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REVELATION 20: HERMENEUTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Jerry D. Colwell
William J. Webb

1. *Introduction*

For many years, the differences between premillennialism and amillennialism have been attributed to a "literal" hermeneutic versus a "spiritual" hermeneutic. The standard premillennial logo has often been, "If one interprets the Bible literally, they will be a premillennialist; conversely, if one interprets non-literally, they will be an amillennialist." Fortunately, this type of rhetoric is fading away. There is a growing recognition on both sides of the debate that the hermeneutical issues are far more complex, and that there exists considerable overlap in hermeneutical systems.

The old labels of "literalist" and "non-literalist" simply do not fit. The reason is quite simple: premillennialists are not really "literalists", nor are amillennialists truly "non-literalists." While their broad interpretive *conclusions* about Rev 20 may be characterized as such,[1] their hermeneutical systems may not. One of the more humorous examples of hermeneutical role-reversal between the two systems is found in the Rev 20 passage itself. The "flip-flop" in perspective comes in the treatment of "Gog and Magog" in Rev 20:8. At this point amillennialists tend towards a much more "literal" approach, while premillennialists have to "spiritualize" the text into a paradigmatic sense (rather than a direct, literal fulfillment). Within the very passage under debate, the roles are reversed!

It would be helpful at the outset to acknowledge that *in any given text* both groups have to determine what is literal and what is not literal, both make decisions about the degree of literalness, both integrate features of a standard grammatical-historical approach, and both are

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[1] One interpretive *result* sees the millennium as a more literal earthly, direct reign, while the other *result* takes the passage as conveying a more metaphorical, indirect reign. This is not to say that either would be any less "real."

aware of developments in research related to apostolic hermeneutics and the spectrum of interpretive methods found in Second Temple Judaism. Therefore, the popular "literal" versus "non-literal" labels are more a classification of the *results* of exegesis rather than the hermeneutic which guides the exegetical process. The truth of the matter is that both groups share much of the same interpretive procedures and practices.

This is not to say that there are no differences in approach to hermeneutics. The purpose of this first article[2] is to explore some of those differences and to examine the interpretive presuppositions and techniques that influence the exegetical process. A number of crux areas impact the hermeneutical process: continuity-discontinuity, binary salvation history, genre, levels of specificity, conflicting metaphors, second horizons, and validation fallacies. As we deal with each of these areas, we will strive to be as critical of our own eschatological approach as we will of others. The first two areas will be given more extensive treatment, since they directly address Don Garlington's article at a hermeneutical level.[3]

2. Continuity-Discontinuity

The continuity-discontinuity area of hermeneutics concerns one's understanding of what remains when the old covenant gives way to the new in the Christ event. What is the relationship of the old to the new, one of continuity or discontinuity? This is where historically both premillennial and amillennial hermeneutics have tended to extremes which have obstructed their ability to deal impartially with important texts.

Premillennialists have long tended toward extreme discontinuity, particularly because of their desire to retain a specific future fulfillment of both physical and spiritual promises to the nation of Israel. In the classic dispensational formulation of premillennialism, Christ's reign is viewed as entirely future in connection with fulfillment of promise to ethnic Israel. In classic dispensational systems the outcome of the Christ event is in many ways unrelated to the old covenant: the new covenant and the kingdom are not yet seen as instituted and the events

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[2]A second, forthcoming article will examine Rev 20 from an exegetical perspective.
[3]Don Garlington's article ("Reigning with Christ: Revelation 20:1-6 in Its Salvation-Historical Setting") is contained in this same volume.

of this era are parenthetical to the rest of salvation history.[4] The effect of this is to sever a great portion of the New Testament from the Old, and force Rev 20 to bear the greatest weight of Old Testament promises.[5] Consequently, the exegesis of Rev 20 becomes a linchpin of the discontinuous approach and the text is seldom allowed to speak for itself.

Amillennialism, on the other hand, tends toward the continuous extreme, so much so that the Old Testament promises, events, and patterns are completely fulfilled in the church. The hermeneutics of continuity see the new covenant fulfilling and absorbing all the elements of the old covenant, and therefore the old-covenant people, events and forms are simply preparatory for the new. As Garlington writes, "Israel had no reason for existence apart from foreshadowing and preparing the way for the latter day people of God."[6] With this strongly continuous view there is no room for any fulfillment of Old Testament promises other than what will be accomplished in the church. This complete continuity of the church with the Old Testament forms means that the accomplishment of the new covenant involves the termination of all old covenant promises and patterns. The implications of this extreme

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[4]For example, see C. I. Scofield's notes on Israel and church, and on grace and law in *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973). Cf. the discussion of C. C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), chapter 7, "The Church in Dispensationalism." Ryrie concludes that "the church is never equated with a so-called 'new Israel' but is carefully and continually distinguished as a separate work of God in this age" (*Dispensationalism Today*, 140; cf. 132-55). Also helpful in gaining a classic dispensational perspective in the area is J. F. Walvoord's chapter, "The New Covenant with Israel" in his *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959).

