

# Part 11: The Theological Context of Premillennialism

by John F. Walvoord

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*John F. Walvoord's sermon explores the theological context of premillennialism, emphasizing its distinct interpretation of Scripture and the role of Israel in eschatology.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 11:1

**Topics:** "Eschatology", "Hermeneutics"

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## Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the complexities of premillennialism, emphasizing that it is not merely a dispute over Revelation 20 but a theological system rooted in various Scriptures and theological contexts. He contrasts premillennialism with opposing views, highlighting the distinctive principles of interpretation, the concept of the present age, the doctrine of Israel, and the teaching on the second advent and millennial kingdom. Walvoord defends the literal method of interpretation in premillennialism, arguing that prophecies should be taken literally unless clearly identified as symbolic, and he justifies this method by pointing to the historical fulfillment of prophecies surrounding Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection.

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## Transcript

The oft-repeated charge that premillennialism is only a dispute over the interpretation of Revelation 20 is both understatement and a serious misrepresentation of the facts. Opponents of premillennialism delight to point out that the reference to the thousand years is found only in Revelation 20. Warfield observes in a footnote, "'Once, and only once,' says the 'Ency. Bibl.,' 3095, 'in the New Testament we hear of a millennium.'" [1] B. B. Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines*, p. 643. The issues of premillennialism cannot be so simplified. The issues are neither trivial nor simple. Premillennialism is rather a system of theology based on many Scriptures and with a distinctive theological context. The reckless charge of Landis that European premillennialism is based only on Ezekiel 40-48 and that American premillennialism is based only on Revelation 20:1-7 is as unfair as his more serious charge that "actually their bases are both contra-Biblical," and that premillennialism "is a fungus growth of first-century Pharisaic rabbinism." [2] Ira D. Landis, *The Faith of Our Fathers on Eschatology*. Most opponents of premillennialism have enough perspective to see that premillennialism has its own Biblical and theological context and that its origin in the early church as well as its restoration in modern times is based on Biblical and theological studies. It is the purpose of this phase of the study of premillennialism to examine the general features of premillennial theology in contrast to opposing views. Premillennialism involves a distinctive principle of interpretation of

Scripture, a different concept of the present age, a distinct doctrine of Israel, and its own teaching concerning the second advent and millennial kingdom. Origen, the father of amillenarianism, most certainly did. Conservative amillenarians would, however, feel perfectly justified in proceeding to spiritualize passages speaking of a future righteous government on earth, of Israel's restoration as a national and political entity, of Israel's regathering to Palestine, and of Christ reigning literally upon the earth for a thousand years. Their justification is that these doctrines are absurd and impossible and that therefore they must be spiritualized. The wish is father of the interpretation, therefore, and amillennial interpretation of Scripture abundantly illustrates this.

While professing to confine spiritualization to prophecy, actually they invade other fields. For instance they tend to spiritualize Israel to mean the church and make David's throne to be the throne of God in heaven. They hold up to ridicule as extremists those who want to interpret references to Israel literally. As Allis writes with considerable inaccuracy, "Carrying to an almost unprecedented extreme that literalism which is characteristic of Millenarianism, they [the Brethren Movement] insisted that Israel must mean Israel, and that the kingdom promises in the Old Testament concern Israel and are to be fulfilled to Israel literally."<sup>[4]</sup> Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 218. In his zeal to load premillenarians with an extreme position, Allis finds it convenient to forget that the postmillennial Charles Hodge and the amillennial Professor William Hendricksen of Calvin Seminary both interpret reference to Israel in Scripture as belonging to God's ancient people, Israel, not to a Gentile church.

Premillenarians, on the other hand, insist that one general rule of interpretation should be applied to all areas of theology and that prophecy does not require spiritualization any more than other aspects of truth. They hold that this rule is the literal, grammatical-historical method. By this it is meant that a passage should be taken in its literal sense, in keeping with the grammatical meaning of the words and forms. History is history, not allegory. Facts are facts. Prophesied future events are just what they are prophesied. Israel means Israel, earth means earth, heaven means heaven.

Problems of the literal method. Attacks on premillennialism which recognize the central importance of the literal method of interpretation delight to show that premillenarians do not always interpret Scripture literally either. Landis asks, "How literal are the literalists?"<sup>[5]</sup> Landis, *op. cit.*, p. 45. Allis confuses typical with spiritual interpretation and charges that premillennial use of typology destroys the literal principle. He writes, "While Dispensationalists are extreme literalists, they are very inconsistent ones. They are literalists in interpreting prophecy. But in the interpreting of history, they carry the principle of typical interpretation to an extreme which has rarely been exceeded by the most ardent allegorizers."<sup>[6]</sup> Allis, *op. cit.*, p. 21. True typical interpretation, of course, always involves literal interpretation first. In drawing typical truth from the Old Testament sacrifices, for instance, the interpreter takes for granted the historical existence of the sacrifice. If Joseph is taken as a type of Christ, his historical life is assumed. It is surprising that a scholar of Allis' proportions should be confused on such a simple hermeneutical distinction. The dispute highlights, however, some of the problems of the use of the literal method.

