

# THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

A 2nd-Century Eschatology for the  
21st-Century Church

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## Go Deeper Excursus 20 A Detailed Examination of the Two Resurrections in Revelation 20

In this excursus, we explore the possible interpretations of the phrase “the rest of the dead” to determine which presents the least exegetical and theological problems. The larger category of “the dead ones” composed of the “beheaded souls” (Rev 20:4) and “the rest” must be in the same category of death—either physical death or spiritual death. The most defensible interpretation will reckon with the phrase οἱ λοιποὶ τῶν νεκρῶν (“the rest of the dead”) without redefining the category of τῶν νεκρῶν mid-passage and without redefining what it means that “they lived” (ἔζησαν) mid-passage.

With this in mind, we will run through five possible scenarios for how τῶν νεκρῶν, ἔζησαν, and οἱ λοιποὶ interact with one another logically and how each position on the first and second resurrections handles these terms in the course of their interpretations.

### Scenario 1

**Τῶν Νεκρῶν: Physically Dead**

**First Resurrection: Spiritual (Going to Heaven)**

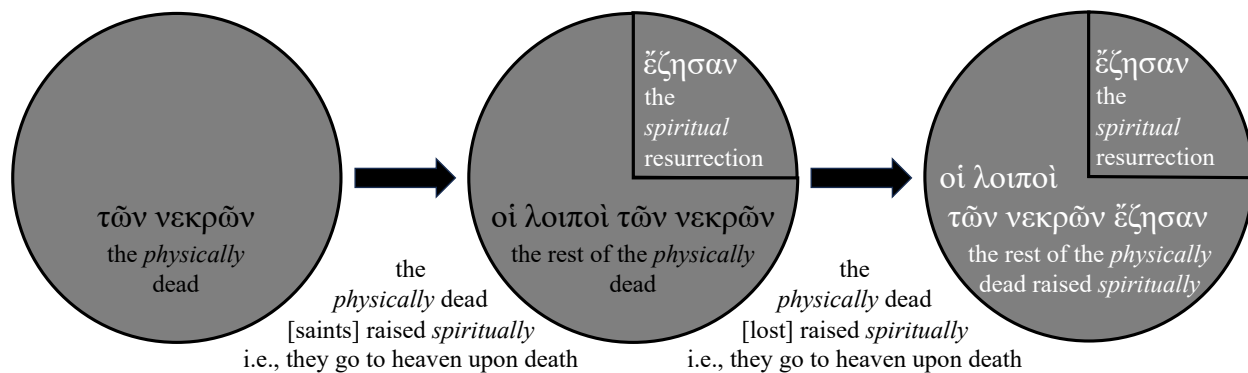
**Second Resurrection: Spiritual**

This first scenario understands the category of τῶν νεκρῶν as physically dead, whether saved or unsaved. Those who died physically for the sake of Christ (the saints) (Rev 20:4) are raised *spiritually* in the sense of going to heaven upon death (e.g., Warfield, Kline, Riddlebarger). That is, the “spiritual resurrection” is the intermediate state. Those who are thus “spiritually resurrected” are still physically dead in Revelation 20:4. Then, if one is to be consistent with the definition of the category τῶν νεκρῶν and the meaning of ἔζησαν in 20:5, the οἱ λοιποὶ—those who are still part of the physically dead (the lost) distinguished from the first group who were resurrected spiritually to heaven (the saints)—will be raised spiritually after the thousand years. That is, if τῶν νεκρῶν is

defined consistently as “physically dead,” and if ἔζησαν is defined consistently as “came to life spiritually in heaven,” then this consistency will result in universalism.

A possible strategy to maintain consistency in the definition of ἔζησαν as “spiritual resurrection” without resulting in universalism would be to define ἔζησαν as “spiritual resurrection to the lake of fire.” This avoids universalism but results in no account whatsoever of bodily physical resurrection of either the saved or the lost. This is plausible, but it seems almost unbelievable that the book of Revelation would be completely silent on the central focus of Christian eschatology: the bodily resurrection of the righteous and the wicked, some to everlasting life, others to everlasting condemnation. Therefore, if there is an interpretation that avoids universalism, definitional inconsistencies, and narrative gaps, it should be preferred.