[5]As Walvoord states, "The premillennial view . . . insists that the new covenant as revealed in the Old Testament concerns Israel and requires fulfillment in the millennial kingdom" (*Millennial Kingdom*, 210). Earlier he wrote, "The book of Revelation is, of course the classic passage on premillennialism. Revelation, while subject to all types of scholarly abuse and divergent interpretation, if taken in its plain intent yields a simple outline of premillennial truth . . . " (*Millennial Kingdom*, 118).

[6]Garlington, "Reigning with Christ," 18. Cf. L. Boettner's conclusions, "A Postmillennial Response" in R. G. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1977), 52.

continuity approach for Rev 20 are that there is no longer a place for a period of fulfillment of discontinuous elements and it must be read as a figure of an already-accomplished reality.

It is our contention that neither of these two extremes adequately recognizes the presence of both continuous and discontinuous elements in the Scriptures.[7] The Old Testament itself prepares us for a continuity-discontinuity framework in its own presentation of the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. As one evaluates the pattern of immediate fulfillment, partial fulfillment, and delayed fulfillment of the covenant promises (especially as related to Deut 28-30), it soon becomes apparent that there are high levels of *both* continuity and discontinuity.

The covenant promises to Abraham and subsequently to Israel about the possession of the land are carried through the Old Testament with both elements of continuity and discontinuity. In each era of Israel's history writers could point to certain levels of fulfillment of the promises. Joshua could affirm that "not one of the Lord's good promises to Israel had failed," even though there were many Canaanites still "determined to live in the land." Even with the extension of the borders under David and Solomon to the very fringes of God's promise,

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[7]The way for moderation has been prepared inside the premillennial camp by the seminal works of K. L. Barker, "False Dichotomies Between the Testaments," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society,* 25 (1982), 3-16 and C. B. Hoch, "The Significance of the *SYN*-Compounds for the Jew-Gentile Relationships in the Body of Christ." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society,* 25 (1982), 175-83. Taking up their baton have been those scholars who have lead the current movements taking place in dispensationalism, known as progressive dispensationalism. See particularly C. A. Blaising and D. L. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church. The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); R. L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism. The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993); and C. A. Blaising, and D. L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993). From the amillennial camp a more moderate approach to continuity-discontinuity has been proposed by W. A. VanGemeren, "Israel as the Hermeneutic Crux in the Interpretation of Prophecy", *Westminster Theological Journal,* 45 (1983), 132-45; 46 (1984), 254-97. VanGemeren (280) argues that the New Testament must be viewed, "not as the fulfillment of the OT prophetic message, but as confirming it and providing assurance that all expectations of the OT prophets will be fulfilled."

and the declaration by the historian of the enjoyment of rest, there remained much covenant unfaithfulness and pockets of unrest.

Another example can be found in the tabernacle/temple concept. The shift from portable tent to Jerusalem temple is a radical one, as is the shift from Solomon's temple to Haggai's rather ragged version, but the covenant concept of God dwelling with his people carries through. Even with the Christ event the tabernacle continues with both continuity-discontinuity elements, from the "Word *dwelling* among us" to the church as God's *temple*, to the new Jerusalem without a temple "because God and the Lamb are the temple."

The relationship of Israel to the church is another area where either of the extremes of continuity or discontinuity impact one's approach to the texts. For the extreme discontinuity of classic dispensationalism, texts such as Eph 2 or 1 Pet 2 are an embarrassment.[8] For the extreme continuity, or replacement view, of some strands of amillennialism, a text such as Rom 11, which *could* involve future fulfillment of promises to the nation Israel, *must* be read in an alternative manner.[9] Of course, neither of these extreme approaches can automatically be ruled out as incorrect. That is not our point. Rather, what we are trying to say is that the interpretive outcome of both extremes is heavily determined before coming to the text. Granted, alternatives and options are present for these interpreters. Yet the endorsement of certain options requires the abandonment of their broader or larger system. In contrast, a moderate continuity-discontinuity view (with its greater flexibility towards any one given text) permits an interpretation of these texts and Rev 20 without necessarily endangering its larger system.[10]

This leads us to our dictum: *the more systemic weight a text is*

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[8]Consequently, the Old Testament promises in these texts are handled with a rather "detached" analogical or illustrative significance for the church (but without any genuine sense of fulfillment).

