A Comparison of the Three Millennial Views

Kenneth J. Morgan

Introduction

Eschatology is that branch of systematic theology that studies the doctrine of last things—that is, future events prophesied or otherwise described in the Bible. It breaks into two parts: personal eschatology and general eschatology.

- **Personal eschatology**: the study of the future of individuals; specifically, the doctrines of death, the intermediate state, the nature of the resurrection, and hell, the final destiny of the wicked.
- **General eschatology**: the study of future events on a national and global level; specifically, the doctrines of the tribulation, the return of Christ, the rapture, the millennium, the time and extent of the resurrections and judgments, and the eternal state.

There is in general far more debate among theologians regarding general eschatology than over personal eschatology, and the focal point of this debate is the doctrine of the millennium. One's view of the millennium to a large extent determines his view on the other issues of general eschatology.

The text at the center of the controversy is Revelation 20:1-6:

1 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. 2 And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; 3 and he threw him into the abyss, and shut it over him, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time. 4 Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. 5 The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.

The Meaning of the Word Millennium

The word millennium is formed from two Latin words, *mille*, "thousand," and *annus*, "year," anglicized in a way similar to "biennium" and "triennium." Jerome in the Vulgate translated the Greek in verse 6 as *regnaverunt cum Christo mille annis*, "reigned with Christ a thousand years."

Of course the New Testament was originally written in Greek, so John actually wrote this expression as *βασιλευσουσιν ετ αυτου χιλια ετη*, "reigned with him a thousand years." The Greek word "thousand" is *χιλιας*, *chilies*. Therefore, belief in a millennial reign is called either *millennialism* or *chiliasm*. 
The purpose of these notes is to contrast the views of postmillennialism, amillennialism, and premillennialism by direct appeal to representative advocates of each view. The primary sources are as follows:

*Postmillennialism:* A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (1907)

*Amillennialism:* L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (1941)

*Premillennialism:*

**Postmillennialism**

There have been several variations of postmillennialism, including a liberal version which was essentially social Darwinism. Conservative versions of postmillennialism are represented by such men as David Brown (the Brown from the Jamison, Fa succinct text, loraine boettner, iain murray, j. marcellus kik, robert l. dabney, rousas j. rushdoony, and the primary source quoted in this paper, augustus hopkins strong.

**Definition**

The literal meaning of the term postmillennialism is that Christ will return "after the millennium." The millennium, or thousand years of Revelation 20, is probably figurative of a long period of time preceding the second advent. During this period, the gospel will triumph more and more over the nations and will introduce and establish a reign of peace which will endure until Christ returns for the final judgment. At the second advent, Christ will immediately conduct the general resurrection and judgment and then usher in the eternal state of the new heavens and the new earth.

**Signs or Events Preceding the Second Advent**

The following points are enumerated by Strong (pp. 1008-1010) under the heading, "The precursors of Christ's coming."

1. "Through the preaching of this gospel in all the world, the kingdom of Christ is steadily to enlarge its boundaries, until Jews and Gentiles alike become possessed of its blessings, and a millennial period is introduced in which Christianity generally prevails throughout the earth." Strong cites Dan. 2:44, 45; Matt. 13:31, 32; and 24:14 here.

2. "There will be a corresponding development of evil, either extensive or intensive, whose character shall be manifest not only in deceiving many professed followers of Christ and in persecuting true believers, but in constituting a personal Antichrist as its representative and object of worship. This rapid growth shall continue until the millennium, during which evil, in the person of its chief, shall be temporarily restrained." Here he cites Matt. 13:30, 38; and 24:5, 11, 12, 24.

3. "At the close of the millennial period, evil will again be permitted to exert its utmost power in a final conflict with righteousness. This spiritual struggle, moreover, will be accompanied by political convolutions, and by fearful indications of desolation in the natural world." For this point Strong cites Matt. 24:29, 30.
Amillennialism

Although men like R. J. Rushdoony have done much in reviving and popularizing postmillennialism today, amillennialism probably still represents the majority viewpoint in Presbyterian and Reformed circles. The Bible and the Future, by Anthony Hoekema of Calvin Seminary, an outstanding recent book that treats the entire subject of eschatology, personal and general, presents a thorough exposition and defense of mainstream amillennialism.

Definition

The literal meaning of the term amillennialism is "no millennium." This is a misnomer, for this view generally, though not always, holds that the millennium, or thousand years of Revelation 20, represents the entire interadvent period. Christ may return during any generation, after a brief but terrible period of tribulation, and will immediately conduct the general resurrection and judgment and then usher in the eternal state of the new heavens and the new earth.

