11:19.

3rd Series, Seven Symbolic Figures, 12:1-14:20.

4th Series, Seven Bowls 15:1-16:21.

5th Series, Seven-fold Judgment, 17:1-19:21.

6th Series, Seven-fold Victory (the thousand year period) 20:1-15.

The glories that follow the victory are depicted in chapters 21-22. Let it be said that this analysis was worked out before any theory of the millennium was adopted. That is to say, the view of the millennium as here presented was derived from an independent and unbiased and prolonged study of the organic structure of the book as a whole, and not *vice versa*.

This unique feature of the structure of Revelation, whereby we are carried over the same ground again and again, has an important bearing upon a question of great interest, which we do well to consider just here. We have the Second Coming in chapter 19 and a thousand year period, or "millennium," in chapter 20. Therefore, some claim, the Second Coming must occur before the thousand year period. But we cannot argue thus, at least in this part of the book (chapters 4-20). If Revelation were built up like Romans, if it were a logical argumentative discourse, in which each point follows logically from the preceding and introduces the following, then we might claim that the apostle John places the Second Coming before the thousand year period. But such is not the structure of Revelation. The visions in this section of the book are synchronous and not successive. One panorama closes with chapter 19 and a new one begins at chapter 20, and this arrangement makes it impossible to argue that the Second Coming will precede the thousand year period of chapter 20. Dr. Vos, of Princeton, says: "It is urged that the sequence of visions places this millennium after the parousia of Christ narrated in chapter 19. The question of historic sequence, however, in Revelation is difficult to decide. In other parts of the book the principle of "recapitulation," *i. e.*, of contemporaneousness of things successively depicted, seems to underlie the visions, and numbers elsewhere in the book are meant symbolically. These facts leave open the possibility that the thousand years are synchronous with the earlier developments recorded, and symbolically describe the state of glorified life

enjoyed with Christ in heaven by the martyrs during the intermediate period preceding the parousia."¹⁰

But the overwhelming argument against placing the Second Coming *before* the thousand year period is found in the fact that John definitely locates it *after* the thousand years are finished. Let us see. The coming down of fire out of heaven and devouring Satan and his hosts may be an apocalyptic symbol for the Second Coming of Christ to rescue and reward his people and destroy his and their enemies. "And when the thousand years are finished Satan shall be loosed and shall come forth to deceive the nations, to gather them together to the war . . . And they compassed the camp of the saints about and the beloved city; and fire came down out of heaven and devoured them." Fire in Scripture is often the symbol of God, and here it evidently denotes some signal divine intervention just before the general resurrection and final judgment, when the saints are represented as in desperate need of superhuman aid. Paul in 2 Thess. 1:4-10, 1 Cor. 3:10-15, and Peter in 2 Pet. 3:10, picture the Second Coming under the symbol of fire. "We ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and afflictions; to the end that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, if so be that it is a righteous thing with God to recompense affliction to them that afflict you, and to you that are afflicted rest with us, at the revelation (apocalypse) of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of his power in flaming fire, rendering vengeance to them that know not God and obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus, who shall suffer eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and the glory of his power when he shall come to be glorified in his saints . . . in that day" (2 Thess. 1:4-10). John, too, puts the coming of fire in close connection with the destruction of the foes of the saints, the general resurrection and final judgment—events which throughout the N. T. are uniformly connected with the Second Coming.

¹⁰Intern. Standard Bible Encycl., Vol. 2, p. 987.

Hence, to interpret the descent of fire in Revelation 20:9 as an apocalyptic symbol of the Second Advent is in perfect accord with the uniform teaching of the N. T. and also in beautiful harmony with the organic structure of the book of Revelation as a whole. In immediate connection with the descent of fire (20:9), we have a description of the Second Coming in vs. 11: "And I saw a great white throne and him that sat upon it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away." Christ comes on a great white throne before which heaven and earth and all things flee away. In 14:14 Christ is pictured as coming on a white cloud, in 19:11, as coming on a white horse, and here the Second Advent is depicted as the appearance of Messiah seated on a white throne. And, mark you, John specifically locates the Second Coming after the thousand years are finished. Each one of the first five moving picture reels—the seven seals, the seven trumpets, the seven symbolic figures, the seven bowls, and the seven-fold judgment—carries us to the Second Coming. And if chapter 20 with the thousand year period is, as we claim, a complete reel in itself parallel with the others, then we would expect that it too would close with the Second Coming. And so it does, as symbolized in the descent of fire from heaven overwhelming the wicked and ushering in the Second Advent, the general resurrection and final judgment. But if this be the correct interpretation of the fire descending and the great white throne, it follows that the Second Coming cannot occur *before* the thousand year period; it comes at the close. Thus we have each reel, each panorama of the Church's conflict, closing with the Second Advent. It is of vital importance to note that Christ will return only at the *close* and culmination of the period of the Church militant. Because of the presence and power of her Lord in her in the person of the Holy Spirit, the Church advances through the deeps of time conquering and to conquer, ever gaining increasing victory; and on the eve of the final battle against sin her Lord will appear in person and himself lead her into the last charge and share with her the fruits of the victory. So throughout the N. T.

