

VIEWS OF THE ESCHATOLOGICAL MILLENIUM

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Issue

Referring to the wildly speculative interpretations commentators have offered for the book of Revelation, G. K. Chesterton quipped, “Though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creatures so wild as one of his commentators.”¹ Adding to Chesterton’s observations, “James Orr, lecturing at the end of the nineteenth century, observed that various areas of Christian doctrine had received special attention and development at different periods in the history of the church,” but suggested “the one remaining undeveloped topic of theology” which is the “peculiar interest of the modern age is eschatology.”² It appears that at no point in history has the church been more theologically enamored with eschatology (the study of the “last things”) than in recent years. In recognition of the growing fascination of the day, this paper will enter the eschatological discussion by focusing on the narrow topic of the millennial reign of Christ introduced in Revelation chapter 20. One of the most hotly debated

¹G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Co., 1908), 29.

²Millard J. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 11.

topics in eschatology, several systems have been developed for interpreting the historical placement and theological significance of the millennium. This paper will assess the four major views for interpreting Revelation 20:1-6 – dispensational premillennialism, historical premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism – and will defend the amillennial position – which suggests this passage refers to the reign of dead believers in heaven with Christ for the duration of the present church age.

Underlying the divergent views of the millennium are the differing hermeneutical principles employed by the interpreters. Commentators primarily disagree upon the approach to reading the book of Revelation in three main ways. The first point of difference occurs when determining how to read prophetic Scripture in light of history. Differing views see prophetic Scripture as applying specifically to the past – predominantly prior to 70 A. D., as applying to history through the ages, as applying specifically to the future, or as eclectically applying to general patterns of all history past, present, and future. Interpreters further differ when deciding whether apocalyptic literature is to be read literally or symbolically. The symbolic approach sees Revelation as communicating information at three levels: a visionary level (what John actually saw), a symbolic level (what the items in John’s visions connote biblically beyond a specific historical reference), and a historical level (the particular historical identification).³ Juxtaposed to this hermeneutical approach are those from the dispensational tradition, who, in an attempt to maintain a conservative orthodox reading of Scripture, demand that interpretations be strictly literal. This has led commentators to further disagree as to whether John’s visions are to be read literally, in a linear chronological sequence – as an “ordered and progressive unfolding,”⁴ or as related recapitulations, symbolically offering kaleidoscopic depictions of the same events.⁵ The

³G. K. Beale with David H. Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), 421.

⁴Herman A. Hoyt, “Dispensational Premillennialism” in Robert G. Clouse (ed.) *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 63.

⁵G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries* (New York

outcomes of the underlying hermeneutical principles will play out in the systems examined below.

Positions

Dispensational Premillennialism

Developed in England by John Nelson Darby, dispensational theology was popularized around the turn of the nineteenth century, and is arguably an instigating factor in the modern infatuation with eschatology. The first tenet of dispensationalism is the belief the Bible must be interpreted literally.⁶ As a clear proponent of dispensational premillennialism, Herman A. Hoyt claims, “The literal method of approach to the teaching of the pre-millennial, dispensational doctrine of the kingdom is absolutely basic.”⁷ John F. Walvoord says, “The pre-millennial interpretation offers the only literal fulfillment for the hundreds of verses of prophetic testimony.”⁸ Taking seriously the concept of progressive revelation, dispensationalists see God as revealing more truth as time progresses, and therefore see the majority of the prophecies of Revelation as taking place in the future. This literal futuristic interpretation of Revelation 20 manifests as the millennium being “more than merely a thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth.” The dispensational millennium is “the restoration of national Israel to its favored place in God’s program and the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel.”⁹ Being that dispensationalists (unlike non-dispensationalists) hold a strong distinction between God’s promises to ethnic Israel

and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1966), 13.

⁶Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 86-89.

⁷Hoyt, “Dispensational Premillennialism,” 67.

⁸John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1959), 114.

⁹Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology*, 119.

and to the church, in dispensationalism the millennium is the time when unfulfilled prophecies are clearly fulfilled and national Israel returns to prominence. Saucy explains,

The unity of the historical kingdom program, however, must be interpreted in such a way as to allow for the natural understanding of all the biblical prophecies. These promises portray a restoration of the nation of Israel to the promised land and a central position for that nation in the final period of the mediatorial kingdom. Contrary to non-dispensationalism, the term *Israel* is not finally applied to all God's people irrespective of nationality.¹⁰

Understanding this view depends on an appreciation of classical dispensationalism's affirmation of "two coexisting eternal realms of salvation, one heavenly and one earthly." Early dispensationalists drew on a "spiritual vision model of heaven as the final destiny for Christian believers [. . .] by postulating two coexisting forms of ultimate salvation – one eternal in heaven for the church and one everlasting on the new earth for Israel."¹¹

