

# Part 10: The Historical Context of Premillennialism

by John F. Walvoord

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*John F. Walvoord's sermon explores the historical context and theological foundations of premillennialism, highlighting its biblical support and early church acceptance.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 20:20, Luke 1:32, Luke 22:29, Acts 1:6, Romans 11:1, Romans 11:29, 1 Corinthians 15:23, 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:20

**Topics:** "Premillennialism", "Biblical Interpretation"

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## Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the historical context and theological significance of modern premillennialism, highlighting the challenges faced by this doctrine throughout history. He emphasizes the importance of the infallibility of Scripture, literal interpretation, evangelicalism, opposition to ecclesiasticism, and the emphasis on prophetic studies within the framework of premillennialism. Walvoord traces the roots of premillennialism from the Old and New Testaments, through the early church, to its resurgence in modern times, portraying it as a system of Biblical interpretation that honors the Word of God and prepares believers for the second coming of Christ.

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## Transcript

While modern premillennialism depends upon Scriptural foundations for its apologetic and theological statement, it has nevertheless a significant historical context. It is regrettable that some historians have held low views of premillennialism, with the result that premillennialism has seldom had fair consideration in historical treatments of Christian doctrine. Liberals and skeptics surveying the evidence with theological indifference have often arrived at a fairer view of the evidence for premillennialism in history than those endeavoring to defend another millennial position.

It is hardly within the province of a theological study of premillennialism to include an adequate history of the doctrine. An exhaustive modern study of the subject remains for someone to undertake. Fortunately, the main issues are clear in even a casual study, and the significant evidence in relation to premillennialism can hardly be disputed by any scholarly sources produced to date. The evidence for premillennialism in the Old and New Testaments and in the literature and theology of the early church at least in its main elements is commonly recognized. It needs here only to be restated as forming the historical context of modern premillennialism. This testimony unites in one river of evidence that the theology of the Old and New Testament and the theology of the early church was not only pre-millennial, but

that its premillennialism was practically undisputed except by heretics and skeptics until the time of Augustine. The coming of Christ as the prelude for the establishment of a kingdom of righteousness on earth in fulfillment of the Old Testament kingdom prophecies was the almost uniform expectation, both of the Jews at the time of the incarnation and of the early church. This is essential premillennialism however it may differ in its details from its modern advanced counterpart. Old Testament supports the premillennial viewpoint and that the Jews at the time of Christ held just such views of the Old Testament.

Amillenarians have followed two main routes to escape the logical result of this admission. The first has been to hold that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament was wrong. This is essentially the position of Hamilton quoted above. While he admits, "In fact, the Jews were looking for just such a kingdom to be set up by the Messiah in Jerusalem,"[3] *Ibid.*, p. 39. he continues, "Jesus Himself, in speaking of that whole idea said, 'The kingdom of God is within (or, in the midst of) you' (Luke 17:21), thus contradicting the idea that it was to be an earthly, literal, Jewish kingdom." [4] *Loc. cit.* As he goes on to explain, the error in the premillennial interpretation is that they interpret the prophecies literally, just as the Jews did.

The other route followed by amillenarians is another expedient for disposing of the prophecies of the Old Testament without literal fulfillment. This line of thought is to admit that the Old Testament prophecies rightly promise the Jews a kingdom on earth as usually presented by premillenarians, but to cancel this promise on the ground that it was conditioned on faith and obedience. In other words, the promise will never be fulfilled because Israel failed. As Allis puts it, "...obedience is the precondition of blessing under all circumstances." [5] Allis, *op. cit.*, p. 33. He goes on to argue that obedience is the condition for fulfillment of all God's covenant relations, specifically the Abrahamic covenant, the Davidic covenant, and the Gospel of grace. [6] *Ibid.*, pp. 32-48.

These two lines of amillennial argument, are, of course, contradictory. One assumes that a literal interpretation is right but fulfillment is forfeited for disobedience. The other assumes that literal interpretation is wrong and therefore only spiritual fulfillment is to be expected. Amillenarians like Allis use both principles even though their respective premises nullify each other. It is plain that they are determined at all costs to dispose of these kingdom promises without being too particular as to what method is followed. Premillenarians hold, of course, that the promises are unconditional and to be interpreted literally, and that premillennialism as found in the New Testament confirms the premillennialism of the Old Testament in no uncertain terms.