Signs or Events Preceding the Second Advent

Under the heading, "Great Events Preceding the Parousia" (pp. 696-703), Berkhof writes, "According to Scripture several important events must occur before the return of the Lord, and therefore it cannot be called imminent. In the light of Scripture it cannot be maintained that there are no predicted events which must still come to pass before the second coming. . . Now the question can be raised, How can we then be urged to watch for the coming? Jesus teaches us in Matt. 24:32, 33 to watch for the coming through the signs: 'when ye see all these things, know ye that he is nigh.' Moreover, we need not interpret the exhortation to watch as an exhortation to scan the heavens for immediate signs of the Lord's appearance. We should rather see in it an admonition to be awake, to be alert, to be prepared, to be active in the work of the Lord, lest we be overtaken by sudden calamity. The following great events must precede the coming of the Lord." Here are the events Berkhof enumerates:

1. "The calling of the Gentiles." Berkhof cites Matt. 24:14; Mark 13:10; and Rom. 11:25 to the effect that "the gospel of the kingdom must be preached to all nations before the return of the Lord." He points out, however, that this does not mean "that all the nations as a whole accept the gospel, but only that it will find adherents in all the nations and will thus be instrumental in bringing in the fulness of the Gentiles."

2. "The conversion of the pleroma [fulness, completeness] of Israel." Berkhof cites Zech. 12:10; 13:1; 2 Cor. 3:15, 16; and Rom. 11:25-29 in this connection. It must be pointed out that Berkhof does not see a restoration of the nation of Israel in the land of Palestine.

3. "The great apostasy and the great tribulation." Here Berkhof writes, "These two may be mentioned together, because they are interwoven in the eschatological discourse of Jesus, Matt. 24:9-12, 21-24; Mark 13:9-22; Luke 21:22-24. The words of Jesus undoubtedly found a partial fulfilment in the days preceding the destruction of Jerusalem, but will evidently have a further fulfilment in the future in a tribulation far surpassing anything that has ever been experienced, Matt. 24:21; Mark 13:19. Paul also speaks of the great apostasy in II Thess. 2:3; I Tim. 4:1; II Tim. 3:1-5."

4. "The coming revelation of Antichrist." Berkhof has a long discussion of the various interpretations of "antichrist", "man of sin", and "son of perdition" (see 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7; Dan. 7:8, 23-26; and 2 Thess. 2:3-4). While some amillenarians take
the view that "antichrist" is a system, such as the papacy, Berkhof finally draws the following conclusion: "The more general opinion of the Church, however, is that in the last analysis the term "Antichrist" denotes an eschatological person, who will be the incarnation of all wickedness and therefore represents a spirit which is always more or less present in the world, and who has several precursors or types in history. This view prevailed in the early Church and would seem to be the Scriptural view."

5. "Signs and wonders." Here are Berkhof’s comments: "The Bible speaks of several signs that will be harbingers of the end of the world and of the coming of Christ. It mentions (a) wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes in various places, which are called the beginning of travail, the travail, as it were, of the rebirth of the universe at the time of the coming of Christ; (b) the coming of false prophets, who will lead many astray, and of false Christs, who will show great signs and wonders to lead astray, if possible, even the elect; and (c) of fearful portents in heaven involving sun, moon, and stars, when the powers of the heavens will be shaken, Matt. 24:29, 30; Mark 13:24, 25; Luke 21:25, 26."

**Premillennialism**

Today premillennialism exists in two forms: dispensational premillennialism and what might be called historic premillennialism. This naming scheme implies that the dispensational formulation of premillennialism is of recent origin, in fact dating back only to the time of John N. Darby in the nineteenth century. Dispensationalists are particularly sensitive to the charge that the theory originated with Darby, for then it could not have been the teaching of the Apostles and early Church. Nevertheless, the terminology "historic premillennialism" is used by almost everyone.

There are slight differences in emphasis within historic premillennialism.

1. When it is coupled with the doctrine of the covenant of grace in Presbyterian and Reformed circles, it is called "covenant premillennialism." D. H. Kromminga is a rare advocate of covenant premillennialism within the Christian Reformed Church, a body which is almost entirely amillennial (both Berkhof and Hoekema were members of the CRC). However, the most prolific writer and scholar representing covenant premillennialism today is George Eldon Ladd of Fuller Theological Seminary.

2. Historic premillennialism is even more rare within Lutheran circles than within Reformed circles. Joseph A. Seiss of the nineteenth century and John Warwick Montgomery today, however, do hold to a form of premillennialism.

3. Probably the largest group of scholars that advocate historic premillennialism is from evangelical circles that are neither Reformed nor Lutheran. Men such as Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., and Robert H. Gundry would be examples.