[9]An extreme continuity position has no choice but to read Rom 11 in a way which negates any future fulfillment of promise through the nation Israel.

[10]A moderate continuity position could still affirm a future fulfillment for national Israel in Rom 11 without abandoning an amillennial treatment of Rev 20. Conversely, a moderate discontinuity view could deny a future fulfillment for national Israel in Rom 11 without abandoning a premillennial treatment of Rev 20. The continuity-discontinuity "system" doesn't play as dominant or as determinative a role in a moderate framework.

forced to bear, the less likely is the chance that it will receive impartial exegetical treatment. This is not to suggest that exegesis is ever a totally impartial, objective task. It is not. However, certain hermeneutical scenarios have a greater impartiality than others. In either of the amillennial or premillennial *extremes* a particular interpretation of Rev 20 is overly significant to the retention of the particular view. For classic dispensationalism Rev 20 was the fulfillment of all the old covenant promises, and apart from this text the promises were without significant fulfillment. For classic amillennialism even the hint of a future reign of Christ that was not new heavens and earth was problematic. A hermeneutic that carries *a priori* conclusions about the present and future reign of Christ will adversely impact an exegesis of Rev 20.

A continuity-discontinutity approach, even when it is premillennial, is not forced to rely solely on Rev 20 to sustain a fulfillment of promises to national Israel in the future.[11] Having less at stake frees this position to let the text speak. A continuity-discontinuity hermeneutic allows, on the one hand, for a present realization of the kingdom of God in continuity with the old covenant promises to Israel, so making the millennium not an absolutely new work but stage two in the culmination of the already-initiated work of God. On the other hand, it also allows for a future realization of certain inceptive elements in the eschaton. This not only fits better with the tension of New Testament texts, it lifts some of the systemic obstruction to working with Rev 20 — no longer is it the conerstone of an entirely discontinuous system, nor is it an embarrassment to an entirely continuous one. This opens the way for a more impartial approach to the text, as the stakes are lessened.

3. *Binary Salvation History*

A question that is at the forefront in a salvation-history hermeneutic focuses on the stages of redemptive history. To speak of a two-stage salvation history is to affirm much of the positive teaching of the New Testament. Scholars have become very comfortable using the paired terms like: D-day/V-day, inauguration/consummation, inception/

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[11]For an example of the wide variety of passages in both the Old and New Testaments which buttress support for a premillennial position see D. K. Campbell and J. L. Townsend, eds., *A Case for Premillennialism* (Chicago: Moody, 1992).

completion, already/not yet.[12] This kind of binary, two-stage pattern is predominant in the thinking of the New Testament authors.

Classic dispensationalism failed to maintain this binary approach, or at least obscured it, by not recognizing that the present "time between" is in fact a real part of the two-stage redemptive history, and not parenthetical to it. They therefore missed the real connection between Rev 20 and the present. They knew of a two-stage approach, but failed to relate the present era to either stage.

Classic amillennialism, on the other hand, tended to lock the binary approach into a rigid structure which at times failed to allow any flexibility in fulfillment. Indeed, at times the biblical drama is cast as a play in two acts without even the flexibility of a variety of scenes within the two. This is the error Garlington falls into when he states that a chiliastic scheme "confuses the pattern."[13] Again, this rigidity is seen in his contention that "the 'Already' . . . defines and delineates the 'Not Yet' of the eschatological timetable."[14] The inference from such a wooden formula suggests that anything which is seen as already must be completely realized, and anything which is seen as not yet must have received no significant present realization. This polarization will not stand up to scrutiny.

A bi-fold structure is indeed helpful in analyzing the biblical text, since it is a structure from within rather than one from without; but it is only helpful as a general, not rigidly specific, approach. To see redemptive history as a play in two acts is useful, as long as one recognizes that there are numerous scenes within those two acts and there is always at least the *potential* of adding a scene or two as the play is in progress.

There are a number of lines of evidence which support this less-rigid binary approach. The first is the flexibility with which the Old Testament uses the already/not yet approach, frequently blurring or fragmenting the lines.[15] For example, Abraham has his own already/not

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[12]Especially formative here are the works of O. Cullman, *Christ and Time* (London: SCM, 1951) and *Salvation in History* (London: SCM, 1965).

