

Some Comments on Views of The Millennium

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(Note: This presentation is slanted toward Amillennialism. It is the second of two presentations, the first of which covered Premillennialism. That presentation was not documented.)

In Revelation 20 the concept of the millennium is mentioned. This is a 1000-year period when Christ reigns over His people. This is generally viewed as an earthly reign. Accordingly, theologians have developed three primary positions with regard to this idea. Pre-millennialists teach that believers are raptured or resurrected at some point prior to the millennium. Post-millennialists teach that the rapture and the second-coming of Christ occur after the millennium. Finally, Amillennialists teach that there will not be a literal 1000-year reign of Christ on the earth.

One problem with these three views is that most who hold them disagree among themselves about the details, and some hold positions that overlap with one or both of the other viewpoints. I'll speak about this later. In his Commentary on Rev. 20:4-5, Joseph Seiss says this: "A rich and magnificent revelation here comes before us. Beautiful and blessed contemplations would it also afford were it not for the noise and dust of controversy which surrounds it. Unfortunately it has become a battleground of opposing schemes, not only of the interpretation of the Apocalypse, but of the whole outcome of God's promises and man's redemption. A war of the theologians has hung upon it for centuries. Hence it is seldom treated otherwise than polemically, or with partisan bias."

One issue that arises in discussion of verses that speak about the end times is whether to view these passages literally or in some other way. Most serious students of Scripture come to realize that a lot of its language is meant to be understood figuratively or symbolically. Note that I did not say "allegorically," in spite of the fact that a few passages are specifically allegorical. For example, when Jesus gave the parable of the Soils, in Mark 4 and Matthew 13, He Himself presented an allegorical interpretation of the parable.

Allegorical interpretation of Scripture was common in the first century, and Philo was perhaps its earliest proponent. He was a member of a group in Alexandria which used this as a primary method of interpretation. Origen in the second century AD was another prominent proponent of allegorical interpretation, and he was followed in the fourth century by St. Augustine of Hippo. This method led to outlandish interpretations and eventually came to be viewed as heresy by the established church in Rome when applied to books other than prophecy and apocalyptic writings.

Still, it is clear that much OT Scripture is intended to be understood figuratively. For example, **Isaiah 40:31 (NASB)** *Yet those who wait for the LORD Will gain new strength; They will mount up with wings like eagles, They will run and not get tired, They will walk and not become weary.*

Daniel 12:3 (NASB) *"Those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.*

Isaiah 65:25 (NASB) *"The wolf and the lamb will graze together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox; and dust will be the serpent's food. They will do no evil or harm in all My holy mountain," says the LORD.*

On the other hand, many Scriptures originally viewed spiritually came to be fulfilled literally.

Psalms 22:16 (NASB) *For dogs have surrounded me; A band of evildoers has encompassed me; They pierced my hands and my feet.*

Isaiah 52:13 (NASB) *Behold, My servant will prosper; He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted.*

Isaiah 53:3-4 (NASB) ³ *He was despised and forsaken of men, A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; And like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.*

⁴ *Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted.*

These verses from Isaiah 52 and 53 were understood as speaking figuratively about the nation Israel, but they were fulfilled literally by Jesus Christ. The point is this: both literal and figurative interpretations have their place. However, those who are more comfortable with literal interpretation tend to view with suspicion those who often understand Scripture figuratively and accuse them of allegorical interpretation, and in the extreme, view them as heretics or to use a less abusive term, liberals. Some literalists even view their approach as a higher view of Scripture, when actually, it is a limited perspective.

On the other hand, those who have an appreciation for symbolic interpretations, such as the Eastern Orthodox Church, often view literalists as simple-minded, as unable to grasp the full implication of spiritually-inspired writing.

Either of these two mindsets can be detrimental, not only to the individual but to the common cause of both groups, which is to view Scripture as a written revelation of God. With that in mind, let's turn to the question of the Millennium.

Most Pre-millennialists will remind you that pre-millennialism was the earliest view of the Christian church. Actually, that isn't strictly true.

The Millennium is mentioned only in the 20th chapter of Revelation. Depending upon who you listen to, the book of Revelation was written sometime between 60 and 90 AD. Jesus spoke of the end times during His earthly ministry between roughly 30 and 33 AD, and He never mentioned a millennium. Paul's writings came between the late 40's and the 50's. He spoke in several places about the end times, but he never mentioned a millennium.

