

A DEFENSE OF PREMILLENNIALISM

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Who cares? I mean, really, who cares how history wraps up? If we can all agree Christ is coming back, literally, physically, visibly, then does it really matter what the details are?

Prior to seminary, that was my attitude towards eschatology. I was, for all intents and purposes, a “pan-millennialist”—*it will all pan out in the end*. The dogmatism of premillennialists repulsed me in its arrogance. It did not help that the people espousing premillennial eschatology often seemed the same people who had a blind eye towards the creation and deaf ears towards the poor and the oppressed. Amillennial and postmillennial voices were often the ones speaking up for racial reconciliation, for endangered species, and for victims of HIV/AIDS. Whether their eschatology drove their social action or vice versa, I do not know. But because they spoke into these issues that I cared about, I—and many others, I suspect—began to embrace their views.

But are all views on the end times equal? Are they each just as biblically, historically, and theologically credible? Today, I answer, “No.” While all men may be created equally, all eschatologies are not. I have become increasingly convinced of that premillennialism is the most reliable and consistent explanation of Scripture. This paper will seek to defend premillennialism by demonstrating its alignment with key passages of Scripture, with historic Christianity, and with the metanarrative of the Bible.

Prolegomena

Before proceeding with my defense, I must confess two things. First, I am a futurist. I believe that the events of the end times have not yet come to pass. Nor are they presently in the process of coming to pass. Rather, they belong to time yet to come. For space limitations, this

paper will not challenge preterists' or presentists' views. Instead it will focus on distinguishing premillennialism as over and above amillennialism and postmillennialism.

Second, I treat the visions of Revelation as literal visions with literary meaning. When John says he saw something, I think that is what he saw. But I also hold that the meaning of what he saw, when the interpretation is not given to John or to his readers, is found in understanding the symbolism and imagery of his visions.

The Three Views of the Millennium

For those who believe that the end times and its events are yet to come, the question of when Christ will return has been answered three ways: before the Millennium (premillennial), after it (postmillennial), or essentially independent of it (amillennial). Generically, a millennium is a 1000-year period of time, akin to a century or decade. Biblically, the Millennium is the 1000-year period referred to in Revelation 20:1-10. Amillennialism, postmillennialism, and premillennialism each have a unique understanding of this period in light of when it expects Christ to return.

Amillennialism holds that the Millennium is a spiritual reality that came into effect with Christ's death and resurrection.¹ At that point in history, Satan was bound, and the saints began to rule with Christ in heaven. The 1000-year period in Revelation 20:1-10 is not a literal millennium nor is it an earthly rule of Christ and the saints. Christ and the saints will then continue to rule until the Father decides to inaugurate the eternal state.

Postmillennialism believes that the Christianity will continue to grow in size and influence, finally achieving a golden-era of Christendom.² For 1000 years, the earth will be marked by the rule of Christianity. At the conclusion of that time, the earth will finally have been

¹ Robert B. Strimple, "Amillennialism," in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 123.

² Kenneth L. Gentry, "Postmillennialism," in Bock, 13-14.

thoroughly prepared for the return of her Redeemer, her King. Christ will return then and instate the conditions of eternity future.

Premillennialism holds that following the Great Day of the Lord, the Tribulation, Christ will return to the Earth. He will vanquish the Antichrist and the False Prophet, bind Satan, and ascend to David's throne in Jerusalem over a reconstituted, re-gathered believing Israel. For an extended time—most premillennialists hold to an actual thousand years—Christ will rule the earth with the resurrected saints and tribulation martyrs. At the end of this time, Satan will be released and will rally the unbelievers to one final battle against Christ. Upon their complete defeat and the white throne judgment, the Father will bring forth the eternal state.

The Biblical Argument

To make the case that premillennialism is the superior scheme for understanding the end times, I present four biblical arguments: the expectation of an earthly kingdom, the presence of Christ in the Kingdom, the presence of sin in the Kingdom, and Revelation 20:1-10.