### Diagram of Scenario 1



### Scenario 2

#### Τῶν Νεκρῶν: Physically Dead

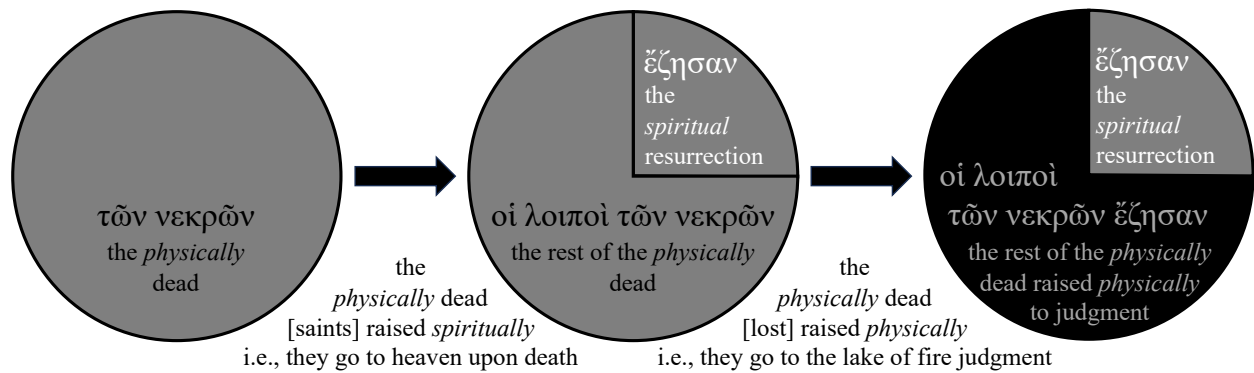
#### First Resurrection: Spiritual (Going to Heaven)

#### Second Resurrection: Physical

To avoid the universalist implications of the first scenario that results from using ἔζησαν consistently as spiritual resurrection, this scenario changes the meaning of ἔζησαν from “came to life spiritually in heaven” when applied to the saints to “came to life physically to judgment in the lake of fire” when applied to the lost.

This move certainly avoids universalism, but it requires an inconsistency in the definition of ἔζησαν and leaves us with no account of the physical resurrection of the saints. Therefore, if there is an interpretation that avoids these definitional inconsistencies and narrative gaps, it should be preferred.