[13]Garlington, "Reigning," 17.

[14]Garlington, "Reigning," 4.

[15]In addition to blurred lines, one also finds a kind of a "navel" or existential-vortex phenomena. In other words, *each* writer of Scripture throughout *each* epoch of salvation history had their own binary, "this age and the age to come" approach with something of a naive hope that the "next phase" would lead to ultimate consummation. We wish to

yet. God makes a covenant with Abraham, gives him certain promises, and gives him a pattern which will form the context for the fulfillment of those promises: a suffering/glory pattern. God will make his seed as the stars, but not for twenty-five years, and then through a barren womb. He will make him a nation, but they will first spend 430 years in protective captivity in Egypt (another pattern altogether!). God will give him a land, but it is securely in the hands of the Canaanites, who have little intention of releasing it. He will bless all nations through his seed, in a way that Abraham may never have imagined.[16]

Later, these promises were repeated — to the patriarchs first, and then later to the redeemed nation of Israel. With the promises, the patterns are repeated as well, and actually seem to become identified with the promises, i.e., the suffering/glory pattern is always the context for the promised blessing of Israel. Along the way there are new patterns: patterns of exile and exodus, of captivity and return.[17] As well, there is new information given to assist in understanding the patterns, and in preparing for their fulfillment. As we observe this progressive advance of information we note that the fulfillment is *always more complex* than could have been seen in the original pattern or prediction. The release of Israel from Egypt involved many steps unforeseen in the original word to Abraham. The time frame of the restoration of Israel was shown by Daniel to be much more involved than simply the 536 B.C. return under Cyrus. Once back in the land, the restored community had to come to grips with the delayed realization of promise.[18] Peter tells us that the prophets strained their imaginations

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acknowledge the helpful contribution of B. Popma, "Binary Epochs: How did the Old Testament Writers Perceive Their Own Salvation History?" (Unpublished Paper, Heritage Theological Seminary, 1993).
[16]From the Pentateuchal material the primary binary-epochal view was "outside the land" vs. "inside the land." A secondary perspective is found in a generational way of framing time, such as the generations before the Abrahamic covenant, the patriarchal generation, and the next generation after Joseph's who experienced the exodus but failed to enter the land ("that evil generation") vs. "this generation" who would enter the land.
[17]The former prophets had their own binary view of "exile" and "return."
[18]The post-exilic prophets developed their binary perspective of salvation history by seeing their era as a "day of small things" in comparison to "the greatness" of days to come. See the treatment by W. O. McCready, "The 'Day of Small Things' vs. the the Latter Days: Historical Fulfillment or Eschatological Hope?" in A. Gileadi, ed.,

to understand how the suffering/glory pattern would work in Jesus' life, and the gospel writers use much space to depict the actual completion of those events.

If any single principle can be derived from the pattern of fulfillments of the Old Testament, perhaps it is this: *progressive revelation shows us that the fulfillments of the patterns are more complex than the initial prediction or pattern can indicate.* While fulfillments may be a good deal more elaborate than could be anticipated, they were never less. What is established by the pattern is not the final word about how the pattern will be fulfilled: there will be continuity, but the details are likely to be far more complex than could have been anticipated from the pattern.

A second line of evidence is found in the way the Christ event itself fulfills Old Testament patterns. An overly simplistic or rigid binary hermeneutic fails to appreciate the multiple comings of the messiah and multiple stages of messianic fulfillment — a development in redemptive history which was not entirely clear at the predictive stage.[19] The first coming, then, inaugurated the first stage of what would appear to be a two-stage act.[20] Furthermore, within the first scene there are several sub-components. It was not an act with only one scene. Rather, this inauguration of the new covenant takes in all aspects of the Christ event, and extends over a thirty-year period. The inception of the kingdom involves incarnation, initiation into ministry; ministry of exorcism, healing and teaching; arrest, trial, and crucifixion; resurrection; descent to hades;[21] ascension; and sending of the Spirit.

Israel's Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Ronald K. Harrison, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 226.

[19]This has always been a liability for those amillennialists, such as Garlington, who propose a somewhat reductionistic approach to the stages of future fulfillments.

[20]Since the categories and perspective of salvation-history are generally existential (from the current experience of the particular Old Testament or New Testament writer) then any *absolutization* of this two-fold scheme is tenuous. From the perspective of the next epoch (whatever epoch that may be), the former epoch may look quite different compared to how those *within* that epoch viewed their own time frame and fulfillment of promise.