### Premillennialism in the New Testament

The answer to the amillennial objection to premillennial interpretation of the Old Testament is found in the New Testament in two principal forms. First, the expectation of the Jews for literal fulfillment of the kingdom promises is confirmed. Second, this confirmation proves that the Old Testament promises are unconditional as to ultimate literal fulfillment.

It has been noted that rightly or wrongly it was the universal expectation of the Jews that the kingdom promises would be literally fulfilled. What does the New Testament have to say about this expectation? In Luke 1:32-33, Mary is told by the angel, in relation to the child Jesus, "He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end." In view of the common Jewish expectation, how would Mary interpret such a prophecy? It should certainly be clear that she would consider it a confirmation of the literal interpretation and literal fulfillment of the Davidic

covenant. She would naturally expect that her child Jesus would sit on an earthly Davidic throne. In spite of the disobedience of Israel in the Old Testament, and the long years in which no one sat on the throne of David, here was confirmation of the precise expectation common among the Jews. Did Mary for one moment hold the amillenarian view? Would she spiritualize this passage--the throne of David is God's throne in heaven; the kingdom is a spiritual kingdom; Israel is synonymous with the church? Certainly not! It was totally foreign to her thinking. If the amillenarians are right, Mary was sadly deceived. The prophecy of the angel could hardly have been better worded to confirm the ordinary Jewish hope as well as the exact essentials of the premillennial position--the literal and earthly fulfillment of the Davidic covenant.

It is, of course, true that Christ taught much concerning the spiritual aspects of God's kingdom. The Messianic kingdom on earth following the second advent by no means exhausts kingdom truth. The important point is, however, that whenever the precise kingdom promises of the Old Testament are introduced, these promises and their literal fulfillment are never denied, corrected, or altered, but are instead confirmed.

There is much positive evidence in the New Testament for premillennial teachings. It is clear that the Jews rejected Jesus Christ as their King and Messiah, not as their Savior, and in so doing fulfilled literally those prophecies dealing with His rejection and death. His rejection did not alter the kingdom promises, however. When the mother of James and John sought special privilege for her sons in the kingdom (Matt 20:20-23), her request was not denied on the ground that she had a mistaken idea of the kingdom, but rather that the privilege she requested was to be given to those chosen by the Father. Again Christ the night before His rejection and crucifixion told His disciples that they would sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel in the kingdom (Luke 22:29-30). In Acts 1:6, when the disciples wanted to know when the kingdom was going to be restored to Israel, they were not told that they were in error, that the kingdom would never be restored to Israel, but only that it was not for them to know the "times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power" (Acts 1:7). When Paul raises the question concerning the future of Israel, in Romans 9-11, and considers the possibility of God rescinding His promises to them as a nation and casting them off forever, he exclaims, "God forbid" (Rom 11:1). The whole tenor of Romans 9-11 is to the point that while Israel for the present is cut off the olive tree of blessing, Israel is scheduled to be restored at the second advent, when the Deliverer will come out of Zion. It is expressly stated in this regard that "the gifts and callings of God are without repentance" (Rom 11:29), i.e., that God will fulfill His purpose regarding the nation Israel.

The book of Revelation is, of course, the classic passage on premillennialism. Revelation, while subject to all types of scholarly abuse and divergent interpretation, if taken in its plain intent yields a simple outline of premillennial truth--first a time of great tribulation, then the second advent, the binding of Satan, the deliverance and blessing of the saints, a righteous government on earth for 1000 years, followed by the final judgments and the new heaven and new earth. The only method of interpretation of Revelation which has ever yielded a consistent answer to the question of its meaning is that which interprets the book, however symbolic, as having its general revelation plain, one to be fulfilled literally, and therefore subject to future fulfillment.

One of the most eloquent testimonies to premillennial truth is found in the absolute silence of the New Testament, and for that matter the early centuries of the church, on any controversy over premillennial teaching. It is admitted that it was universally held by the Jews. It is often admitted that the early church was predominantly premillennial. Yet there is no record of any kind dealing with controversy. It is incredible that if the Jews and the early church were in such a serious error in their interpretation of the

Old Testament and in their expectation of a righteous kingdom on earth following the second advent, that there should be no corrective, and that all the evidence should confirm rather than deny such an interpretation. The general context of the New Testament is entirely in favor of the premillennial viewpoint. The amillennial interpretation has not one verse of positive testimony in the New Testament and can be sustained only by spiritualizing the prophecies of the Old Testament as well as the teaching of the New.