Thus Jesus and Paul must be regarded as amillennialists! The leaders of the church in the first century, then can only be regarded as mostly amillennialists. After Revelation became known, Christians had to develop some understanding about the millennium. In the second century, both amillennialism and pre-millennialism were espoused by various Christian leaders. I'll say more about this in a moment.

One question that might be raised is where did the idea of a millennial kingdom first arise? Here, we must turn to the OT.

Isaiah 2:2 (NASB)

² *Now it will come about that In the last days The mountain of the house of the LORD Will be established as the chief of the mountains, And will be raised above the hills; And all the nations will stream to it.*

Isaiah 2:4 (NASB)

⁴ *And He will judge between the nations, And will render decisions for many peoples; And they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, And never again will they learn war.*

Isaiah 9:6-7 (NASB)

⁶ *For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.*

⁷ *There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness From then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this.*

Isaiah 11:1-9 (NASB)

¹ *Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, And a branch from his roots will bear fruit.*

² *The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him, The spirit of wisdom and understanding, The spirit of counsel and strength, The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ³ And He will delight in the fear of the LORD, And He will not judge by what His eyes see, Nor make a decision by what His ears hear; ⁴ But with righteousness He will judge the poor, And decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; And He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, And with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked.*

⁵ *Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins, And faithfulness the belt about His waist.*

⁶ *And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, And the leopard will lie down with the young goat, And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little boy will lead them.*

⁷ *Also the cow and the bear will graze, Their young will lie down together, And the lion will eat straw like the ox. ⁸ The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. ⁹ They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD As the waters cover the sea.*

These are just a few of OT passages that speak about what came to be called “the peaceful kingdom,” a time of tranquility, when Messiah would come and rule on the earth over His people. Often these passages are said to refer to the “Messianic kingdom.” Those who hold to pre-millennialism call this the “Millennial Kingdom,” while Amillennialists see these passages as referring to the time after the second coming of Christ. If you're truly objective about this, you have to admit that OT prophets were Amillennialists, because when speaking of the end times, they never mentioned a millennium!

The prophetic books such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah were written during times when Israel was being over-run and the people taken into captivity by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. They were written, sometimes using figurative language, to give the people hope and assure them that God would eventually vanquish all their enemies. The book of Daniel was written to address the threat from later enemies – Greece and the Seleucids from Syria, but it's visions are written from the perspective of the Babylonian captivity.

One event mentioned by most prophetic books is called “the Day of the Lord.” This is a time when God will execute judgement on all who have ever lived. Some Biblical writers see or describe this is a physical destruction of Israel's enemies. During His earthly ministry, Jesus spoke of a time when He would return to the earth and when God would execute judgement. Believers would go to heaven; unbelievers would go to hell, the Bible seems to say rather clearly, either directly or in parabolic form. After the advent of Christ, the Day of the Lord came to be associated with His second coming. So we have many Scriptures that speak of a time of peace and times of judgement, but nothing about 1000 years associated with either, until Revelation.

In the OT, the word “thousand” is used in two different ways. The first is to indicate a large, fairly specific, but perhaps rounded, number.

Genesis 20:16 (NASB) *To Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver;"*

Exodus 32:28 (NASB) *So the sons of Levi did as Moses instructed, and about three thousand men of the people fell that day.*

In other passages, the word is used to represent a very large but indefinite number:

1 Chronicles 16:15 (NASB) *Remember His covenant forever; The word which He commanded to a thousand generations, which is a quote of Psalm 105:8*

Psalm 50:10 (NASB) *For every beast of the forest is Mine, The cattle on a thousand hills.*

Perhaps a good example of this use of 1000 to represent a large but indefinite number is

Revelation 7:4 (NASB) *And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel.*

Most scholars, whether A-mil, Pre-Mil, or Post-Mil, view this passage symbolically, representing God's people, although some (e.g., Dispensationalists) restrict the people being represented as Jews only. The number of them is very large and indefinite. This passage is followed by verse **9 (NASB)** *After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands;*

Notice carefully how these verses read: verse 4 says, "I heard," but verse 9 says "Then I saw." Thus, when John looked to see the 144,000 that the angel spoke about, he saw a great multitude of all types of people. It seems clear that these people are all of God's people, Jews and Gentiles alike. This comports with passages such as **Galatians 3:28 (NASB)** *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* (See Note 1.)