[21]Not all would agree with the placement of Christ's "descent into hades" as a post-resurrection and pre-ascension journey. Here we follow, for the most part, the work of W. J. Dalton, "The Interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6: Light from 2 Peter," *Biblica* 60 (1979), 547-55;

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Therefore, it must be recognized that when we speak of "one stage" it does not demand only Act I, Scene I; it involves a complex of unfolding events. The very nature of Christ's coming, ascension, and return argues for flexibility, blurring, and fragmenting of the lines. The Old Testament writers would certainly not have conceived of the complex of fulfillment, either in the additional forthcoming "stage" or "multiple acts within that stage."

In a similar way to the first stage of salvation history, we cannot reduce the second stage necessarily to a single event. To say this is to miss the fact that the pattern, as established at the first advent, leads us to expect a complex of events, within which a millennial period would be quite possible (either as a separate stage or an act within a larger epoch).[22] As well, stage two may take up many of the events begun in stage one. Salvation history is indeed about inauguration and consummation. It is in its broadest strokes (and from our vantage point[23]) binary, or a two stage, system. But to limit these two stages in what they may consist goes far beyond the data, indeed it must, to a degree, neglect the data.[24]

4. *Genre*

The aspect of literary genre contributes in two significant ways to shaping an interpretive approach to Rev 20. First, one should consider the figurative nature of such literature. At times premillennialists have come to texts with a pre-determined hermeneutical formula, such as:

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cf. *idem*, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits. A Study of 1 Peter 3:18-4:6.* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965).

[22]Some premillennialists view the millennium as a distinct stage; others see it as a sub-component or "act" within the new heavens and new earth.

[23]This vantage-point or existential portrayal of salvation history has been the case with each biblical writer throughout each stage of salvation history. Cf. discussion above.

[24]Ironically, Berkhof goes against his own interpretive principles to maintain this when, in his *The Second Coming of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), he argues that the return and resurrection and "end of the world" must be simultaneous because Jesus said that "he would raise up those that believe in him at the last day" (28), apparently taking "day" literally here in what appears to be a clearly figurative reference. This again shows how our systems can overcome our exegetical principles when a text can either significantly help us or hurt us.

"take everything as literal unless forced otherwise!" Not only is this kind of predisposition dangerous on its own merit, it completely ignores the contribution of genre to the area of hermeneutics. Certain genres by nature have a greater proportion of figurative elements than others. For example, some genres have a high degree of figurative language (e.g., poetic, apocalyptic, prophetic, etc.), some a lesser degree (e.g., epistolary, legal material, etc.), and other genres find a middle road between these two extremes (e.g., gospel, theological narrative, etc.). Maybe in certain genres, such as apocalyptic with its wild imagery, one should reverse the dictum: "take everything as metaphorical unless forced otherwise!" However, this second dictum is as rigid and wooden as the first. With regard to genre, then, we might say that *an interpreter needs to anticipate figurative language in any given text to the degree to which it characterizes a genre as a whole.*

There is broad agreement today that Revelation contains a blend of epistolary, apocalyptic, and prophetic genres.[25] Rev 20 obviously falls into the apocalyptic-prophetic part of the book. Surely this genre factor should mute the stream of premillennialist rhetoric and trite hermeneutical formulas. Within a book such as Revelation (with seven-headed creatures, locusts coming up out of the abyss, dragons, and white horses), one simply cannot hold to the old "everything literal . . ." dictum. Consequently, amillennialists should not be castigated for understanding elements within this section in a less-than-literal manner. In fact, premillennialists should openly concede that amillennial interpreters have something of an advantage based on this aspect of the genre criterion. Nevertheless, this particular "genre advantage" is only sustainable if amillennialists are willing to acknowledge that the figurative nature of any given passage (or sub-elements) within Revelation must be established on its own merit. The decision cannot be automatically nor mechanically based on genre.[26]

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[25]While the proportional mix and blend of these genres is debated, there is a growing consensus that Revelation represents a mixed genre. For a recent survey of scholars see D. Mathewson, "Revelation in Recent Genre Criticism: Some Implications for Interpretation", *Trinity Journal,* 13 (1992), 193-213; cf. J. R. Michaels, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 21-33.