### Diagram of Scenario 2



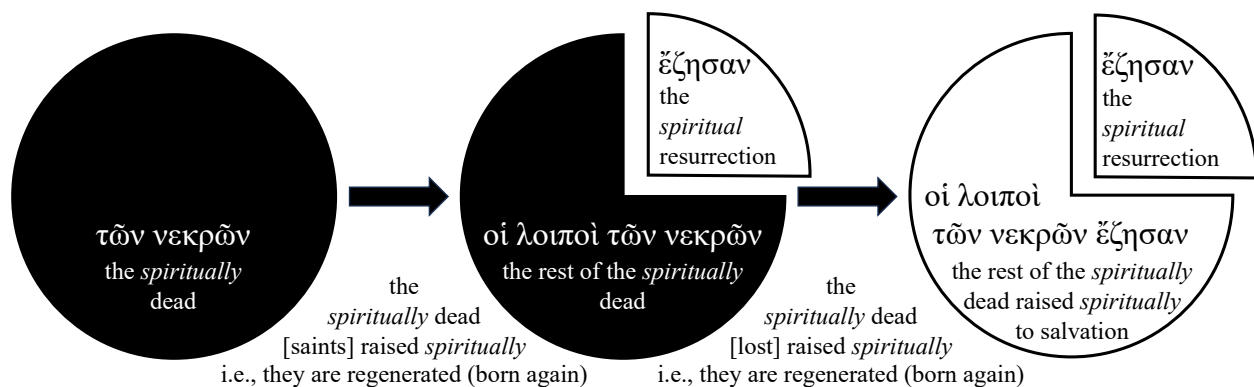
### Scenario 3

#### Τῶν Νεκρῶν: Spiritually Dead First Resurrection: Spiritual (Regeneration) Second Resurrection: Spiritual

In this third scenario, the category τῶν νεκρῶν is defined as “spiritually dead” and used consistently throughout. Those who are raised, ἔζησαν, in Revelation 20:4 are regenerated spiritually: “born again.” At that moment, all those who are resurrected spiritually are removed from the category of τῶν νεκρῶν, the “spiritually dead.” Thus οἱ λοιποὶ refers to the “rest of the spiritually dead” who did not experience regeneration.

After the thousand-year period, those remaining “spiritually dead” are raised, and to avoid changing the definition of ἔζησαν from 20:4 to 20:5, they must be regarded as being resurrected spiritually from spiritual death. This results both in universalism and in no accounting of physical resurrection of either the saved or the lost prior to the last judgment. Therefore, if there is an interpretation that avoids universalism and narrative gaps, it should be preferred.

### Diagram of Scenario 3

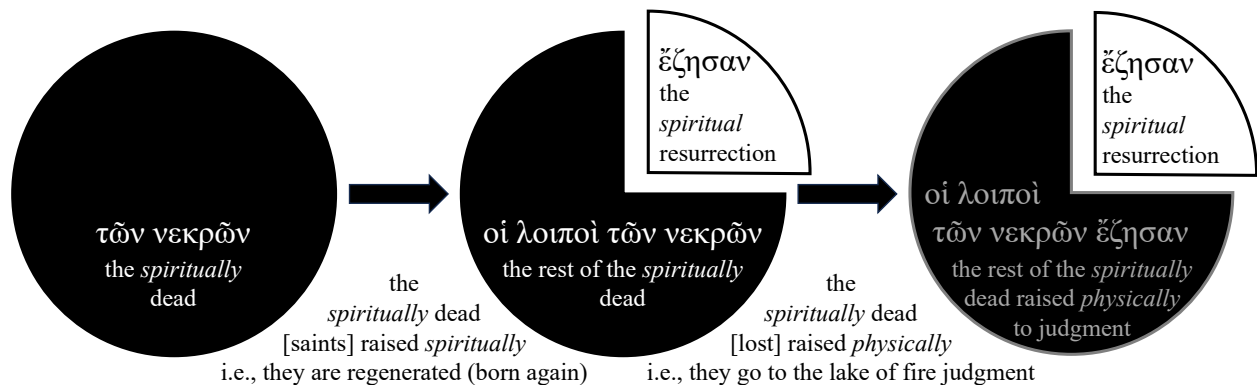


**Scenario 4**  
**τῶν Νεκρῶν: Spiritually Dead**  
**First Resurrection: Spiritual (Regeneration)**  
**Second Resurrection: Physical**

The fourth scenario, which reflects the classic Augustinian amillennial view, also regards the category τῶν νεκρῶν as “spiritually dead” and the first resurrection as spiritual and maintains this consistently throughout. The first ἔζησαν in Revelation 20:4 refers to the spiritual resurrection of the saints in regeneration. Then, οἱ λοιποὶ of the dead also refers to the spiritually dead who were not raised to new life by regeneration. However, to avoid universalism, the definition of ἔζησαν must be changed from 20:4 to 20:5. That is, “the rest of the *spiritually* dead” are raised physically at the end of the thousand-year span. They are subsequently consigned to the lake of fire.

The problem with this interpretation is it requires a definition shift of both τῶν νεκρῶν and ἔζησαν from “spiritual death to spiritual resurrection” when applied to the saints but “physical death to physical resurrection” when applied to the lost. Or τῶν νεκρῶν retains its meaning of “spiritually dead,” but ἔζησαν shifts meaning to “physical resurrection” for the lost. This results in no narrative account of the bodily resurrection of the saints, because their “spiritual resurrection” had already occurred, and they are no longer counted among οἱ λοιποὶ of the dead that are raised later.