Thus, 144,000, which is 12 x 12 x 1000 is a symbolic number, representing a large multitude of God's people. Now, let's look at some passages where 1000 is used to speak about a time period.

Psalm 84:10 (NASB) *For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand outside. ...*

Psalm 90:4 (NASB) *For a thousand years in Your sight Are like yesterday when it passes by, Or as a watch in the night.*

In these verses, it seems like 1000 is used to speak of a large but indefinite period of time. Psalm 90 verse 4 is quoted in **2 Peter 3:7-13 (NASB)** ⁷ *But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.* ⁸ *But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day.* ⁹ *The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.* ¹⁰ *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.* ¹¹ *Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness,* ¹² *looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat!*

¹³ *But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.*

Here, Peter quotes a Psalm that uses the term “a thousand years” to show that God is very patient, waiting for a long but indefinite time for all to come to repentance. The verse at 2 Peter 3:10 is one that is used by Amillennialists to show that the Second-Coming will come suddenly. There will be no 1000-year time of entirely peaceful rule on the earth by Christ. This is in accordance with what Jesus taught in verses such as **Matthew 24:42 (NASB)** *"Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.*

Chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew are referred to as the “Little Apocalypse.” In these two chapters, Jesus answers questions from His followers about the sign of His second coming and the end of this age. Jesus responds by telling them there will be various signs, including apostasy and war. When Jesus mentions the “Abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet”, some believe that He simply means apostasy. (Note 2) These passages are often viewed as speaking prophetically of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Roman general Titus around 70 AD.

Thus, Amillennialists and some Post-Millennialists see the 1000 years as a symbolic way of speaking about Christ's reign from heaven over the earth from His earthly resurrection until the time of His second coming back to the earth, when a new heaven and earth will be established. Thus, 1000 years is seen as a large but indefinite time period that is going on now and has already lasted almost 2000 years. (Note 3) N. T. Wright (The NT For Everyone) in speaking about the 1000 years states that “John has used all kinds of symbolic numbers throughout [The Revelation]. It would be very odd if he were suddenly to throw in a rather obvious round and symbolic number, but expect us to take it literally.”

Amillennialists view the millennium as speaking symbolically of the present age, with Jesus reigning in heaven. This is supported by passages such as Eph 2:4-7. If one examines carefully Rev 20:1-6, one finds no description of life on the earth. Satan is said to be bound and confined to the abyss, but how does a chain suffice to hold a spiritual being? It is a spiritual chain (Seiss). His power seems to be limited alright, so that he “would not deceive the nations any longer.” Thus, it is an assumption on the part of millennialists that the messianic kingdom conditions of peace and tranquility apply to the millennium. Amillennialists believe that passages such as Mk 3:23-27 tell us that Satan's power was vanquished by Christ. He cast out demons. Satan is still active, but is bound so that he can not prevent the spread of the gospel during the present age. The passage in Rev 20:1-3 comes from Isa. 24:21-23, which is a passage about the last days.

Another topic to examine is resurrection. Pre-millennialists mostly see the rapture as a resurrection of living believers prior to the millennium. Since 1 Thess 4:13-18 states that the dead in Christ will arise first, the rapture must consist of two resurrections occurring roughly simultaneously when Christ comes to set up the millennial kingdom. Then later, when the New Jerusalem is established (a third coming?) and the final judgment takes place, non-believers will be resurrected. However, in every passage in the OT and when Christ speaks about the subject, there is only one general resurrection of both believers and non-believers. For example, **John 5:28-29 (NASB)**²⁸ *"Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice,* ²⁹ *and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.* (See Dan 12:2) This verse speaks of just one resurrection that involves both believers and non-believers., and it happens at the Second Coming. There is no mention of a millennium. **John 6:54 (NASB)** *"He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.* This verse states clearly that the resurrection of believers will occur on the “last day.” This is how Amillennialists view the resurrection – one resurrection of all people at the Second Coming on the Last Day.

Amillennialists view some Scriptures as speaking symbolically about events that have already occurred or are happening at the time of the writing but which may have their fulfillment in the indefinite future. For example, they see the OT Scripture passages that speak about the building of a new temple in Jerusalem being fulfilled literally by the temple constructed by Zerubbabel and spiritually as a sign of hope for the future. Similarly, when Jesus speaks about the destruction of the temple in Matthew 24, His prophecy was fulfilled literally in 70 AD and will be fulfilled spiritually at an indefinite time in the future, when the earth as we know it will disappear. Pre-millennialists see the events of apocalyptic writings as entirely future events. They do not consider it important that these writings were to have been understood by those living when they were written.

