

THE THREE MILLENNIAL VIEWS IN CHRISTIANITY

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The Christendom have struggled with, entertained, and accommodated three important millennial interpretations and positions. These include the postmillennialism, amillennialism, and premillennialism points of view. Although Scriptural interpretation is a personal undertaking and experience, literal hermeneutics is critical to how people handle and interprets what they read from Scriptures. It is necessary to refer to Apostle Paul's epistle to the Philippians saints concerning the new righteousness and resurrection, when he wrote that “therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you” (Phil. 3:15, NKJV). Hermeneutics has come to be the central issue, the basis for any debate of scriptural origin. Different people in Christianity have different interpretational principles, and these set of principles are the foundation upon which they build their biblical belief system. Additions and inconsistencies lead to error and heresy. Walvoord, writing on the infallibility of the bible stated that “After all, if Scripture which teaches something contrary to a preconceived theory can be altered by spiritualizing it, of what importance is the concept of inerrancy?”¹ It is vital for a student of theology not to abandon the literal hermeneutic because it is likely to result in misinterpretation. Thus, this paper looks at the three point of view and the

¹ John F. Walvoord, "Millennial Series: Part 6: The Theological Context of Premillennialism" (BibSac 108:431), 73.

one that I consider as more explanatory and consistent with Scriptures. Differences in interpretation are not sufficient to constitute a division or departure from orthodoxy.

Postmillennialism

Postmillennialism is an interpretation of the biblical text concerning the millennium, about a thousand-year period characterized by peace and abundance, ushered by the Church of Christ Jesus through the gospel as the instrument that conquers the world. It is the view that by the end of the thousand years, the Messiah will literally return to earth the same way that he came but not as a human child but a King. Upon His return, the promised new heaven and new earth will then be established and the reign of eternity will take place. One of the early proponents of this view is St. Augustine. Many systematic theological scholars have supported this view. What follows is a look at some of the supporting arguments.

Eschatological Perspective

Eschatology deals with the Scriptural study of the last things, especially concerning the future of humanity. It relates to those things in the future that involves humans, and God's creature, the world. The Bible provides details of the future. These futuristic revelations in the Bible talk about intermediate human state, Rapture of the church, resurrection, Millennium, and the second coming of Christ. Postmillennialism places the second coming of Christ after the millennium. In this position, the rapture, general judgment, general resurrection, and the everlasting states will occur after the event of Christ Second Advent. The millennium period is not perceived as a time that involves any physical reign and dominion of Christ. This interpretation means that they shall be no throne on earth where Christ will inhabit to rule the earth. Postmillennialists assert that the millennium should not be given a literal one thousand years.

It is important to note that postmillennialism does not reject the reality of a millennium. Instead, its understanding is an age that will be recognized by peace and prosperity for all humans. It is after this establishment of prosperity and peace that Christ will return. Postmillennialists also maintain that the period will be ushered slowly as Christianity spreads across the world. The interpretation by the postmillennialists is that the world will be Christianized by the influence of the gospel. This influence means that the millennium will arrive gradually under the increasing influence of Christianity, leading to the ubiquitous reduction of evil and great improvement in the social, economic, political and cultural spheres of life. In fact, the entire world will eventually be Christianized to the point that the Christian belief and value system will become the accepted norm for all nations. For the postmillennialist, Matthew 28:18-20 will be realized. Postmillennialists have high optimism about the millennium or end-times. Christ will return physically on earth, and this will be followed by the resurrection of the dead both righteous and unrighteous. This resurrection will precede the final judgment.

The Millennial Kingdom and Revelation 20.1-6

The postmillennialist believe the millennium is an ongoing unfolding of the victory of Christ over the devil. Jesus Christ has defeated the great beast in the book of Revelations and Satan in the present unfolding millennium, and the great final victory will be at the Second Coming of Christ. The kingdom of God is progressive, and this progression is the evangelization of the world. This view is anchored on the Scriptural text that Christ spoke about, the parables of the kingdom ((Mat. 13:31-33). They also interpret Scriptures that talk about Christ present reign (1 Cor. 15:25, 26). If he is reigning, then he has a kingdom through which he reigns. While reigning from heaven, Christians are the people he uses to spread the gospel and bring his

enemies under his feet. He has a temporal victory over death, and the culmination will be at the second coming.