[26]In view of the complexity of genre in Revelation, Michaels (*Revelation,* 32) wisely suggests that "there is room to be skeptical about how crucial the determination of genre is for the interpretation of specific passages." Later in the same chapter on genre, he comes to a very guarded conclusion: "In short, one must be prepared for variety in

Second, hermeneutical consideration should be given to the cosmology of apocalyptic genre. Apocalyptic literature is characterized by what scholars have labeled the "horizontal" (temporal) axis and the "vertical" (spatial) axis.[27] Both of these dimensions invite the reader to travel via the vision in time and/or space to other destinations. The one axis allows the reader to see beyond their own life into the afterlife, judgments, etc.; the other axis permits a glimpse at cosmological realities beyond the earth, such as heaven and hell, the abode of God, the demons, angels, etc.

It is the vertical axis of apocalyptic literature which creates considerable difficulty for an amillennial development of Rev 20. In Rev 20:2-3 Satan is bound for a thousand years and thrown into the abyss. Within apocalyptic literature the abyss is spatially removed from the earth, inhibiting direct contact with the earth (other than through a journey which the seer takes to get there). Also, in these other-worldly writings angels who have been incarcerated in the abyss (or similar prisons) would require release in order to torment or influence humankind on earth.[28] While Satan's present binding "on earth" is a credible option within a biblical-theological framework,[29] it is at best dubious when considering the genre of apocalyptic literature and its portrayal of the abyss.

In sum, premillennialists stumble over the figurative nature of apocalyptic genre; amillennialists stagger to find a footing amid the cosmology of such a literature.

5. Levels of Specificity

When faced with deciding what elements in the text are literal, the criterion of "levels of interpretive specificity" proves to be a useful one.

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attempting to read and interpret Revelation" (*Revelation,* 33).

[27]For a brief introduction to these and other features, see M. G. Reddish, *Apocalyptic Literature. A Reader* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990). A more developed treatment is available in J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination* (New York: Crossroads, 1987); D. S. Russell, Divine Disclosure. *An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

[28]Angelic beings are often portrayed as being trapped in a nether world (having been banished from the earth) and awaiting the divine summons for judgment. E.g., see 1 Enoch 10:4-6; 18:11-18; 21-22; 90:24-27; 108:2-6; *Jub* 5:6-10 (cf. Isa 24:20-23).

[29]Cf. discussion below on validation fallacies.

A dictum might be suggested as follows: *the greater the interpretive specificity (in details and referents), the less assurance of the validity of one's interpretation.* As applied to the issue at hand, the most credible (and the broadest!) piece of interpretive data that the text of Rev 20 yields is that the millennial kingdom is a picture of "reward for the saints." Some modern interpreters of the apocalypse understand the passage at this level only, without any space and time qualifications.[30] Now both premillennialists and amillennialists push for greater specificity with respect to space and time. Both systems would *hope* this interpretive move is correct. However, in pushing to a greater level of specificity, there is also the increasing risk of being wrong. The very existence of alternative space-and-time options proves this point. Consequently, *both* interpretive communities would do well to admit that they have moved *beyond* the most assured interpretive results of the passage.

In addition, premillennialists would benefit by keeping specificity in mind when handling the details of Rev 20. For instance, it is one thing to suggest a space-and-time referent for the kingdom relative to Christ's return (which goes further than the general idea of "reward"); it is quite another to delimit that time to a specific unit of 1000 years.[31] At this point we have moved to yet a *third* level of specificity. It is rather ironic that some premillennialists vigorously defend a literal 1000-year time frame for the millennium on the earth. However, few of these same interpreters would feel equal compulsion to argue for a specifically defined, literal "chain" binding Satan, "key" to the abyss, or "thrones" for saints to sit on.[32] The ultimate question is, upon what level

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[30]E.g., for a strictly a-temporal view see R. Schnackenburg, *God's Rule and Kingdom,* trans. J. Murray (London: Nelson, 1963), 329-39 and E. S. Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 107-124. It is also possible that John taught a literal-future millennium in picture/story only, while *intending* simply to convey the idea or reality of a non-temporal reward. This latter position is suggested tentatively by I. T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 736-38 and R. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 359.

[31]We are not arguing here for either a literal 1000 years or some metaphorical dimension to the figure (see the next article for a treatment of this issue). Rather, the point is simply to analyze our interpretive approach.

[32]One cannot help but enjoy a little cynical suspicion here. Is it more likely that the evidence supports such a specificity conclusion, or does

of specificity is the vision communicating? Our answer must be a humble one. We do not exactly know. However, we can say with some assurance that the greater the interpretive specificity, the greater the chance of error.