In the past, each of these three or four views has been held by prominent theologians, so each must have some degree of merit, and there must be some problems with each one. Today, as we compare these primary views with one another, Post-millennialism has drifted out of favor to a large degree. Dispensational Pre-Millennialism, whose proponents stress that Israel will be treated differently from the rest of God's people, has also declined to a degree, leaving Historical Pre-Millennialism and Amillennialism as the two major views among serious theologians. (Dispensational Pre-Millennialism remains popular in some circles due to annotated Bibles such as those by Scofield and Ryrie.) See Note 4.

One major problem with some who hold to Post-millennial and Pre-millennial views is to see the Pope as the Anti-Christ and the Catholic Church as the False Prophet. In the view of many scholars, the teaching that the Anti-Christ is to be a specific person is not Biblical, despite the fact that Pink has written an entire book on this topic, and that it has a long history within Christianity even from the 2nd century. (Note 5) Amillennialists stress this viewpoint, while Pre-millennialists spend countless efforts trying to identify this person, and through the centuries have seen him in various persons of their day. Jesus warned about this type of fruitless endeavor. Not only does it detract from what Christians need to be focused on – the spreading of the Gospel – it also turns away people who know enough about Scripture to see the obvious fallacies in the extremely literal views of some groups. Another problem is that because Amillennialists see symbolic references to specific past events in books or passages regarded as prophecy, Pre-millennialists accuse them of not believing in prophecy. They also like to label them as liberals, as if there were something more Godly about being considered conservative. Einstein has said, “Condemnation without investigation is the height of ignorance.”

A rather interesting view of Revelation is to see it as “progressive parallelism.” In this view, the book can be divided into seven sections, and, except for the first, each describes the same events using different imagery, but each ends with a description of the last days. This approach also views the millennium as symbolic.

It turns out that practically all Pre-millennialists carefully mix a healthy dose of symbolism into their literal interpretations, which focus almost exclusively on the future. Amillennialists, on the other hand, see in apocalyptic imagery references to past historical events as well as visions of the future and are quite comfortable with symbolic expression of past and future events. Many amillennialists do believe in the literal fulfillment of Biblical prophecies; they simply disagree with Millennialists about how or when these prophecies will be fulfilled. The differences lie in the details, and if either group fails to grasp the central message of these Scriptures, then that group has gone astray.

Notes...

1. See Rev. 5 – One of the elders says that the Lion of Judah is worthy to open the scroll with seven seals. When John turns to look, he sees a lamb that seems to have been slain. Thus, the lion and the lamb are one and the same.

2. See 2 Thess 2:1-12. At 2:3 the Greek reads *apostasia*. Paul speaks of prophecies from Daniel (7:25, 8:25, 11:36) This happened previously in 167 BC, when Antiochus Epiphanes set up an altar to Zeus in the Second Temple in Jerusalem, and sacrificed swine on it. It would happen again in 70 AD when Titus desecrated the temple area and his soldiers destroyed the temple. See Lk 21:20-21. Those who see this as a still future event conclude that another Jewish temple will have to be built in Jerusalem, something the NT never mentions specifically. This fact is used to date the NT books as written before AD 70.
3. N.T Wright (NT For Everyone) states that “John is saying that the martyrs are already reigning with Christ,” and that this reflects an early Christian view, expressed in Eph 2:6, where the church is seated in heavenly places with Christ.
4. Though he holds to a Pre-millennialist view, John Walvoord (Prophecy Knowledge Handbook, 1990, p. 624) admits that “the Amillennial interpretation is probably the majority view of the church today.”
5. Hippolytus of Rome (c. 170-c. 236) held that the Antichrist would come from the tribe of Dan and would rebuild the Jewish temple on the Temple Mount in order to reign from it. He identified the Antichrist with the Beast out of the Earth from the book of Revelation.
6. William Hendriksen in More Than Conquerors, 2nd ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1940. and Hoekema, Anthony A. (1994-03-01). The Bible and the Future (Kindle Location 8305). Eerdmans Publishing Co - A. Kindle Edition. The sections are Chapters 1-3, 4-7, 8-11, 12-14, 15-16, 17-19, 20-22.