Expecting Something More

“ ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’ ” (Acts 1:6, ESV). That was the question of the Apostles after three years at the feet of Jesus. Jesus had taught about a coming kingdom time and again. They had seen their Messiah die an excruciating death at the hands of the reigning earthly kingdom. Then in His resurrection, they saw the greatest weapon of that kingdom rendered impotent. *We have our Messiah, our King who conquered death, so is now finally be the time for our kingdom?* These disciples were expecting to regain national sovereignty, not to attain some ethereal domain. *Could this be it?*

But just because the disciples expected something does not mean that they were right to expect it. After all, this is the same group who bailed on Jesus when the pressure got too high. He had even referred to them as “O ye of little faith” (Matt 8:26, KJV). So the question becomes: how did Jesus respond? Did He dismiss their obsession with the kingdom as errant or did He validate it?

Jesus answered, “ ‘It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority’ ” (Acts 1:7, ESV). He does not say, “You idiots, there is no coming kingdom.” Absent is any rebuke for expecting Israel to have her day. Jesus simply said the time of that kingdom was not for them to know. But by doing so, He validates the premise that an earthly kingdom is coming for Israel—which stands in clear opposition to amillennialism. In addition, the simple deduction from this coming kingdom is that had not already been initiated with His crucifixion or resurrection or other prior events. It was still out on the horizon—yet another blow to amillennialism.

Who Will Be King?

If then there is an earthly kingdom coming for Israel, who will rule? More specifically, will Christ be physically present to reign or will He remain in the heavens at the right hand of the Father during this millennium? The expectation of Christ actually reigning in body on the earth can be seen in Luke 1:31-33. For the angel Gabriel told Mary before she was pregnant that her little man would one day rule on King David’s throne—a throne that has never been heavenly, only earthly.

Postmillennialism asserts, though, that the return of Christ constitutes such a radical break in human history that it must be chronologically collocated with the eternal state. Therefore, for the postmillennialist, Christ will return only after the Millennium.

While His second advent is unequivocally significant—an event arguably rivaled in magnitude by only His first advent—this assertion must be contested. Isaiah 65:17-25 describes the world after God has begun to recreate and rule the world. This picture, though, includes death (Isa 65:20). As the wages of sin is death, presumably sin must also be present in Isaiah’s reality. Thus Isaiah places God’s rule in the presence of sin and death. However, the eternal state is characterized, in part, by the absence of sin and death (Rev 20:14). Therefore, Isaiah cannot have been describing God ruling in the eternal state here, but rather God ruling at a time before the end of sin and death.

Likewise, Psalm 72 depicts a kingdom much greater David's or Solomon's where the needy and afflicted are still present, where violence is met with justice. Again, this cannot be the eternal state where sin and death are destroyed. "All of this speaks of an age far different from the present age but short of the eternal state in which there is no more sin or suffering."³

A millennial rule of Christ prior to the eternal state best explains this phenomenon. Not everyone in the millennium will have been given glorified, resurrection bodies free from sin. Moreover, not everyone in the millennium will be believers, for some will rebel with Satan at the Millennium's conclusion. Only in the eternal state will creation finally be permanently free from Satan, sin, and death, amen.

Revelation 20:1-10

The crux for the Biblical argument not just for the notion of the Millennium, but also for premillennialism lies in Revelation 20:1-10. Following Christ's return and victory in Revelation 19, John sees an angel descend from heaven to imprison the dragon, the ancient serpent, the devil, Satan, for 1000 years (Rev 20:1-2). The purpose of Satan's incarceration is to free the nations from his deception until the 1000 years are over, at which point Satan will again breathe free air for a time (Rev 20:3). John sees thrones occupied by "those given authority to judge" (Rev 20:4a, ESV). Among these rulers are the resurrected tribulation martyrs (Rev 20:4b). Anyone left unresurrected will then be raised from the dead at the conclusion of the 1000 years (Rev 20:5). The rulers from verse 4 will be priests and reign with Christ for 1000 years (Rev 20:6). At the end of the 1000 years, Satan will be freed to deceive the nations and to enlist a massive army, one that would then march against Christ and His saints (Rev 20:7-8). Christ will defeat them and sentence Satan to the same fate as his Antichrist and False Prophet (Rev 20:9-10).

³ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 1129.

Amillennialism holds that Revelation 20:1-10 was not recapitulation of 19:11-21. However, the subject of the verb ἐκάθισαν (*they sat*) in 20:4 is Christ and his armies from verses 19:11-21.⁴ Hence these passages are sequential pericopes in the same vision. In addition, six times in ten verses a 1000-year period is mentioned. Such flagrant repetition appears emphatic of an actual thousand years.

To boot, “nowhere does Scripture say that believers in the intermediate state (between their death and Christ’s return) are reigning with Christ or sharing in rule with him.”⁵ In John’s vision, Christ and his armies had just destroyed the kings *of the earth* in battle not in some heavenly realm but where kings *of the earth* can gather, on the earth (Rev 19:21). So the last place the soon-to-be-rulers were seen was on earth—hence, an earthly kingdom.

Furthermore, amillennialism and postmillennialism posit that the first resurrection is spiritual and the second resurrection is physical.⁶ This is an injustice to the text. Both resurrection references use the same Greek term in consecutive verses without any indication in the text of such a distinction, such a differentiation. “Their explanations that we have here two different types of resurrection or two spiritual resurrections strain the usual principles of hermeneutics.”⁷

Historical Argument

Perhaps the most influential argument in my journey towards premillennialism was the historical argument. Amillennialism and postmillennialism have ways of working around troublesome biblical texts. Often times they appeal to a spiritual interpretation of passages to

⁴ Tom Constable, *Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), under Rev 20:4, Logos Bible Software.

⁵ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1131.

⁶ Steve Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views: A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson Publishers, 1997), under Rev 20:4–6, sec., “Premillennial,” Logos Bible Software.

⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), 1223.

explain away verses that do not readily support their view. So who is to say whether or not passages were written a spiritual interpretation in mind?

Well, frankly, John would know if he intended a spiritual interpretation of Revelation 20:1-10. He would know if it was a recapitulation or a sequential vision. *But we do not have direct access to John apart from what he wrote.* True, but we do have the testimony and the teachings from the early church. If Paul, John, Peter, and the other apostles taught the early church, one would expect the writings of that era's church leaders to reflect the apostles' teaching. Hence, an examination of the earliest writings is in order.

The *Didache* was probably written between AD 80 and 120.⁸ Likely composed as a “how-to” manual for discipleship and church planting,⁹ it spoke of just a partial resurrection concurrent with the return of the Lord.¹⁰ Thus, this early writing opposes the amillennial view of one general resurrection at the return of Christ.

Considered canonical by some of the early church—that is, until Eusebius of Caesarea¹¹—the *Epistle of Barnabas* dates to AD 70-135.¹² This letter used the seven-day creation from Genesis 1 as a paradigm to explain that after six thousand years, there will be a thousand-year Sabbath with the return of Christ, followed by a new creation, the eternal state, on the ‘eighth day’.¹³

⁸ Rick Brannan, “Apostolic Fathers,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry and Lazarus Wentz, electronic ed. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2012).

⁹ Michael William Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Updated ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 246.

¹⁰ *Didache* 16:6-7.

¹¹ Thomas C. Oden, ed., *Introduction and Biographical Information*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 497.

¹² Brannan, “Apostolic Fathers,” in Barry.

¹³ *Epistle of Barnabas* 15.3-9.

Between AD 110 and 165,¹⁴ the Gentile Palestinian philosopher-turned-Christian Justin Martyr wrote *Dialogue with Trypho*.¹⁵ In it, he said:

But I and others, who are right-minded Christians on all points, are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged, [as] the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and others declare...