6. Conflicting Metaphor

Conflicting metaphor is another criterion to help determine which elements in the text are literal and which are not. For example, hell in the New Testament is depicted as a place of torment with different and *conflicting* metaphors: a lake of fire, utter darkness, worms, decaying flesh, etc. If it is utter darkness, how can there be fire (which gives light)? Are the worms asbestos so they do not burn in the fire? How can the fire be a lake, unless it is a lake of gasoline? And the questions go on.[33] Similar observations could be made about the new Jerusalem with its enormous walls (several kilometres high), streets of gold, monstrous-sized pearls, etc. These new-Jerusalem metaphors may not conflict with each other, but they definitely conflict with reality as we know it. At this point the interpreter should "back off" the metaphors and simply conclude that hell is a place of torment and grief, while heaven is a place of wonderful bliss (without articulating the specific nature or composition beyond that). When encountering conflicting metaphors, then, *the interpreter needs to suspend conclusions beyond what the different metaphors collectively contribute through their "shared elements."*[34]

The conflicting-metaphor principle applies to the millennial debate at a number of points, but we will only surface one example here. In Isa 65:17-25 we have metaphorical descriptions of the new heavens and the new earth which *could* be understood as depicting something less than a perfect Eden-like state.[35] A customary response of premillennialists

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such a specificity conclusion supports the system and therefore is useful?

[33] How can the flesh continue to decay or be eaten forever?

[34] This principle functions much the way a Venn diagram might have four or five intersecting circles. Only the area which intersects each of the various circles (of metaphorical meaning) is admissible when constructing a composite reality.

[35] E.g., two statements might suggest the presence of death and birth during this period: "he who dies at a hundred will be considered accursed" (65:20) and "they will not . . . bear children doomed to destruction" (65:23). Another statement might be taken to infer a

is to cut-and-paste the text in order to align certain verses with the millennium and others with the eternal state.[36] Yet, another way to understand the text is to say that the conflicting metaphors represent a single reality. One might compare the trees for the "healing of the nations" found in Rev 22:2.[37] Perhaps salvation-history will unfold in a way that affirms the cut-and-paste job.[38] However, the principle of conflicting metaphors disallows the use of passages like Isa 65 in forging a premillennial position.

7. Second Horizons

The history of interpretation for many texts has been dramatically influenced by the broader trends in society. Our understanding of a passage is often coloured as much by the world around us (the "second horizon"[39]), as by what we see in the text itself. The hermeneutical

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definite duration to this time period: "as the days of a tree [which ultimately end?] so will be the days of my people." However, the interpreter is probably extracting too much (or the fringe portions) from the metaphors—i.e., the part of the metaphor which is *conflicting* with the larger picture of a new heavens and new earth. These statements may simply infer that, "Life in the new heavens and new earth will be great!" Cf. A. A. Hoekema, *The Bible and The Future* (Repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 201-203.
[36]E.g., J. F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 318-19; J. D. Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964), 488-90; C. L. Feinberg, *Millennialism* (Revised ed., Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1985), 326-28.
[37]It would be difficult to sustain from the statement about the healing of the nations (Rev 22:2) that the picture is *not* referring to the new heavens and the new earth. Cf. D. L. Turner, "The New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1-22:5: Consummation of a Biblical Continuum," in Blaising and Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 284.
[38]This is a possible solution given the way in which Christ's first coming "fractured" various Old Testament texts. However, such an outcome may be more accidental than a direct fulfillment of Isa 65:17-25.
[39]For a philosophical treatment of the subject, see A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980). For an excellent analysis of "second horizon" hermeneutics and the millennial issue see J. J. Davis, *Christ's Victorious Kingdom. Postmillennialism Reconsidered* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 117-28 and S. N. Gundry, "Hermeneutics or *Zeitgeist* as the Determining Factor in the History of

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history of the millennial question has been plagued with these external factors. For example, premillennialism was a compelling option for the early church who did not anticipate the "extended wait" for the return of Christ that modern interpreters have experienced and have had to account for.[40] Amillennialism flourished with the later influx of Hellenistic philosophy into the church, with the growing dominance of Christianity as a political force, and with the dawning realization of a delayed parousia.[41] Times of social upheaval and war have gained a more receptive hearing for premillennialism; whereas, in peaceful and prosperous times postmillennialism has enjoyed greater success. The emergence of Israel as a nation in the last forty years has produced a momentous wave of "pop apocalypticism" (most of it from a premillennial strain). However, in the last decade modern Israel has lost some of her "golden child" status due to a repressive foreign policy and, correspondingly, eschatology that is directly tied to that country has lost some of its euphoria.