Postmillennialist asserts that Satan is bound but not in every respect of the term, and there will be a national salvation. The reason for binding Satan was made clear, “to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore” (Rev. 20:3b). The birth, death, burial, and resurrection of Christ changed the relationship that God had with Jews and non-Jews. Fruchtenbaum wrote that “postmillennialism believes in a national salvation, but not a national restoration of Israel.² This subject is another area of differences in interpretation even within the three millennial positions.

Premillennialism

Premillennialism attempt to apply literal hermeneutic in its eschatological interpretations. This perspective holds the view that Revelation 20 should be read literally. Premillennialism contends that John's repeated use of the phrase "a thousand years" is instructive and should be understood, interpreted according to the language without alterations. The second coming of Christ will be a single event that precedes the tribulation. They believe that a majority of Jews will be converted through the gospel of Jesus Christ. There shall be a resurrection of all believers in Christ who have died and will be transformed, raptured, then return to earth to live with Christ as he reigns. Christ in his second coming will destroy the antichrist, set his kingdom, and bind Satan. Jews and non-Jewish are one body of people, belonging to God. They will reign together, over the unbelieving nations on earth. They are of the view that sin and death will be part of the human race but it will be that God will restrain them. The millennium is a time of prosperity and justice for all believers. After this time, Satan will be let loose again against the unbelieving people, to deceive them as a mark of his final attack on God's children. Satan will be finally

² Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1996), 314.

destroyed, resurrection and judgment for all believers and unbelievers will take place before the establishment of eternity.

Premillennialism does not differ slightly from postmillennialism and amillennialism on issues of Christ Jesus except his reign at the throne of King David. Premillennialism believes in a literal throne in Jerusalem, where Christ will sit and rule (Luke 1:32). On the issue of Satan being bound, premillennialism does not believe that Satan is bound before the millennium, which has not started. They also think that the final judgment will be about angels and the unbelieving individuals. Their view is that the present physical Israel is going to be restored and a national salvation is granted to them. It teaches that the kingdom promises that God gave to the present-day Israel still apply to them and some are expected to be fulfilled during the millennial reign of Christ. They hold the understanding that the church began in the book of Acts 2, church and physical Israel are distinct entities. They are members who trust in Christ, but the promises made to them are distinct equally.

In sum, there will be a millennium kingdom because it was spoken of in the Old Testament. Christ Jesus reiterated the future kingdom during his earthly ministry. And the apostles asked him about it in Acts 1:6-7. The Old Testament promises made to God's people will be fulfilled during the millennial kingdom. The binding of Satan is to reveal the rebellious hearts of humans, and Satan still influences humans according to Scriptures. The millennial kingdom is the culmination of God's redemptive work and the demonstration of his glory. The believers will resurrect and reign with Christ in the millennial kingdom for a thousand years on earth, and Satan will be loosed at the end of the thousand year's reign of Christ. For another thousand years, the judgment of the unbelieving people and the devil, his cohorts, will take place. Then, they will be thrown into the lake of fire for eternal damnation.

Amillennialism

Amillennialism does not mean the people who hold this view do not believe in a millennial kingdom in which Christ will reign supreme. The interpretative position of the amillennialists is that the one thousand years referred to in Revelations 20 are not literal. There are no literal one thousand years earthly reign of Jesus Christ. The teaching contends that the text in Revelations 20 is ongoing and in the process of realization. An amillennialist Hoekema stated that "amillennialists believe that the millennium of Revelation 20 is not exclusively future but is now in the process of realization".³ The author reinforced the amillennialist perspective on Revelation 20 by asserting that:

There is no indication in these verses that John is describing an earthly millennial reign.