We are now in a position to see clearly the purpose and plan of the book of Revelation. In 90-95 A. D. God's people were in deep trouble. They needed comfort. And, like all people in the same or similar situation, they needed to have the same great glorious divine truth dinned into them. So John gave to them six moving picture reels, or panoramas, each one inculcating the same comforting truth: "After the conflict cometh the victory; after the cross the crown."

IV.

The Significance of the "First" Resurrection.

John is full and explicit here, and we do well to observe closely his exact language. Speaking of the faithful of his day who had either perished in martyrdom or passed away in peace, he declares: "And they lived, and reigned with Christ a thousand years. This is the first resurrection." Literally, "the resurrection the first." "First" is emphatic. It is perfectly obvious that the antecedent of "this" is the living and reigning of the souls of the faithful with Christ in heaven. That is, John makes of the "first" resurrection a specific and peculiar thing: it is the living and reigning of these souls in heaven. John proceeds: "Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: over these the second death hath no power; but they shall be priests of God and Christ, and they shall reign with him a thousand years." These souls are now blessed and holy. They are perfectly safe: over them the second death hath no power, that is, they will never be cast into the lake of fire. They are priests of God and of Christ—they live in the immediate presence of God and of Christ: and they reign with Christ, they share his throne a thousand years.

To the present writer two distinct impressions are made by this account of the first resurrection. (1) In the meaning of John the first resurrection is something special and definite. By this he means not regeneration, as Christ meant when he declared: "The hour cometh and now is, when the dead shall

hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear shall live" (John 5:25) or as Paul meant in Romans 6:1-11; Col. 2:12; 3:1-3. Undoubtedly Christ and Paul used the idea of "resurrection" in the spiritual and figurative meaning of regeneration; but John does not mean regeneration here. These martyrs and confessors were already regenerate before they experienced the first resurrection. Because they were regenerate, they died rather than deny Christ. Their bodies had perished but their souls, escaping from the dying body, ascended into heaven to the throne of God. This ascension and enthronement is what John meant by the "first resurrection." And he is careful to call it the "first" resurrection in order to distinguish it from the general resurrection of the bodies of both good and bad at the final judgment, which he describes later in this same chapter (20:11-15).

Thus the first resurrection cannot refer to the resurrection of the *body*. John says specifically: "I saw the *souls* of them that had been beheaded . . . and such as worshipped not the beast." It is the souls, not the bodies, of these martyrs and confessors, all the faithful of his time, that he sees. Moreover, the thousand year period began, as has already been shown, at the first Christian century. Now the "first" resurrection, whatever it is, took place at the same time. Hence, if the first resurrection be that of the body, we have a bodily resurrection of some believers at the beginning of the Christian era. But that can hardly be true. For we have no historical evidence that the bodies of the faithful of John's day have ever been raised. Besides, the Scriptures teach that the bodies of all Christians of all ages and lands, as well as the bodies of the wicked will be raised only in the general resurrection at the end of the world. There is not a line of Scripture which by any sound exegesis can be made to teach the doctrine of two bodily resurrections separated by a long interval of time. So we conclude that the first resurrection is neither regeneration nor bodily resurrection. What is it then? No better description of it can be framed than in the stately and majestic language of our catechism: "The souls of believers are at their death

made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection." That is the living and reigning with Christ; that is the first resurrection. Of course, John has in mind here the faithful of his day. But what he says of them is also true of the faithful of all ages. For the second death hath no power over any true believer. So we may regard the martyrs and confessors of the first century as the representatives of all the faithful people of God, who have the martyr-spirit, whether they suffer martyrdom or pass away in peace.

