

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE HISTORY OF MILLENNIALISM

Excerpt from

Revelation

A Commentary by

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We may note that the ancient church down to the time of Augustine (354-430) (though not without minor exceptions) unquestionably held to the teaching of an earthly, historical reign of peace that was to follow the defeat of Antichrist and the physical resurrection of the saints but precede both the judgment and the new creation (Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964]; see note on v. 1). To be sure, in the ancient church there were various positions as to the material nature of the Millennium (see comments at v. 4), but the true conception of the thousand years was a balance between the worldly aspects of the kingdom and its spiritual aspects as a reign with Christ.

It is well known that the break with this earlier position came with the views of the late fourth-century interpreter Tyconius, an African Donatist, who, partly dependent on the Alexandrian allegorizing of Origen, developed a view of the Millennium based on a recapitulation method of interpretation. In applying this principle, Tyconius viewed Revelation as containing a number of different visions that repeated basic themes throughout the book. Though Tyconius's original work is not available, his exegesis of the Apocalypse can be largely reconstructed through his prime benefactor, Augustine, as well as Tyconius's many Roman Catholic followers. When he came to chapter 20, he interpreted the thousand years in nonliteral terms and understood the period as referring to the church age, the time between the first and second advents of Christ. Tyconius interpreted the first resurrection as the resurrection of the soul from spiritual death to the new life, while the second resurrection was the resurrection of the body at the end of history. The binding of Satan had already taken place in that the devil cannot seduce the church during the present age. Moreover, the reign of the saints and their "thrones of judgment" had already begun in the church and its rulers. Augustine, following Tyconius, "cast the die against the expectation of a millennial kingdom for centuries to come" (H. Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], p. 161). The recapitulation method adopted by Augustine continued through the centuries and is not without its modern exponents in both the Protestant and Roman Catholic branches of the church. This is the first main option in modern nonmillennial (or amillennial) interpretations of Revelation 20.

Augustine's approach, however, was not to remain unchallenged. Joachim of Floris (c. 1135-1202) saw in the Apocalypse a prophecy of the events of Western history from the time of Christ till the end. He thought the Millennium was still future in his time but soon to begin. The Franciscans, who followed Joachim, identified Babylon with ecclesiastical Rome and the Antichrist with the papacy. The Reformers followed suit. In modern times, Henry Alford (1810-71) adopted this view.

During Reformation times, still another type of interpretation developed, expounded by a Jesuit

scholar named Ribeira (1537-91). He held that almost all the events described in the Apocalypse are future and apply to the end times rather than to the history of the world or contemporary Rome and the papacy. He still, however, held to Augustine's view of the Millennium as the period between the first and second advents of Christ. But at one important point he changed Augustine's view. Instead of the Millennium taking place on earth between the advents, Ribeira saw it as taking place in heaven. It is a reward for faithfulness. When the saints at any time in history are martyred, they do not perish but live and reign with Christ in heaven in the intermediate state before the final resurrection. This is the second main option today for nonmillennialists. John's basic message in Revelation 20 is, according to this viewpoint, pastoral. If Christians face the prospect of suffering death for Jesus, they should be encouraged because if they are killed, they will go to reign with him in heaven. This seems to be the drift of Berkouwer's conclusions (*The Return of Christ*, pp. 314ff.) and earlier those of B. B. Warfield ("The Millennium and the Apocalypse," PTR, 2[1904], 599-617).

The Augustinian view of Revelation 20 and its variant espoused by Joachim cannot be harmonized with a serious exegesis of Revelation 20 on two important counts. In the first place, it founders on the statements concerning the binding of Satan (vv. 1-3); and, second, it must handle in an absurd fashion the statements about the coming to life of the martyrs, which cannot be exegetically understood as anything other than physical resurrection without seriously tampering with the sense of the words (cf. discussion on vv. 1-4). While it is popular among certain nonmillennialists to view 20:1-6 as a symbolic description of the reward to be granted the martyrs on their entrance into heaven (so Beckwith, Berkouwer, Boer, Schnackenburg), this variation of the Augustinian exegesis, while removing the criticism that the passage refers to the present rule of Christ in the church age, fails to deal seriously with the binding of Satan and other details of the text.

There is yet another view that, though not free of problems, does more justice to the Book of Revelation as a whole and to the exegesis of chapter 20 in particular. This view rejects both the Augustinian interpretation that the Millennium is the rule of Christ during this dispensation and the variant of Joachim that locates the resurrection and the reign of the martyrs in heaven for an interim period before their bodily resurrection and the return of Christ. It likewise rejects the variation of Augustine's view known as postmillennialism or evolutionary chiliasm, which teaches that the forces of Antichrist will gradually be put down and the gospel will permeate and transform the world into an interim of the reign of peace before the return of Christ (see note on v. 1 for representatives of this view). Berkouwer justly criticizes this postmillennial view as exegetically and theologically weak. He then goes on to espouse a totally mystical viewpoint of Revelation 20 that fails to grapple exegetically with the text. For him the millennial language is purely a figure of speech to depict the reality of the hidden triumph of Christ (*Return of Christ*, pp. 208-9). Such a view, however, fails to account for how the reality of the divine kingdom of God has actually invaded history in Jesus Christ.