Dispensationalism may be traced to John N. Darby and a branch of the Plymouth Brethren movement in England, but it was popularized in this country by the *Scofield Reference Bible*, edited by C. I. Scofield. It was carefully worked into a coherent system of theology by Lewis Sperry Chafer, founding president of Dallas Theological Seminary, in his ten-volume work *Systematic Theology*. Some of the best known advocates are John F. Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, J. Dwight Pentecost, all of Dallas Seminary, and Alva J. McClain of Grace Theological Seminary. Hal Lindsey is also a dispensationalist, but his speculations do not represent the mainstream. Dispensationalism may be traced to John N. Darby and a branch of the Plymouth Brethren movement in England, but it was popularized in this country by the *Scofield Reference Bible*, edited by C. I. Scofield. It was carefully worked into a coherent
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Despite substantive differences between premillennialism in its historic and dispensational forms, a definition of premillennialism is possible which represents the common core of both systems.

**Definition**

The literal meaning of the term premillennialism is that Christ will return "before the millennium." The millennium, or thousand years of Revelation 20, is a literal period of time. The millennium is immediately preceded by a period of tribulation with much of the world under the power of a personal Antichrist. Christ may return during any generation, at which time he defeats the Antichrist, raises the righteous dead, and reigns on the earth for 1000 years. When the thousand years are completed, he will raise the wicked dead, judge them, and usher in the eternal state of the new heavens and the new earth.

**Signs or Events Preceding the Second Advent**

The differences between historic and dispensational premillennialism surface when the signs and events that precede the second advent are considered.

**Dispensational Premillennialism**

Dispensationalism is not essentially a system of eschatology, and therefore it does not represent a fourth system of millennialism. Dispensational theology is premillennial, but there is a marked difference between the dispensational version and the historic version. The "dispensations" refer to specific economies of God which he administered during specific periods of time. Scofield divided history into seven such periods of time. However, the essence of dispensationalism does not lie in its view of history. Instead, it is the notion that God has two separate programs in the Bible for two separate peoples of God, Israel and the Church. Here is a summary of the scheme:

1. The Old Testament, the Gospels, and with some varieties, part of Acts, deal with God's prophetic program that centers on the people and nation of Israel.
2. When Israel in the New Testament rejected Christ and the gospel of the kingdom, the nation as such was temporarily set aside, and God began a new, previously unrevealed, unprophesied program that centers on the Body of Christ, the Church, and the gospel of the grace of God.
3. At the close of the present Church dispensation, the prophetic program dealing with Israel and described in the Old Testament will continue where it left off and again take up its predicted course. Here, then, is the distinctive feature of dispensational premillennialism: there are two phases of the second advent.
4. First there is the imminent return of Christ (without any signs) "in the air" to rapture out his Church from the world (1 Thess. 4:13-18).
5. The prophetic program will then continue with Israel reestablished as a nation in the land of Palestine, with the period of great tribulation, and with the revelation of the Antichrist, all subjects of prophecy.
6. At the end of the tribulation (often put at seven years), Christ will return to earth with his Church and establish his kingdom in Jerusalem for 1000 years. It is this phase of the second advent, then, which will be preceded by the signs discussed in some detail
by Berkhof as quoted above. From this point on, dispensational premillennialism and historic premillennialism coincide as described in the above definition of premillennialism.

**Historic Premillennialism**

Possibly the best and most concise summary of historic premillennialism is found in *The Approaching Advent of Christ* by Alexander Reese. This book was written to defend premillennialism specifically in view of the (then) recent innovative reformulation of it within dispensational circles. Reese begins his book with the following words:

Until the second quarter of the nineteenth century general agreement existed among pre-millennial advocates of our Lord's Coming concerning the main outlines of the prophetic future: amidst differences of opinion on the interpretation of the Apocalypse and other portions of Scripture, the following scheme stood out as fairly representative of the school:---

1. The approaching Advent of Christ to this world will be visible, personal, and glorious.

2. This Advent, though in itself a single crisis, will be accompanied and followed by a variety of phenomena bearing upon the history of the Church, of Israel, and the world. Believers who survive till the Advent will be transfigured and translated to meet the approaching Lord, together with the saints raised and changed at the first resurrection. Immediately following this, Antichrist and his allies will be slain, and Israel, the covenant people, will repent and be saved, by looking upon Him whom they pierced.

3. Thereupon the Messianic Kingdom of prophecy, which, as the Apocalypse informs us, will last for a thousand years, will be established in power and great glory in a transfigured world. The nations will turn to God, war and oppression cease, and righteousness and peace cover the earth.

4. At the conclusion of the kingly rule of Christ and His saints, the rest of the dead will be raised, the Last Judgment ensue, and a new and eternal world be created.