And further, there was a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied, by a revelation that was made to him, that those who believed in our Christ would dwell a thousand years in Jerusalem; and that thereafter the general, and, in short, the eternal resurrection and judgment of all men would likewise take place.¹⁶

Justin was yet another voice in favor of a literal 1000-year kingdom based in Jerusalem. Only after which will there come the general resurrection into the eternal state. Notice too his exclusionary tone towards all other views of the eschaton.

Then there is also Irenaeus of Lyons. Living between AD 135 and 202,¹⁷ Irenaeus wrote the following in his anti-gnostic *Against Heresies*:

Then the Lord will come from heaven in the clouds, in the glory of the Father, sending this man and those who follow him into the lake of fire; but bringing in for the righteous the times of the kingdom, that is, the rest, the hallowed seventh day; and restoring to Abraham the promised inheritance, in which kingdom the Lord declared, that “many coming from the east and from the west should sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”...

Since, again, some who are reckoned among the orthodox go beyond the pre-arranged plan for the exaltation of the just, and are ignorant of the methods by which they are disciplined beforehand for incorruption, they thus entertain heretical opinions.¹⁸

So Irenaeus held that Christ would return, defeat the Antichrist, and usher in a new kingdom for the righteous—again using the language of the seventh-day Sabbath rest. Such a kingdom in

¹⁴ Roberts, Alexander, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 1:159.

¹⁵ Oden, *Introduction*, 497.

¹⁶ Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 80-1.

¹⁷ Oden, *Introduction*, 495.

¹⁸ Irenaeus of Lyons *Against Heresies* 5.30.4, 5.31.1.

Israel would fulfill Jesus' words recorded in Matthew 8:11. Irenaeus too derides Christians who buy into alternative eschatologies.

Moreover, Irenaeus spent time at the feet of Polycarp,¹⁹ a disciple of the Apostle John.²⁰ Assuming that the students were faithful to their instructor's teaching, Irenaeus' understanding of the Millennium would be the same understanding that Polycarp received from John, the man who himself wrote Revelation 20:1-10. Hence John most likely taught Polycarp, who taught Irenaeus, to look forward to an earthly, millennial kingdom and reign of Christ after the Tribulation.

In the late second century AD, a man from Carthage espoused a premillennial view:

But we do confess that a kingdom is promised to us upon the earth, although before heaven, only in another state of existence; inasmuch as it will be after the resurrection for a thousand years in the divinely-built city of Jerusalem, "let down from heaven" ... After its thousand years are over, within which period is completed the resurrection of the saints, who rise sooner or later according to their deserts there will ensue the destruction of the world and the conflagration of all things at the judgment...²¹

Tertullian penned these words between AD 160 and 225.²² *A kingdom before heaven* is clearly a rule prior to the eternal state. The kingdom's affiliation with Jerusalem makes it an earthly expectation. All the more this is a kingdom that separates two resurrections.

Another voice all but lost in history is Papias'. Friend of Polycarp and student of the Apostle John,²³ Papias wrote between from AD 70 to 155.²⁴ His writings are only known from quotes and attributions in later writings. Nevertheless Eusebius records Papias as a teacher of the

¹⁹ Roberts, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:vii.

²⁰ Brannan, "Apostolic Fathers," in Barry.

²¹ Tertullian *Against Marcion* 3.24.

²² John D. Hannah, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2001), 309.

²³ Irenaeus of Lyons *Against Heresies* 5.33.4.

²⁴ Roberts, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:151.

millennial reign of Christ on earth—though for Eusebius, this label is not a good thing.²⁵ Jerome too brands him with the same stigma.²⁶ It seems reasonable to conclude then that Papias too was a premillennial voice in the early church.