Chronologically, dispensational premillennialists see Revelation 20 occurring immediately after the seven year tribulation. Unmistakably inaugurated by Christ's second coming, the millennium will be a literal one thousand year period in which Satan is bound (Rev 20:2-3) and Christ establishes His earthly reign from the throne of David. Dispensationalists interpret both resurrections in Revelation 20:4-6 as physical in nature. The first resurrection in verse four is limited to believers who will reign on earth with Christ during the millennium, and the second resurrection in verse 6 encompasses all non-believers who are resurrected after the millennium to face final judgment. Dispensationalism has the positive aspects of being thoroughly biblical, conservative, and consistent.

Historical Premillennialism

Like dispensational premillennialism, historical premillennialism sees Revelation chapter 20 as chronologically following chapter 19. In the premillennial view, following the

¹⁰Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1993), 28-29.

¹¹Craig A. Blaising, "Premillennialism" in Stanley N. Gundry and Darrell L. Bock (ed.) *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1999), 182-183.

great tribulation (which is not necessarily seven years), Christ ushers in the millennium by inaugurating a period of absolute peace and justice in which Satan will be bound and Christ will reign bodily on earth among men. The historical view sees the two resurrections of Revelation 20:4-6 similarly to dispensationalism. In the first resurrection believers will be physically resurrected to reign with Christ in the millennium, while non-believers will not be resurrected until final judgment – after the second resurrection at the end of the millennium. While sharing these similarities with dispensationalists, the historical premillennialists take a less literal approach to apocalyptic Scripture, seeing the literal hermeneutic as misunderstanding the deeper meaning of the texts. Historical premillennialism’s most notable modern proponent, George Eldon Ladd, exerted considerable effort in arguing against the dispensational reading saying, “The literal hermeneutic does not work. [. . .] Old Testament prophecies must be interpreted in the light of the New Testament to find their deeper meaning. [. . .] I do not see how it is possible to avoid the conclusion that the New Testament applies Old Testament prophecies to the New Testament church and in so doing identifies the church as spiritual Israel.”¹² Along with amillennialism and postmillennialism, historical premillennialism rejects the dispensational separation of Israel and the New Testament church on the grounds that numerous passages such as Ephesians 2 and Galatians 3 make clear that Paul saw the church comprised of Jew and Gentile as God’s new covenant people and heir to the promises made to national Israel. Ladd clarifies, “The fact is that the New Testament frequently interprets Old Testament prophecies in a way not suggested by the Old Testament context.”¹³ Historical premillennialists therefore do not necessarily assert that the millennium is a literal one thousand years, nor do they interpret the millennium to be the fulfillment of a literal restoration of national Israel. Where dispensationalism “follows the futurist method of interpretation almost exclusively, historical

¹²George Eldon Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism” in Robert G. Clouse (ed.) *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 23.

¹³Ibid, 20.

premillennialism [. . .] combines the futurist and preterist views, holding that the book necessarily had a message for John's own age and that it represents the consummation of redemptive history."¹⁴ Historical premillennialism has the benefit of being the most natural and straightforward reading of the text, and aligns well with the collective New Testament mentions of resurrection, which seem to consistently refer to bodily resurrection.

Postmillennialism

Having fallen out of popularity following the great world wars of the twentieth century, Postmillennialism, while not widely held today, has had significant influence at different times in the history of the church, and even "has at times been the dominant position."¹⁵ While postmillennialism shares many commonalities with the other positions, in the postmillennial view "the doctrine of the millennium is based not upon Revelation 20 but upon other portions of Scripture."¹⁶ For the postmillennialist, the millennium is symbolic in nature, and is qualitative rather than quantitative.¹⁷ The most distinctive characteristics of postmillennialism are the view that the new creation began after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A. D., the kingdom of God is now being extended in the new earth by the preaching of the gospel, and the world is now being increasingly Christianized in anticipation of the return of Christ. Unique to postmillennialism is the optimistic outlook regarding the conditions leading up to Christ's return. Where the other positions agree that conditions will worsen as the age draws to a close, postmillennialists believe that the world is becoming more Christianized, and therefore features of the kingdom of God – such as peace and justice – are increasing as Christ's return draws closer. Unlike the premillennialist's view of Christ's kingdom, the postmillennial view sees the kingdom of God

¹⁴Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology*, 98.

¹⁵Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology*, 55.

¹⁶Ibid, 69.