**Diagram of Scenario 4**



These first four scenarios all share the view that the first resurrection is spiritual, not physical. J. Ramsey Michaels makes an important observation that if the first resurrection is spiritual and not bodily in Revelation 20:4–6, and if the bodily resurrection—the “second”—is found at the end of the “millennial” church age in Revelation 20:11–15, this leaves an alarming narrative gap. He writes:

If the literal future resurrection of Christian believers is not what is meant by the “first resurrection,” then where in the chapter *is* this traditional New Testament hope to be found? It would be strange indeed if a work emphasizing so strongly at the outset the resurrection of Jesus (1:5, 18), and with such a pervasive concern to offer consolation to Christians facing persecution and martyrdom, were to overlook the very heart of the church’s eschatological expectation.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, in an amillennial interpretation of Revelation 20:1–15, the long-hoped-for object of the Christian faith throughout the New Testament—the resurrection of the body—is missing from the narrative.<sup>2</sup> Michaels continues: “The only possible answer to the question, it appears, is that the literal future resurrection of Christians is described in 20:11–15. But in these verses there is no emphasis at all upon this future resurrection as the positive object of Christian hope.... It seems inconceivable that the resurrection hope would appear only implicitly, and under the heading of the ‘second death.’”<sup>3</sup>

Again, if there is an interpretation available to the exegete that avoids definitional inconsistencies and narrative gaps, it should be preferred.

### Scenario 5

**τῶν Νεκρῶν: Physically Dead**

**First Resurrection: Physical**

**Second Resurrection: Physical**

The final scenario regards the category τῶν νεκρῶν consistently as “physically dead,” which is consistent with the symbolism used to describe the saints who were beheaded (Rev 20:4). The category, though, contains all those who died physically regardless of whether they were saved or lost, because the delimiter of “souls that had been beheaded” is used not to modify τῶν νεκρῶν but the first instance of ἔζησαν.

Revelation 20:4 specifies that from this category of τῶν νεκρῶν (all physically dead—saved and lost), those who were beheaded for their faith and maintained their testimony of Jesus—clear signs of regenerate saints who died—ἔζησαν (“came to life”). In this scenario, ἔζησαν is used consistently as “physical resurrection.” Upon the physical resurrection of the saints, they no longer belong to the group of τῶν νεκρῶν. Thus οἱ λοιποὶ τῶν νεκρῶν, “the rest of the *physically* dead,” include only

<sup>1</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, “First Resurrection: A Response,” *WTJ* 39.1 (1976): 105.

<sup>2</sup> Kline’s response that the final resurrection of the redeemed awaits Revelation 21:1–8, after the final disposition of the wicked is addressed in the previous chapter missing Michaels’ point, because Revelation 21 does not mention actual resurrection; rather, it assumes resurrection has occurred. Claiming the imagery of the bride, the new Jerusalem, and the glory of the eternal city is a picture of the resurrection of the righteous is fantastical. See Meredith G. Kline, “The First Resurrection: A Reaffirmation,” *WTJ* 39.1 (1976): 115–16.

<sup>3</sup> Michaels, “First Resurrection,” 105, 106.

the unsaved physically dead. These physically dead lost, who were not raised with the saints, will later be raised after the thousand-year period.

To maintain definitional consistency, οἱ λοιποὶ τῶν νεκρῶν are raised (ἐξήσαν) physically unto judgment in the lake of fire. This interpretation uses τῶν νεκρῶν consistently as “physically dead”; It uses ἐξήσαν consistently as referring to “physical resurrection”; it provides a climactic narrativel account of the eschatological resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked; and it avoids universalism. In other words, this scenario avoids all the exegetical and theological weaknesses of the previous four scenarios. However, it does result in classic Irenaean premillennialism.

### Diagram of Scenario 5