Didache, *Barnabas*, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Papias—all are first and second century AD witnesses to premillennialism. Walvoord proceeded to claim that finding any evidence of an orthodox view other than premillennialism prior to AD 190 is a challenge.²⁷ Svigel even asserted that where any Apostolic Father wrote on eschatology—though not all of them wrote on the subject—they depicted exclusively a premillennial return of Christ succeeded by a 1000-year earthly kingdom.²⁸ In contrast, amillennialism took flight under Augustine’s doctrine of a symbolic Millennium in the fourth century AD,²⁹ and postmillennialism only emerged after the Reformation.³⁰

Theological Argument

Theologically, an earthly reign of Christ following His return and prior to the eternal state is necessary for two significant reasons. First, the millennial reign of Christ on earth is the most Christologically plumb. “As God, the Son already had authority over all creation (John 17:5; Col 1:16–17); therefore, a heavenly, universal reign apart from an earthly, Davidic reign

²⁵ Eusebius of Caesaria *Church History* 3.39.12.

²⁶ Jerome *Lives of Illustrious Men* 18.

²⁷ John F. Walvoord, “End Times,” in *Understanding Christian Theology*, ed. Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), 1350.

²⁸ Michael Svigel, “ST106 Lecture 3 History of Millennialism,” unpublished class notes for ST106 (Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall Semester, 2012), 48.

²⁹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1220.

³⁰ Walvoord, “End Times,” 1350.

would be consistent with God the Son, but not with the incarnate God-Man, Jesus son of David.”³¹

Second, the Millennium fulfills many Old Testament covenants and prophecies. A re-gathered Israel as the epicenter of the Kingdom and a sovereign state in possession of their homeland would fulfill the land and people promised to Abraham in Genesis 12. An incarnate Christ reigning everlastingly on the throne of his forefather David would fulfill God’s covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7:11-16. The Millennium is the inaugurated fulfillment of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31. Similarly, the Millennial Kingdom also serves as “the final fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies which spoke of a messianic reign of righteousness on the earth (Pss. 2; 24; 72; 96; Isa. 2; 9:6-7; 11-12; 63:1-6; 65-66; Jer. 23:5-6; 30:8-11; Dan. 2:44; 7:13-14; Hos. 3:4-5; Amos 9:11-15; Mic. 4:1-8; Zeph. 3:14-20; Zech. 8:1-8; 14:1-9).”³²

Failure, then, for God to make good on His word to Abraham and David or failure for God to bring to fruition what He foretold through His spokesmen is irreconcilable with who God has revealed himself to be. “The all-wise eternal God, who knows all things by His omniscient knowledge, makes unconditional promises based on His immutable character, plans all things by His unchangeable will, and achieves them with His omnipotent power.”³³

Conclusion

Premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism are three distinct views on the end times rivaling for supremacy in Christian theology. Only one does not require hermeneutical gymnastics to make sense of the Scriptures. Only one has the exclusive voice of the early church. Only one brings to fulfillment the covenants upon which God staked His name

³¹ Michael Svigel, “ST 106 Lecture 11 the Millennium,” unpublished class notes for ST 106 (Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall Semester, 2012), 39.

³² W. Hall Harris, “A Theology of John’s Writings,” in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 240-41.

³³ Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 4 (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2005), 564.

and reputation. That one is premillennialism—the view that Christ will return prior to ruling for 1000 years on the earth, after which He will defeat Satan once and for all and then give the kingdom over to the Father.

That said, a caution must be issued lest pride or arrogance lay hold of those who affirm and defend premillennialism. While premillennialism may make the best sense of all the data, historic orthodox Christianity has never defined one particular view of the Millennium as *the* view.³⁴ The measure of orthodoxy is the literal, visible, personal return of Christ.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of his Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten ... not made, being of one substance ... with the Father. By whom all things were made, both which be in heaven and in earth. Who for us men and for our salvation came down [from heaven] and was incarnate and was made man. He suffered and the third day he rose again, and ascended into heaven. *And he shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead.* And [we believe] in the Holy Ghost.³⁵

That is a mark of true Christian faith—believed everywhere, always, and by all. So, in so far as it is up to us, we ought not let division and strife arise from differing views of the Millennium and destroy the body of Christ. Rather we should allow differing views to challenge and lovingly critique the others such that growth and maturation would be found in all who strive after Christ.

³⁴ Svigel, “History of Millennium,” 2.

³⁵ *The Nicene Creed* (emphasis added).

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