(2) The second distinct impression is that by "the rest of the dead" John meant primarily those false church members of his time who had not borne the testimony of Jesus, but had renounced Christ and his church and had received on their forehead and on their hand the mark of the beast and thus had made plain the tragic fact that they had never been true believers. "The rest of the dead" in vs. 5 obviously points back to the dead spoken of in vs. 4, and draws a sharp contrast between two classes of the dead. But the dead of vs. 4 are the faithful dead, as we have been. Hence, "the rest of the dead" of vs. 5 are the unfaithful, the false church members of the time. As John says in his first epistle written perhaps very soon after Revelation: "They went out from us because they were not of us: for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest that they all are not of us." (1 John 2:19.) However, what John says as to the fate of these false professing Christians is equally true of all the impenitent and wicked. So we may put them all in the same class as "the rest of the dead." What does he say of them? They "lived not." "Lived not" here is the direct sharp negative of "lived" in vs. 4. One class *lived*; the other lived *not*. "Lived" in vs. 4 means, as we have seen, life in fellowship with God and Christ in glory; it means blessed, holy, happy existence. "Lived not" is the precise opposite; it denotes existence remote from God and Christ in the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of

teeth; impure, unholy, miserable existence. Thus the word "lived" bears the same sense in vs. 4 as in vs. 5. "The rest of the dead lived not *until the thousand years should be finished,*" says John. Does he imply that at the end of the thousand year period, that is, at the final judgment, they would pass from this miserable Godless existence into a holy and happy fellowship with God? Not at all. The conjunction "until" simply asserts that for a thousand years—from the time of their death on to the final judgment—they continued separated from God and Christ and heaven. What will become of them then is left unsaid, what change they will experience is not stated, in this immediate passage; but a few verses on near the close of this chapter John does tell what becomes of them. They shall be judged, found guilty and cast into the lake of fire. "And if any was not found written in the book of life he was cast into the lake of fire" (20:15). Observe: "Not in the book of life" and "lived not." The two expressions describe the same class, and when combined answer most tragically the question: What shall become of "the rest of the dead" at the end of the thousand years?

That we have given the right interpretation to the word "until" is abundantly proved by a brief examination of its use in Revelation. It is used eleven times. For example, Christ says to the Smyrnanian Church: "Be thou faithful until death, and I will give thee the crown of life" (2:10). That simply means: "Be faithful as long as life lasts." There is no intimation that they are to cease to be faithful after death. To the Thyatiran Church Christ says: "That which ye have hold fast until I come" (2:25). That is, they are to hold fast their profession during all the time Christ delays his coming. It does not imply that when Christ comes they are to let go their profession. So when John declares that the rest of the dead lived not until the thousand years should be finished, he means to say that they remained spiritually dead, cut off from God, all the time from their death on to the final judgment.

To the above interpretation of chapter 20, I anticipate the following objection: "If John means that we are in the

Millennium now, with so much sin and tragedy, then we do not want the Millennium; away with it. It is a dark and foul and loathsome thing. No sane man can believe we are in the Millennium now." To this we reply: You are using the word Millennium, the Latin word for a period of a thousand years, in the popular unbiblical sense of that blessed time when righteousness and peace and love will prevail on the earth, and sin and suffering poverty and death shall be done away. John believes in that blessed time as well as you; but he places it, not in chapter 20, where he sketches the conflicts of the church in the present gospel era under the figure of a thousand year period, but in chapter 21. Here is John's description of that blessed time when God's will shall be done on earth as in heaven: "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth are passed away . . . And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God . . . And I heard a great voice out of the throne, saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he shall dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God: and he shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain, any more; the first things are passed away. And he that sitteth on the throne said Behold, I make all things new" (21:1-5). This interpretation, then, so far as robbing us of the "Millennium" hope in the popular understanding of the word, as an era of righteousness and love and peace on the earth, puts it in its right place and makes it far more wonderful and glorious than a miserable millennium ending in a fresh outbreak of Satan's power. The present gospel era, culminating in our Lord's coming, is to make an end of Satan, and in the holy city, new Jerusalem, he will never show his face.

We have quoted with approval from Dr. Vos to the effect that "the question of historic sequence in Revelation is difficult to decide." That is undoubtedly true *within* each of the three main divisions of the book, but not so as to the sequence of these divisions in their relation to one another. The

discipline of the church (chapters 1-3), obviously precedes the conflict (chapters 4-20), and it is equally patent that the conflict precedes the victory (chapters 21-22). In other words, the historic sequence of the three main divisions of the book in relation to each other is not difficult to decide, but is manifestly as follows: the discipline leads to and prepares for the conflict, the conflict, in turn, issues in victory and the glories that follow. But the conflict as sketched in chapters 4-20 culminates in the visible Second Coming of Christ, and *after* that come the new heavens and the new earth and the Kingdom of God. Which is to say that there is a sense in which the book of Revelation is premillennarian. If we will delete from that unfortunate word "millennium," all idea of a thousand years of time and conceive of it as designating the Golden Age of humanity, when righteousness, peace and love shall forever prevail, and sin, sorrow, suffering and death are forever done away, then the apostle John is a premillennarian; for manifestly he represents our Lord's coming as inaugurating that Golden Age.