Misc. Comments

In the section entitled Last Things, the Baptist Faith and Message says this:

God, in His own time and in His own way, will bring the world to its appropriate end. According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all men in righteousness. The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in Heaven with the Lord.

Note that there is no mention of a Millennium. This must mean that it is not an essential doctrine, and/or that its meaning is unclear.

Commentary on Rev. 20:4-5 by Joseph Seiss (A Lutheran dispensational pre-millennialist)

A rich and magnificent revelation here comes before us. Beautiful and blessed contemplations would it also afford were it not for the noise and dust of controversy which surrounds it. Unfortunately it has become a battleground of opposing schemes, not only of the interpretation of the Apocalypse, but of the whole outcome of God's promises and man's redemption. A war of the theologians has hung upon it for centuries. Hence it is seldom treated otherwise than polemically, or with partisan bias. Nor is it possible to touch it at all without entering in some degree into the deep and far-reaching controversy which here comes to its intensest and final tug. It is a great pity that it is so. The effect is disastrous in many directions. It turns multitudes from looking at the subject. It creates suspicions of any doctrines that seem to depend on the passage in question. It induces numbers to accept the unwarranted conclusion that the whole thing is so mysterious, incomprehensible, and dark, that no light or spiritual edification is to be gained from it. It has led disputants into inventions, assertions, and ways of dealing with the Divine Word, which, if consistently followed out, would undermine every distinctive doctrine of Inspiration. Nor is there, perhaps, another section of holy Scripture the consideration of which so much needs the aid and guidance of the Holy Ghost to keep the inquirer in balance and temper, to look and see with unprejudiced eyes, and to form conclusions with sound and

conscientious regard to what has been written for our learning. God help us in our handling of the subject that we may rightly conceive, embrace, and rest on his own everlasting truth!

1. Postmillennialists believe that Christ will come after the millennium has taken place. The kingdom of God is now being extended in the world through the preaching of the gospel and the saving work of the Holy Spirit. Christ is already reigning through his obedient church, and will bring to the world a thousand years of peace and righteousness prior to his return at the conclusion of history.
2. Premillennialists maintain that Christ will come before the millennium begins. Despite all attempts to Christianize society, things will become worse and worse, and in the last days Antichrist will gain control of human affairs. Only the catastrophic return of Christ can inaugurate the golden age of one thousand years of peace here on earth.
3. Amillennialists regard the thousand years, like other numerals in Revelation, to be symbolic. Instead of being a literal period of exactly one thousand years, the expression refers to a very long time, extending from the first coming of Christ to his Second Coming. During this entire period Satan's power is limited by the preaching of the gospel (Luke 10:18). The "last days" began with Jesus (Heb. 1:2) and with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16, 17), and they will end when the "last day" arrives (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24; 12:48). Instead of the optimism of the postmillenarian or the pessimism of the premillenarian, the amillenarian takes seriously the realism of Jesus' parable of the weeds among the wheat (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43), namely, that good and evil will develop side by side until the harvest, which is at the end of the world.

Each of these interpretations involves various difficulties, but the central truth of all three is the clear and direct affirmation: Christ will return, as he had promised (John 14:3),

Metzger, Bruce M. (2010-12-22). *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation : Leader's Guide* (pp. 94-95). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

All premillennialists teach that the resurrection of believers will occur at the beginning of the millennium, while the resurrection of unbelievers will take place at the end of the millennium. Dispensationalists add to these two resurrections two more: the resurrection of tribulation saints at the end of the seven-year tribulation, and the resurrection of millennial saints at the end of the millennium.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁹ See above, pp. 190, 192. Since historic premillennialists hold that there will still be death during the millennium, they must also affirm a resurrection of believers who died during the millennium, in addition to the two resurrections mentioned above.

Hoekema, Anthony A. (1994-03-01). *The Bible and the Future* (Kindle Locations 4684-4688). Eerdmans Publishing Co - A. Kindle Edition.

The system of interpretation of the book of Revelation which seems most satisfactory to me (though it is not without its difficulties) is that known as progressive parallelism, ably defended by William Hendriksen in *More Than Conquerors*, his commentary on Revelation (1940).

Hoekema, Anthony A. (1994-03-01). *The Bible and the Future* (Kindle Locations 4372-4374). Eerdmans Publishing Co - A. Kindle Edition.