¹⁷Lorraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1991), 28.

primarily existing as a present reality in the hearts of believers. The kingdom is not something to be introduced cataclysmically at a future time, but is already progressively under way.¹⁸ “Postmillennialism expects the vast majority of the world’s population to convert to Christ as a consequence of the Spirit-blessed proclamation of the gospel. [. . .] Thus, the postmillennialist’s hope-filled expectation is rooted in creational reality.”¹⁹ Further, as more people submit themselves to the Lord’s will, postmillennialism expects a long period of earthly peace termed the millennium.²⁰ This millennium is a golden age of spiritual prosperity during the present church age, which is not a literal one thousand years, and has no clear point of beginning but arrives by degrees.²¹ At the end of the millennium there will occur an apostasy and an increase in evil, the millennium will end with the bodily return of Christ, at which point large numbers of Jews will be converted and enter the church, and Christ’s return will be immediately be followed by the resurrection and judgment of all.²² Postmillennialism, while not commonly affirmed today, does well to keep the Spirit of optimism and drive to carry out the Great Commission at its core.

Amillennialism

While amillennialism agrees with postmillennialism that the millennium is not a literal thousand-year earthly reign following Christ’s return, amillennialism holds important distinctions from the postmillennial view. Anthony Hoekema helpfully clarifies that

¹⁸James H. Snowden, *The Coming of the Lord: Will it be Premillennial?* (New York: MacMillan, 1919), 64-66.

¹⁹Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., “Postmillennialism” in Stanley N. Gundry and Darrell L. Bock (ed.) *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1999), 22-23.

²⁰Snowden, *The Coming of the Lord*, 257-63.

²¹Boettner, *The Millennium*, 14.

²²Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, & Co., 1873), 3:792-800, 832.

‘amillennial’ is an unfortunate name for the position because the amillennialist does not assert that there is no millennium, but rather that the millennium described in Revelation 20:1-6 is a *realized millennium*.²³ Summarily communicating the essence of the amillennial position, Greg Beale states, “The millennium is inaugurated during the church age by God’s curtailment of Satan’s ability to deceive the nations and to annihilate the church and by the resurrection of believer’s souls to heaven to reign there with Christ.”²⁴ Unlike other positions, amillennialists interpret Revelation 20:4 “as describing the present reign of the souls of deceased believers with Christ in heaven,” and understand verses 1-3 as the binding of Satan “during the entire period between the first and second comings of Christ.”²⁵ Unlike the postmillennial position, amillennialism views the great tribulation, apostasy, and the Antichrist as future events, meaning that the amillennialist does not share the postmillennialist’s optimistic certainty of “a worldwide growth of righteousness that will extend to every area of society.”²⁶ Additionally, amillennialism agrees with the non-dispensational views that the millennium does not necessarily include the restoration of political Israel.

In agreement with other non-dispensationalists, amillennial scholar Greg Beale says, “Literal interpreters [. . .] too often neglect the visionary and symbolic levels of communication by collapsing them into the referential historical level.”²⁷ Expounding further the amillennial hermeneutic, Beale says the only hope for obtaining clarity is to interpret Revelation 20 “in the light of its immediate context, then in the light of the closest parallels elsewhere in the book, and

²³J. E. Adams, *The Time is at Hand*, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 7-11.

²⁴ Beale, *Revelation*, 420.

²⁵Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 174.

²⁶W. J. Grier, “Christian Hope and the Millennium” (Christianity Today: October 13, 1958), 19.

²⁷Beale, *Revelation*, 421.

finally in the light of other parallels in the NT and OT.”²⁸ Amillennial interpreters arrive at their understanding of the millennium by recognizing that Revelation is written in seven sections of parallel recapitulations – each symbolically offering nuanced kaleidoscopic views of the “church and the world from the time of Christ’s first coming to the time of his second.”²⁹ This system of interpretation is known as *recapitulation theory* or *progressive parallelism*.³⁰ Reading Revelation in such a way reveals that 20:7-10, 19:17-21, and 16:12-16 all recount the same battle. This insight, among others, reveals that “the events of 20:1-6 (the millennium) refer to events *prior in time* to the last battle of 19:11-21, thus indicating that the millennium itself is to be identified with the church age.”³¹ The premillennial position views 20:1-6 as immediately following 19:11-21 (in historical sequence) on the basis of the Greek word ‘kai’ (located at the beginning of 20:1) being taken to mean ‘and’ in a chronological sense. The ESV has taken the interpretive initiative to render the ‘kai’ in Revelation 20:1 as ‘then.’ Beale, however, argues that “often in Revelation [‘kai’] functions as a transitional word simply indicating another vision and not necessarily chronological sequence. [. . .] Only three out of thirty-five occurrences of [‘kai’] in 19:11-21 clearly indicate sequence in historical time while the remainder serve as visionary linking devices.”³²

Further helpful for recognizing the relation of the millennium to the present church age is to note that in Revelation 20:2-3 Satan is said to be seized and bound for a thousand years so that he might not deceive the ‘ethne’ until the thousand years are ended. ‘Ethne,’ in Revelation 20, is typically translated as ‘nations,’ but ‘ethne’ is more often translated as ‘gentiles’

²⁸Ibid, 420.