This then is John's presentation of the whole matter: the Spirit-filled church will gradually extend herself over the earth, slowly in the face of opposition making disciples of all the nations, gaining ever-increasing victories; and just on the eve of her final victory the Lord will return in person and will himself lead her in the final charge and share the fruits of the victory. Like Blucher at Waterloo, he will arrive in time to turn the tide against the foe and roll back the hosts of Satan in shame and everlasting defeat. Thus the book of Revelation sets forth our Saviour's coming and the establishment of his Kingdom on earth as a slow growth, and on the other hand, as a sudden and decisive event. And herein it agrees with the teachings of Christ himself. When on trial before the Sanhedrin Jesus said, "Henceforth (Greek, from the present time), ye shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven," he was referring to the gradual coming of his kingdom through the ministry of the church. He comes and his kingdom comes in each separate

victory of the church through the ages. And the same truth he teaches in the great commission, "Go, make disciples of all the nations," and in his parables which liken his kingdom to growing seed—first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn—to the grain of mustard seed and to the leaven leavening the three measures of meal.

Yet in his farewell discourse, recorded in Matt. 24-25, Luke 21, and Mark 13, which has been well named "The little Apocalypse," Jesus sets forth the other aspect of the truth, that he and his kingdom on earth will come in a sudden, objective, catastrophic event. The apostle Paul likewise combines the two aspects. The kingdom comes in a developing process—that is the heart of post-millennarianism; the kingdom will come in a cataclysm—that is the soul of pre-millennarianism. There are elements of truth in both views. Natural science, history and Divine Revelation "show that the two processes—the gradually developing and the catastrophic—are not mutually exclusive. The former is often only the preparation for the latter." God's revelation of Himself to men is a thing of slow unfolding, an affair of centuries. The whole Old Testament is a progressive revelation of God, a gradual unveiling of His glory, a record of His increasing entrance into the life of man. On the other hand, the revelation of God in the Incarnate Son, the Eternal Word made flesh, is nothing short of a cataclysm. Yet even that may be regarded as the culmination of the partial revelations that went before. The same holds true of God's judgment of sin. He is judging men continually through the centuries, yet they must face the judge in the last day. We may say that the world war through which we have just passed struck us like lightning from a clear sky, yet historians inform us that it had been coming for at least 40 years. Mountains and other features of the physical earth were millions of years in process of formation, yet were thrown into their present shape by some sudden upheaval. Even so the "New Testament views the kingdom of God in two aspects, as always coming, and on the other hand, as yet to come."

Let us briefly sum up the results of our study and state the

conclusion to which we have been led. The expression, "a thousand years," is a symbol of the whole Christian era and chapter 20 is a condensed panorama of the conflicts of the church from her first temporary victory over Satan on to the final and complete victory. Throughout this whole period the victims of Nero and Domitian, the first Christian martyrs, "the first fruits unto God" (14:4) reign with Christ in heaven. This signal honor is theirs, because they were the pioneers and pointed the way to victory for others to follow in their train. How far into this period we have already advanced we can learn only from the progress the church has made in the evangelization of the world; for the gospel must be preached in all the world, and then cometh the end. As the church approaches the completion of her task, the time draweth ever nearer for the appearance of the Saviour. In the meantime, the church, by reason of the presence and power of her Lord in the person of the Holy Spirit, is gradually extending her conquests over the earth, and on the eve of her final victory Christ will appear in person and will himself lead her in the final battle against sin, and with her share the honors and glories of the victory and establish the kingdom of God in its full perfection and abiding splendor.

This view of the Millennium and the Second Coming, derived from a study of chapter 20 in the light of the whole book, possesses certain distinct advantages. For one thing, it banishes all notions of a period of a thousand years from our consideration of the Lord's return. Thank God for that riddance; for where to put that long period, before or after Christ's appearance, has been the chief bone of contention and the prolific source of error, confusion and division. Another advantage is that it saves us from the distressing and absurd thought that after so long and so glorious a reign of God's people on earth the whole thing is to be spoiled by a fresh outbreak of Satan's power. This view removes all such dread. Furthermore, it accepts all the good points of both post-millennarianism and pre-millennarianism and rejects all that is bad in both. And last, but not least, it harmonizes some apparently contradic-

tory New Testament teachings concerning Christ's coming and the establishment of his kingdom.

Throughout this investigation I have tried to approach chapter 20 with no preconceptions or theories of my own. I have endeavored to let John say what I think he means to say. You may not agree with me. But one thing we can agree on. Come how it may, he whose right it is to reign will one day take the kingdom and reign forever. We all agree as to the ultimate triumph of our Saviour's kingdom; and that is the heart and soul of the Apocalypse of St. John, the Theologian.

By God's will
Doubt not, the last word is still
"Victory!"