The scene, as we saw, is set in heaven. Nothing is said in verses 4-6 about the earth, about Palestine as the center of this reign or the Jews. The thousand-year reign of Revelation 20:4 is a reign with Christ in heaven of the souls of believers who have died.⁴

Thus, Revelation 20 is a figurative Scripture that is expressive of the present reign of Christ. This reign began after the ascension of Christ into heaven. The reign of Christ will have its full status in the second coming of Jesus Christ. The second coming of Christ will be a one-time event, and all dead believers and those alive will be given life that is eternal.

Amillennialist does not adhere to the belief that Christ will have a literal throne someday in the physical city of Jerusalem as indicated in the Book. "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father, David" (Luke 1:32). Another amillennialist Berkhof, stressed this point further where the author wrote about Christ throne stated "He did not publicly and formally assume His throne and inaugurated His

³ Anthony A. Hoekema, "Amillennialism" in *The Meaning of the Millennium* ed. by Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1977), 155, 156.

⁴ Ibid, 169.

spiritual kingdom until the time of His ascension and elevation at the right hand of God, Acts 2:29-36; Phil. 2:5-11."⁵ They also believe that the millennium is the Church era, and because it is in progress, the devil in Revelation 20 is already bound in chains. On the subject of the future Israel, they maintain the view that the body of Christ referred to in Scriptures had already existed in the Old Testament, and the Gentile nations were additions to the body. They reject a national restoration as well as national salvation for the nation of Israel.

Amillennialism does not see the book of Revelation as a chronological presentation of vision by John. The beginning of chapter 20 is the work of God binding Satan through the already finished work of Christ. The rest of the chapter to the end of the book is an explanatory text that discusses the activities of the church period and the future kingdom of Christ. Some amillennialists see part of Revelation 19 as having a chronological arrangement of vision, but without a historical attachment or connotation. Thus, for them, God had given John the images of Revelation 19-20 in a sequential fashion, but historical incidences need to be used to interpret the visions. For them, Revelation 19:11-21 is historically progressive but Revelation 20:7-10 is a reference to 19:11-21. Amillennialists will take the first three verses of Revelation 20 and those concerning the binding of Satan as events that happened at the resurrection and ascension into heaven of Christ but the millennium is an extension from ascent to the second coming of Christ.

Thus, there shall be no physical reign of Christ. They give a spiritualized interpretation of the millennial reign of Christ on earth and the fulfillment of the promises that were made to God's children in the Old Testament. The promises do not apply specifically to the present day Jews. They argue that Israel's promises have been made general, to the new creation in Christ Jesus. They believe that the kingdom is in the hearts of the believers, dead or alive. They also think that there are two resurrections. The first is a spiritual resurrection whereby the Holy Spirit

⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1958, 1998).

dwells in the heart of the believer. The kingdom is spiritual and in the heart, remaining until the second coming of Christ. In the amillennialists thinking, the second coming will be marked by the rapture of saints, believers in Christ. Everyone will be judged and the second coming is the second resurrection where bodies return to the souls of the disembodied. It is then that eternal life is fully established.

Daniel Prophecy and Revelation 20

The visions of indicate that God will set up a kingdom during the days of the fourth empire as explained in the book of Daniel chapter 2 (2:44). This aspect of the prophecy became fulfilled during Christ first advent. The Romans were an empire, but it will all culminate in his second coming. Jack Deere compared Daniel 7 and Revelation vividly:

The little horn of Daniel 7 parallels the beast of Revelation 13:1-8. Both the little horn of Daniel and the beast of Revelation are said to have a worldwide empire (Dan.7:7, 23; Rev.13:8). Both have victory over the saints for "a time and times and half a time" (Dan.7:25; Rev.12:14). The Messiah destroys both at His second advent (Dan.7:11, 26; Rev.19:20). Both affirm that immediately following the destruction of the world ruler the kingdom is given to the saints (Dan.7:22, 27; Rev.20:4-6). Thus it is apparent that a least up to the reign of the saints Revelation 19:11-20:6 is following the same pattern as Daniel 7.⁶

Chapter 7 of Daniel is the vision of judgment. The use of "one like the son of man" are words that Christ used during his earthly life and teachings (Dan.7:13). The final judgment is given to Christ to execute. However, the Scripture declares that Christ and the New Testament emphasize that the kingdom of God is not of this world. He rejected the plan to be made the

⁶ Jack S. Deere, "Premillennialism in Revelation 20:4-6," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 (Jan.-Mar., 1978): 60-61.

political king of the Jews. Thus, part of Daniel's vision was fulfilled with the first coming of Christ Jesus.