If eschatological realities are simply mystical, figurative, and pastoral in intent and never impinge on the empirical world, then the Christ event as an eschatological event must likewise be abandoned. Instead, the view espoused in this commentary argues that the Millennium is in history and on the earth as an eschatological reality. Much in the same manner as the kingdom of God was eschatologically present in the life and ministry of Jesus--present, yet still future--so the Millennium is at once the final historical event of this age and the beginning of the eschatological kingdom of Christ in eternity. Oscar Cullmann, one of the principal advocates of this view, states:

The millennium is future and is, so to speak, the very last part of Christ's lordship, which at the same time extends into the new aeon. Consequently, the thousand-year kingdom should be identified neither with the whole chronological extent of Christ's lordship nor with the present Church. That lordship is the larger concept; it has already begun and continues in the aeon for an undefined length of time. The thousand-year reign, on the other hand, belongs temporally to the final act of Christ's lordship, the act which begins with his return and thus already invades the new aeon (*The Christology of the New Testament* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959], p. 226).

This view is called the "end-historical" view. It follows the same chronological sequence as the early church's position, i.e., Parousia--defeat of Antichrist--binding of Satan--resurrection--Millennium--release of Satan--final judgment--new heavens and earth. It differs slightly from earlier chiliasm in viewing the Millennium as an end-historical event that at the same time is the beginning of the eternal reign of Christ and the saints.

The problem as to the limits of the description of the Millennium in Revelation 20-22 is a more difficult question. A group of expositors of varying theological thought (Beasley-Murray, R. H. Charles, Ford, A. C. Gaebelein, Kelly, Zahn) believe that 21:9-22:5, 14-15 belong with 20:1-10 as a further description of the millennial reign, whereas 21:1-5 refers to the eternal state, which follows the final judgment of the dead. This approach is an attempt to harmonize a more literal understanding of certain statements in 21:9ff. with the assumed conditions during the eternal state. For example, according to Beasley-Murray ("The Revelation," p. 1305) the references to nations and kings seem to describe an earthly kingdom better than they describe the eternal condition (21:24, 26); references to leaves "healing" the nations (22:2) seems to describe an imperfect condition better than they describe the perfected eternal state; and, finally, the blessing pronounced on those who come and eat the tree of life while a curse rests on all those outside the city (22:14-15) seems to relate better to the thousand years than to the eternal state when the wicked are in the lake of fire.

Admittedly, this is a possible solution that has the advantage of giving more descriptive content to the millennial reign. This approach, however, suffers from two serious criticisms. First, though it rightly assigns 21:1-5 to the postmillennial New Jerusalem in the context of the new heaven and earth, it arbitrarily assigns 21:9ff. to the millennial New Jerusalem without the slightest hint from the text that this is a recapitulation of 20:1-10. Thus, there is an eternal state New Jerusalem followed immediately by a millennial New Jerusalem, both bearing the same title. This is hardly plausible. Second, this view strongly argues for historical progression in 19:11-21:5; Parousia--defeat of Antichrist--binding of Satan--first resurrection--Millennium--release of Satan--last judgment--new heavens and earth--and then argues for recapitulation in 21:9ff.

It seems best, therefore, despite some problems, to regard the sequence begun at 19:11 as running chronologically through 22:6, thus placing all the material in 21:1ff. after the Millennium. At this point, a suggestion might be offered for further study. If the Millennium is a true eschatological, historical event like the person, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus, may not 21:1ff. be viewed as the full manifestation of the kingdom of God, a partial manifestation of which will be realized in the thousand-year reign of Christ and the saints, during which Christ will defeat all his enemies, including death (1 Cor 15:23-28)? Some of the same conditions described in 21:1ff. would then, at least in part, characterize the Millennium.

Finally, why the Millennium? There are at least four answers to this question.

1. During the Millennium, Christ will openly manifest his kingdom in world history; the Millennium will provide an actual demonstration of the truthfulness of the divine witness borne by Christ and his followers during their life on earth. It will be a time of the fulfillment of all God's covenant promises to his people.
2. The Millennium will reveal that man's rebellion against God lies deep in man's own heart, not in the devil's deception. Even when Satan is bound and righteousness prevails in the world, some people will still rebel against God. The final release of Satan will openly draw out this hidden evil.
3. The release of Satan after the Millennium shows the invulnerability of the city of God and the extent of the authority of Christ, since the devil is immediately defeated and cast into the lake of fire forever.
4. The Millennium will serve as a long period required to do the general "housecleaning" needed after the preceding ages of sin, during which sin was prevalent.

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