There is no antidote to this kind of hermeneutical virus (nor to its blinding effects). Some interpreters have even appealed to these sociological factors in establishing their positions; others seem to be entirely unaware of the influence that these factors have on exegesis. Needless to say, these external criteria are not valid in arriving at one's eschatological position. The best way to handle the liability is *to retain a healthy skepticism towards one's own view to the degree that it is currently "predictable" within a modern sociological and historical context.*

8. Validation Fallacies

Validation fallacies acutely afflict current literature on the millennial issue. Both sides frequently err in their validation through the use of semantic fields (i.e., lexical fields of meaning) and biblical theology (i.e., theological categories derived from different authors). The

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Eschatologies?", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society,* 20 (1977), 45-55.
[40]For premillennialists to admit this obvious second horizon would make for a pleasant change in our approach to (and use of) the early church fathers for validating a premillennial position.
[41]It would appear that several early fathers adopted a non-chiliastic understanding of Rev 20, although this was a comparatively limited phenomenon. Cf. C. E. Hill, *Regnum Caelorum. Patterns of Future Hope in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 188-94.

problem with semantic-field validation may be stated like this: *the mere existence of a semantic field offers no support for an exegetical conclusion.* For instance, amillennialists produce a list of references which confirm that ψυχαί (Rev 20:4) can mean "disembodied souls,"[42] while premillennialists compose their own list of uses where the term means "embodied/whole persons."[43] Both sides carry on a similar kind of semantic mountain building with other disputed terms such as ἔζησαν, ἀνάστσις, and ἄχρι. However, listing semantic options cannot be substituted for a clear articulation of the rationale of choice between them.

A similar fallacy is evident in the use of "conflicting strains" of biblical theology to sustain a position. For example, amillennialists are prone to write proliferously on the current "binding" of Satan and relegate future binding passages to a footnote. Premillennialists often focus exclusively on the current "release" texts (and future binding passages) and overlook the current binding passages. It would seem that even if either side did a masterful job of exegesis on these texts, their contribution would not be recognized. Again, the focus of the discussion must be upon *why* one biblical-theological perspective is contextually suitable in Rev 20. If there is little or no material for making that judgment, then the dialogue must move on and simply affirm that the writer of the Apocalypse could have drawn from either stream of tradition. Other factors must be given the decisive nod.

9. Conclusion

For the most part, amillennialists and premillennialists of a moderate persuasion share a similar hermeneutical approach[44] (though their

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[42]E.g., see J. A. Hughes, "Revelation 20:4-6 and the Question of the Millennium", *Westminster Theological Journal*, 35 (1973), 288-89.
[43]E.g., J. S. Deere, "Premillennialism in Revelation 20:4-6", *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 135 (1978), 66-67; H. W. Hoehner, "Evidence from Revelation 20" in *A Case for Premillennialism* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 254.
[44]Perhaps the ultimate irony is that moderate forms of premillennialism (e.g., Bock's progressive dispensationalism, Kaiser's epangelical theology, Ladd's historic premillennialism, Mealy's pristine premillennialism, etc.) and moderate forms of amillennialism (e.g., Hoekema's new-earth fulfillment, VanGemeren's potential-restoration theology, etc.) share a *greater hermeneutical affinity* to each other than to their respective counterparts in classic dispensationalism and classic amillennialism.

exegetical *results* in Revelation 20 differ greatly). Hermeneutical pitfalls which plague *both* interpretive communities are two-fold: second horizons and fallacies related to validation of semantic fields and biblical-theological categories. It would appear that premillennial interpreters have a greater struggle with apocalyptic genre (as it relates to figurative language), levels of specificity, conflicting metaphor, and the "already" dimension of the kingdom. On the other hand, amillennial interpreters have more difficulties with the progress of revelation, an over-simplified approach to fulfillment (i.e., a rigid quantification of the already/not-yet package), and apocalyptic genre (as it relates to cosmology).

Jerry D. Colwell serves as Professor of New Testament and Theology at Heritage Baptist College in London, Ontario. He holds the M.Div. and Th.M. degrees from Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary. Prior to coming to Canada he ministered for three years at Grace Bible Church of St. Clair, Michigan. He is preparing to write a thesis on "Conversion language in the explanation of the parable of the sower in Matthew's gospel" for the D.Theo. degree from the University of South Africa.

William J. Webb serves as Professor of New Testament at Heritage Theological Seminary in London, Ontario. He holds the Th.D. degree from Dallas Theological Seminary. His doctoral thesis, Returning Home: New Covenant and Second Exodus as the Context for 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press) was published in 1993.