#### Extra-Biblical Premillennialism in the First Century

The available evidence in regard to the premillennialism of the first century is not extensive by most standards, but such evidence as has been uncovered points in one direction--the premillennial concept. Peters in his classic work, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, cites no less than fifteen advocates of premillennialism in the first century.[7] G. N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, I, 494-95. While his classification in some cases no doubt is debatable, in others it is undisputed. The notable testimony of Papias, who was associated with the Apostle John, is of special weight. Papias who lived in the first century and the beginning of the second lists as adherents of premillennialism Aristio, John the Presbyter and the Apostles Andrew, Peter, Philip, Thomas, James, John, and Matthew. He certainly was in a position to know their views, and his testimony is an important link in sustaining the fact that the disciples continued in the Jewish expectation of a kingdom on earth. Peters also lists as premillennarians Clement of Rome, Barnabas, Hermas, Ignatius, and Polycarp. In previous discussion of amillennialism, it was shown that the prevailing opinion of both amillennarians and premillennarians that Barnabas is premillennial in his views is fully justified. Hermas also is conceded by practically all parties as premillennial. In other words, there are clear and unmistakable evidences of premillennialism in the first century. Further, this viewpoint is linked extra-biblically with the apostles themselves. In contrast to these clear evidences, not one adherent, not one line of evidence is produced sustaining the idea that any first-century Christians held Augustinian amillennialism--that the interadvent period was the millennial. Further, there is no evidence whatever that premillennialism was even disputed. It was the overwhelming-majority view of the early church.

#### Premillennialism in the Second Century

The second century like the first bears a sustained testimony to the premillennial character of the early church. Even the amillennarians claim no adherents whatever by name to their position in the second century except in the allegorizing school of interpretation which arose at the very close of the second century. Premillennialism was undisputed for the first ninety years of the second century. Among those who can be cited in this century as holding premillennialism Peters names Pothinus, Justin Martyr, Melito, Hegesippus, Tatian, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Apollinaris.[8] *Ibid.*, I, 495-96. Of these Justin Martyr (100-168) is quite outspoken. He wrote: "But I and whatsoever Christians are orthodox in all things do know that there will be a resurrection of the flesh, and a thousand years in the city of Jerusalem, built, adorned, and enlarged, according as Ezekiel, Isaiah, and other prophets have promised. For Isaiah saith of this thousand years (ch. 65:17), 'Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind; but be ye glad and rejoice in those which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem to triumph, and my people to rejoice,' etc. Moreover, a certain man among us, whose name is John, being one of the twelve apostles of Christ, in that revelation which was shown to him prophesied, that those who believe in our Christ shall fulfil a thousand years at Jerusalem; and after that the general, and in a word, the everlasting resurrection, and last judgment of all together. Whereof also our Lord spake when He said, that therein they shall neither marry, nor be given in marriage, but shall be equal with the angels, being made the sons of the resurrection of God." [9] *Ibid.*, I, 480.

While even modern premillenarians might not accept the details of Justin's interpretation, the notable fact is that he clearly states the essentials of premillennialism--the second advent, followed by a thousand-year reign and the separating of the resurrections before and after the millennium. Further, Justin declares that this view which he advocates is generally accepted as the orthodox view of the church. Peters accordingly cites the conclusion of Semisch in Herzog's cyclopaedia, "Chiliasm constituted in the sec. century so decidedly an article of faith that Justin held it up as a criterion of perfect orthodoxy." [10] Loc. cit.

The testimony of Justin is by no means unsustained by others, as Peters shows. Pothinus taught his churches at Lyons and Vienne premillennial doctrine which was continued by Irenaeus his successor. Melito, the bishop of Sardis, is declared a premillenarian by Shimeall in his Reply, based on Jerome and Genadius. Tertullian is generally regarded as a premillenarian. Others are less certain but the evidence, such as it is, seems to point to their holding similar positions.