The differences in millennialism is that of imagery and literal. Not all part of the Bible has imageries. The non-imagery or non-figurative should form the grounds upon which imagery is interpreted. Chapter 20 of Revelation did not mention a nation or Israel. In Revelation 20:4, John spoke about the first resurrection. To interpret this statement, one has to refer to other scriptures that speak of the resurrection. Believers are said to be raised with Christ in baptism (John 5:24; 11:25-26; Rom. 6:2-11; Col.2:12-13; Eph.2:1-6; Rev.3:1). It is therefore easy to interpret Revelation 20:6, 14-15, as a possible reference to believers' conversion. These people are the priests of God because now there is a new priesthood.

The teaching on persecution is a common biblical teaching that emphasizes the attack that Christians are to expect from those that are not accepting the gospel. The anti-Christian campaign by the devil will not cease until he is confined finally to the lack of fire with those whose names are not in the book of life. Thus, chapter 20 of Revelation is clear and practical when read in context using non-figurative text that is not in the book of Revelation. Therefore, irrespective of the imagery, Scripture should be used to interpret scripture. The apocalyptic writing does have to be read in a literal sense. They tend to lead to different interpretations that are not intended by the writer. Consequently, people should first understand the plain text as a foundation.

My Reflection

I differ to a degree with some of the views of premillennialism, but the interpretation seems to be the one that best aligns with the Bible. Therefore, premillennialism is the millennial view that I have chosen to be the more relevant. There are several passages in the Old Testament

that have New Testament interpretation and fulfillment. Thus, the Bible is a unified book that demonstrates how God has walked with humanity from Genesis. His words are infallible, and He had no intention of hiding essential things about the future events from those who with sincerity will want to know the truth. I shall explain here briefly the points that make premillennialism the preferred point of view.

Using a chronological interpretation, one will begin with Revelation 19, then 20. First, the Book of John chapter 1:1 explains the meaning of the "word of God." Spiritual interpretation is the work of the Holy Spirit. Revelation 19:13 is the only place beside John 1:1, where it indicates that the word of God as a designation. Thus, as an introduction to Revelation 20, Revelation 19:11-20:3 makes it distinctly clear that the rider of the white horse, who is the Word of God, will be the judge, and will wage war. The titles and attributes of the King of kings and Lord of lords are assigned to one individual, Christ. The passage speaks of Christ capturing the beast, false prophet and throwing them alive into the lake of fire. Also, he will kill their armies (antichristian) with the sword. Finally, he binds Satan, the great adversary, with chains and then throws him right into the lake of fire, the bottomless pit. The above passage did not mention the work of the church in the millennium. The above events are not the result of Christian evangelization of the world.

It is impossible to read that the Scripture is infallible and is inspired by God (Second Timothy 3:16-17), to give some sections literal interpretations and others spiritual interpretations. Most importantly, when the words in the Bible communicate clearly, their meanings should be taken as such, because twisting them might lead to a different meaning. The Bible should be read from the literal to the spiritual and not in reverse order. Reading from a literal point of view will

allow for spiritual confirmation by redirection to other similar passages that support what one is reading.

Thus, one can conclude that the closest and best interpretation of Revelation 20 and the teaching on millennium is premillennialism. The promises in the Old Testament to Israel are not entirely fulfilled. Some will be accomplished at the second coming of Christ. Apart from conversion, there shall be a bodily resurrection of the dead for the great white throne judgment. The thousand years is literal, and most of the Bible should be given a literal interpretation, especially when the words do not contain imagery or figurative language.

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