²⁹Anthony A. Hoekema, “Amillennialism” in Robert G. Clouse (ed.) *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 156-157.

³⁰William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1939), 11-64.

³¹Beale, *Revelation*, 422-423.

³²Ibid, 422.

throughout the New Testament, and the amillennial understanding of Revelation 20 becomes clear if ‘ethne’ is rendered as ‘gentiles’ rather than ‘nations’ here. Such a translation then reads that Satan is bound in the church age so that the gentiles will no longer be deceived by Satan. Hoekema explains, ”In the Old Testament, [. . .] the people of Israel were the recipients of God’s special revelation, so that they knew God’s truth about themselves [. . .] and salvation,” but “the other nations of the world, did not know that truth. [. . .] These nations were deceived by Satan.”³³ This picture becomes clearer when Revelation 20:2-3 is held alongside the Great Commission (Matt 28:19) in which Christ commands His disciples to “Go therefore and make disciples of all the ‘ethne.’ Again, in this passage ‘ethne’ is typically translated as ‘nations,’ but again the reference is more specifically to ‘gentiles.’ It is significant that Revelation 20:2 speaks to the binding of Satan because Jesus made a similar remark in Matthew 12:29. While speaking of His coming to save those held captive by Satan, Christ asked, “How can one enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man?” The same word – ‘deo’ – is used in both Revelation 20:2 and Matthew 12:29 to describe the binding of Satan. Hoekema again provides insight positing that “this does not imply that Satan can do no harm whatever while he is bound. It means only what John says here: While Satan is bound he cannot deceive the nations in such a way to keep them from learning the truth of God,” and “he cannot prevent the spread of the gospel. [. . .] It is precisely because the kingdom of God has come that the gospel can now be preached to all the nations (see Matt 13:24-30, 47-50).”³⁴ In similar fashion, Paul makes reference to the restraint of Satan’s attempts to deceive the world when he writes, “And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time” (2 Thess 2:6). In Revelation 20:3, John says the angel cast (‘ebalen’) Satan into the abyss. Similar to the binding of Satan in 20:2, Jesus speaks to the casting out of Satan in John 12:31-32 saying, “Now

³³Hoekema, “Amillennialism,” 161.

³⁴Ibid, 162-63.

is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be cast out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” In this case, the verb translated ‘cast out’ is ‘ekballo,’ and is derived from the same root as the word ‘ebalen’ used to describe the casting out of Satan in Revelation 20:3.³⁵ It stands then to reason that what is being communicated is that the work of Christ – in the inauguration of the kingdom of heaven – has dealt Satan a heavy blow, binding and casting him out of the way, so that the gospel call of Jesus Christ can be made known to unbelieving gentiles the world over. The Amillennial interpretation attempts to do serious exegesis of Revelation 20:1-6, is canonically coherent, and can be seen to offer great encouragement to believers both to take the gospel to the non-believing nations, and to be confident – standing firm in the faith – even in the face of persecution.

Conclusion

When weighing the four views, and the hermeneutical principles employed by each against a canonical biblical theology, it appears that the two views that best align with the biblical metanarrative are historical premillennialism and amillennialism. Based on the exegesis of Revelation 20, and its corresponding cross references, the amillennial view seems to provide the most satisfactory explanation of the available evidence. It remains, however, that eschatology is an open-handed issue which can be debated and disagreed upon, and which should never be the basis for the division fellowship. It should be readily acknowledged that Scripture underdetermines the issue of the millennium, and it cannot be expected that all people will arrive at identical conclusions. The Christian is called to be charitable, and the millennium “is a [topic] where equally evangelical scholars who accept the Bible as the inspired Word of God should be able to disagree without the accusation ‘liberal,’³⁶ or heretic. The end of the matter is that we must always remember that all Scripture is given with the intent that Christ

³⁵Hoekema, “Amillennialism,” 163.

³⁶Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” 20.

would be exalted; that non-believers would be brought to know Him; that believers would be encouraged to endure for the sake of being made like Him; and that, regardless of differing views of the millennium, believers would foremost remember that “the end is not an event but a person.”³⁷

³⁷G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine, Harper's New Testament Commentaries* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1966), 13.

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