In general, the second century, then, has a similar testimony to the first. All characters who have anything to say on the subject are premillennial and this is set forth as the orthodox opinion of the church. Those who may have denied it were classified as heretics, not simply for being opposed to premillennialism but for other reasons. The first opposition to premillennialism did not become vocal until the opening of the third century. Amillenarians and postmillenarians have not only no positive evidence in favor of their position but no evidence that there was even a reasonable minority in the church contending against premillennialism. Apparently no one of the orthodox Fathers thought of challenging this important doctrine in the first two centuries.

### Premillennialism in the Third Century

In the third century premillennialism began its historic decline, and it is admitted by all that opposition arose to premillennial ideas. Opponents of premillennialism are found in Gaius, Clement, Origen, Dionysius, and others. The form in which the attack came consisted in the adoption of the allegorizing method of interpreting Scripture in a manner which is no credit to amillennialism. Rutgers, though a determined foe of premillennialism, analyzes Clement, for instance, as follows: "Clement, engrossed and charmed by Greek philosophy, applied this erroneous allegorical method to Holy Writ. It was a one-sided emphasis: opposed to the real, the visible, phenomenal, spacial and temporal. A Platonic idealistic philosophy could not countenance carnalistic, sensualistic conceptions of the future as that advanced by chiliasm. It shook the very foundations on which chiliasm rested. Robertson observed that 'it loosed its [chiliasm's] sheet-anchor,--naïve literalism in the interpretation of Scripture.'" [11] W. H. Rutgers, Premillennialism in America, p. 64.

It is not surprising that opposition to premillennialism should arise. All forms of true doctrine have opposition and even the majority view in the history of doctrine is not necessarily the right one. The point of great significance is the form in which the opposition arose. It was not the product of orthodox studies in the Scripture, nor of the application of tried and true hermeneutics. It was rather the subversion of the plain meaning of Scripture not only as applied to the millennial question but all other areas of doctrine. The church today with one voice condemns all of the early opponents of premillennialism as heretics. Opposition to premillennialism had its rise in the attackers of true Scriptural doctrine, and it was not until the time of Augustine (354-430) that one reputable adherent of amillennialism can be cited. The opposition of premillennialism in the third century is no asset to amillennialism. While amillenarians may hail the conclusions of the enemies of premillennialism, they accept neither the general method nor the theology of those who participated in the attack. Usually, like Allis, amillenarians abandon the early centuries as a

lost cause and begin with Augustine.

The third century had its own continued witness to premillennialism, however. Among those who can be cited are Cyprian (200-258), Commodian (200-270), Nepos (230-280), Coracion (230-280), Victorinus (240-303), Methodius (250-311), and Lactantius (240-330). Some of these like Commodian and Nepos are undisputed premillennarians. Nepos early recognized the heretical tendencies of the Alexandrian school of theology, which was the first effective opponent of premillennialism, and he attacked them with vigor. Methodius is conceded as premillennarian by Whitby himself. It is clear, however, that a rising tide of opposition was beginning to manifest itself against premillennialism, and while the church managed to extricate itself from much of the other bad doctrine of the Alexandrian school, premillennialism became in time one of the fatalities.

### Premillennialism from the Third Century to Modern Times

All admit that premillennialism after the third century waned and lost its hold on the majority of the church. It was the time of the rising strength of the Roman Church. Both the theological and political atmosphere was against it. While there was a continued minority who held premillennialism both within and without the Roman Church, they were not very vocal and were quite ineffectual in continuing a strong testimony. The Reformers, while returning to true doctrine in many areas, accepted Augustine as the starting point for their theology, and for the most part accepted without much consideration his opposition to premillennialism. The fact that premillennialism was held by some fanatical sects did not give it much standing. It remained for the renewal of Scriptural studies some time after the Reformation to turn the attention of a large portion of the church again to the premillennial question. The last hundred years have brought premillennialism out of its partial eclipse, and among those who accept the inspiration of Scripture it continues to be an area of lively discussion. Most Bible institutes as well as some theological seminaries are today propagating premillennial truth, and scores of evangelical preachers, teachers, and missionaries, as well as widespread publications present premillennialism.

### Modern Premillennialism

The general features of modern premillennialism are highly significant and need to be outlined before assuming the larger task of the analysis and defense of premillennial doctrine. Even a casual observer of the premillennial movement in the twentieth century can see certain important tendencies.