5. No distinction was made between the Coming of our Lord, and His Appearing, Revelation, and Day, because these were all held to be synonymous, or at least related, terms, signifying always the one Advent in glory at the beginning of the Messianic Kingdom.

6. Whilst the Coming of Christ, no matter how long the present dispensation may last, is the true and proper hope of the Church in every generation, it is nevertheless conditioned by the prior fulfilment of certain signs or events in the history of the Kingdom of God: the Gospel has first to be preached to all nations; the Apostasy and the Man of Sin be revealed, and the Great Tribulation come to pass. Then shall the Lord come.

7. The Church of Christ will not be removed from the earth until the Advent of Christ at the very end of the present Age: the Rapture and the Appearing take place at the same crisis; hence Christians of that generation will be exposed to the final affliction under Antichrist.

Reese goes on to comment, "Such is a fair statement of the fundamentals of Premillennialism as it has obtained since the close of the Apostolic Age. There have been differences of opinion on details and subsidiary points, but the main outline is as I have given it." He continues, "These views were held in the main by Irenaeus, the 'grand-pupil' of the Apostle John, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and the primitive Christians generally until the rise of the Catholic, political Church in the West, and of allegorical exegesis at Alexandria." In the last three centuries, historic premillennialism has been the view of such men as Mede, Bengel, Alford, David Baron, Ryle, Tregelles, Bonar, Ellicott, Kellogg, Moorehead,
The View Strongly Promoted by This Web Site

My view is the evangelical form of historic premillennialism. However, the details concerning the future of Israel are not part of the general definition of historic premillennialism. Almost all advocates of historic premillennialism hold to the salvation of the Jewish people as a whole at the second advent. Disagreements, however, enter concerning the subject of the national and territorial future of Israel. Is there a future for Israel as a nation? Is all Israel to be regathered as a nation to the land promised them as an "everlasting possession" in the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:7; 15:18-21; 17:7-8)? On these issues I strongly advocate the same position as dispensationalism and answer yes. Does the Lord consider this a small, unimportant issue in eschatology? Hear what he himself says:

Can a woman forget her nursing child
And have no compassion on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget, but I will not forget you.
Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands;
Your walls are continually before Me. (Isa. 49:13-16)

And again:

Thus says Yahweh,
Who gives the sun for light by day
And the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night,
Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar;
Yahweh of hosts is His name:
"If this fixed order departs
From before Me," declares Yahweh,
"Then the offspring of Israel also will cease
From being a nation before Me forever." (Jer. 31:35-36)

The prophets describe a glorious future for Israel. Here is a summary. At the second advent, Jesus--King Messiah, the Messiah of Israel--will:

- Regather all of Israel back to the land God promised them as an everlasting possession: Isaiah 11:10-12; Ezekiel 37:15-28; Micah 2:12-13; Zechariah 8:1-8; 10:8-12.
- Accomplish Israel's spiritual redemption based on his atoning work at his first coming: Zechariah 12:10-13:1.
- Reestablish the kingdom of Israel and rule the world from Jerusalem on the throne of David: Isaiah 9:6-7; Jeremiah 23:3-8; 30:8-9; 33:14-16; Hosea 3:4-5; Amos 9:11-12.
- Establish the universal knowledge of God in both Israel and the nations: Isaiah 2:2-3; 11:9; Jeremiah 3:16-18; 31:31-34; Zephaniah 2:11; Zechariah 8:20-23; 14:16.

Since "the gifts and the calling [election] of God are irrevocable," (Rom. 11:29) ethnic, national Israel as a whole must receive these promised blessings at the second advent of their Messiah when "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26-29).

This view of Israel is shared by some but not all within historic premillennialism; it is shared by all within dispensational premillennialism. As does dispensationalism, I categorically reject what is known as "replacement theology," which teaches that the "church" is the "new Israel" or "spiritual Israel" and that the "church" will fulfill all of the Old Testament
promises made to national Israel in a "spiritual" way.

One might therefore conclude that I differ from dispensational premillennialism only on the issue of a pretribulational rapture. However, that would not be accurate. The view of a pretribulational rapture involves more than just removing all current believers at the beginning of the tribulation. The whole foundation for a pretribulational rapture is the total and complete distinction between Israel and the church: two peoples of God and two programs of God, with the "church age" a mystery unknown in the Old Testament and the tribulation period a return to, and a continuation of, the Old Testament prophetic program. I do not accept the concept of two peoples of God and two programs of God. However, that subject is beyond the scope of this paper. My book, Upon This Rock: A New Look---Catholicism, Israel and the Church (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2012) discusses it in great detail.