**Infallibility of Scripture.** Premillennialism is based on the thesis of the infallibility of Scripture. It stands or falls not only on the method of interpretation of Scripture, but also on the question of the infallibility of the Holy Scripture. For this reason, premillennialism is entirely confined to those who are conservative in their general theological position. Premillennialism has always been the foe of liberal theology and of unbelief in the Scriptures. It has often been attacked for this very reason. Much of the modern zeal of its opponents has not arisen in love for doctrinal purity, but in hatred of conservative Biblical theology. To be a premillennarian exposes one at once to all who have departed from conservative theology. Premillennialism remains a bulwark against the inroads of modern theology.

**Literal interpretation.** Modern premillennialism is dependent upon the principle of literal interpretation. Premillennialism is a result of the application of this method to Scriptural interpretation. It is accordingly the foe of modern liberal spiritualization of all areas of theology as well as the more confined spiritualization of conservative amillennarians. The literal method of interpretation is also vitally related to Biblical dispensationalism. The recognition of Biblical dispensations and the proper statement of dispensational

distinctions is not in itself a method of interpretation but rather a result of a method--the application of the literal method. Anti-dispensationalists are always guilty of various degrees of spiritualization of Scripture. The dispensational method is the literal method. In this connection it should also be noted that extremes in dispensational distinctions do not have their rise in a more rigid literal method, but rather in the area of general interpretation. Extreme dispensationalism which divides the interadvent period into Jewish and Gentile churches, and makes much of the New Testament non-applicable to modern churches, is not more or less literal than ordinary dispensationalism. It is misapplication of the literal method rather than its proper use.

Evangelicalism. Premillennialism has been definitely an evangelical movement. While often charged with pessimism regarding this world and with "other-worldliness," premillennialism has been a large factor in modern effective Gospel preaching. A premillenarian is usually a believer in the orthodox Gospel and an adherent of Biblical theology in all major areas. Premillennialism among other things has opposed legalism or the Galatian error as it exists today and has upheld the doctrine of grace both as the ground of salvation and as a rule of life for the believer.

Opposition to ecclesiasticism. Premillennialism has tended to be more independent of human and ecclesiastical opinions and more inclined to exalt the Scriptures and the guidance of the Holy Spirit as a basis for conduct. The modern tendency to exalt church programs often pursued in the energy of the flesh rather than in the power of the Spirit, and the trend to exalt submission to church authority rather than to the Holy Spirit have had no encouragement from premillennialism. Premillennialism has supported exegetical preaching, informal church services, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and extemporaneous prayers in contrast to the ritualism, formalism, and mechanical tendency of modern Christianity.

Emphasis on prophetic studies. It is transparent that premillennialism has also exalted the study of prophetic truth. In contrast to the common neglect of even the essential doctrines of the second advent, heaven, hell, and final judgment, usually omitted from liberal theological preaching, premillennialism has focused the white light of careful investigation on Scriptural teachings concerning future things. Prophetic Bible conferences are inevitably premillennial in their doctrine. Neither amillennialism nor postmillennialism ever aroused much interest in prophecy.

Such is the historical context of modern premillennialism. Rooted in the Old and New Testaments, a product of literal interpretation, nurtured by the Apostles and the early church, eclipsed for centuries by the dark shadows of pagan philosophies and allegorizing methods of interpretation, emerging once more as a dominant strain in Biblical theology in these eschatological times, premillennialism is more than a theory, more than a doctrine. It is a system of Biblical interpretation which alone honors the Word of God as infallibly inspired, literally interpreted, and sure of literal fulfillment. It has stirred the coals of evangelicalism, created interest in Biblical study, and constituted a preparation of God's people for the coming of the Lord for His saints. Premillennial truth has been an inestimable blessing to those who have received it. To them the Bible has become a living book to be interpreted in its ordinary sense. It is significant that the Bible study movements have usually been premillennial, and institutions which emphasize the study of the text of Scripture, as illustrated in the Bible institute movement, have often been an integral part of the premillennial movement.

The larger task of examining the foundations of Biblical premillennialism remains before us. The method of approach will be first of all general, then specific, and we trust with profit to the readers.

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