Premillenarians recognize that all Scripture cannot be interpreted literally. All areas of theology are sometimes revealed in Scripture under symbolic terms. Such passages, however, are usually clearly identified. For instance, the "rod out of the stem of Jesse" and the "Branch" which "shall grow out of his roots" is understood by all to refer symbolically to Christ. But when it states that this "Branch" is the one who "shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked," it is clear from that context that a literal prophecy of judgment on the wicked in the earth at the second advent is intended even though some of the expressions are figurative. While the expression "rod

of his mouth" is clearly figurative, such simple expressions as "earth" in the context of this passage in Isaiah 11 cannot be spiritualized on the same grounds. We are not free to make "earth" arbitrarily an equivalent for heaven as many amillenarians do, nor can we speak of the regathering of Israel "from the four corners of the earth" (Isa 11:12) as the conversion of Gentiles and the progress of the church. While the expression "four corners" is figurative, the word "earth" is not. In other words, figures of speech which are clearly identified as such give no warrant whatever to spiritualize words and expressions which can be taken in their ordinary meaning.

The literal method sustained by literal fulfillment. The literal method of interpreting prophecy has been fully justified by the history of fulfillment. The most unlikely prophecies surrounding the birth of Christ, His person, His life and ministry, His death and resurrection have all been literally fulfilled. The prophetic vision of Daniel, however couched in symbols and dreams, has had the most concrete fulfillment down to the present hour in the history of Gentile nations. Hundreds if not thousands of prophecies have had literal fulfillment. A method that has worked with such success in the past is certainly worthy of projection into the future.

The interpreter of prophecy has, therefore, no more warrant to spiritualize prophecy than any other area of theology. If the details of the virgin birth, the character of the miracles of Christ, His very words on the cross, His form of execution, the circumstances of His burial, and His resurrection from the dead could be explicitly prophesied in the Old Testament, certainly there is no a priori reason for rejecting the literal interpretation of prophecy concerning His future righteous government on earth. The literal method is the method recognized in the fulfillment of prophecy and is the mainspring of the premillennial interpretation of the Scriptures.

The question of relative difficulty of interpreting prophecy. It may be admitted that there are problems in the interpretation of prophecy which are peculiar to this field. While the problems differ in character from the interpretation of history or theological revelation, they do not consist in the choice of spiritual or literal interpretation. It is not so much a question of whether the prophecy will be fulfilled, but rather concerning the unrevealed details of time and circumstance. While premillenarians have sometimes been guilty of making prophetic interpretation appear as too simple a process, amillenarians have erred in the other direction. After all, interpreting Scripture on such subjects as predestination, the decree of God, the doctrine of the Trinity, the person of the incarnate Christ, the sufferings of Christ on the cross, and similar doctrines is certainly difficult even though in the realm of specific revelation and historic fulfillment. The theologian should no more turn to spiritualization of Scripture to solve the doctrinal difficulties in these areas than he should spiritualize prophecy to fit a denial of a millennial kingdom on earth. Difficulty or even seeming contradiction is not sufficient justification for spiritualization. If the incongruous elements of the human and the divine in Christ can be accepted literally in spite of their seeming contradiction, the elements of prophecy which may seem confusing should not be sacrificed on the altar of spiritualization to remove the problem that arises from literal interpretation.

A general principle guiding the interpretation of prophecy is quite clear in the Scripture. This principle is that the whole doctrine of prophecy should be allowed to be the guide for the interpretation of details. The main elements of prophecy are far more clear than some of the details. Difficult passages are often solved by a study of related Scriptures. The Book of Revelation, while admittedly difficult to interpret, has its symbols drawn from other portions of Scripture, and many questions of interpretation can be answered with the larger context of the entire Bible.

The problem of the time element in prophecy. One of the problems of interpretation of prophecy is that it involves time relationships. Events widely separated in fulfillment are often brought together in prophetic vision. Thus the first coming and the second coming of Christ are pictured in the same Scriptural context. Isaiah 61:1-2 as quoted in part by Christ in Luke 4:16-19 is an illustration of this. In the quotation in Luke, Christ quoted only the first part of the Isaiah passage, stopping just before the elements that dealt with the second coming. We can therefore expect in Old Testament prophecy the complete spanning of the present age with no inkling of the millenniums that separate the first and second advent. On the other hand, when time elements are included, they are intended to be taken literally. Hence, Daniel's "seventy weeks" are subject to literal interpretation even though the interval between the sixty-ninth and the seventieth week is only hinted at by Daniel himself. The rule does not justify spiritualization of that which is specifically revealed.

The problem of partial fulfillment. This, in a word, is the partial fulfillment of a prophecy first, followed by the complete fulfillment later. In Luke 1:31-33, for instance, there was fulfillment of the first part of the prophecy in the incarnation, but the prediction that Christ would rule over Israel on the throne of David forever has had no fulfillment. Amillenarians have succumbed to the temptation to spiritualize the throne of David. Such an interpretation violates the very integrity of Scripture. Mary certainly believed the prediction to refer to the literal kingdom on earth prophesied in the Old Testament. A spiritual throne in heaven, God's own throne, in no wise fulfills the prediction.

Premillennial principles of literal interpretation justified. The general features of premillennial interpretation are therefore evident. Its method is literal interpretation except for figures plainly intended to be symbols. Prophecies are therefore to be taken literally, the exact interpretation following the pattern of the law of fulfillment established by prophecies already fulfilled and in keeping with the entire doctrine. Time relationships in prophecy are seen to include the literal interpretation of time elements when given and at the same time the prophetic vision is seen to present events widely separated in time in the same revelation. Prophecies fulfilled in part are found to sustain the principle of literal fulfillment, with a partial fulfillment first and complete literal fulfillment to follow. Prophecy in general must follow the same hermeneutical principles of interpretation which govern other areas of theology.

#### The Premillennial Concept of the Present Age

The immediate and practical importance of premillennial interpretation can be seen at once in the comparison of concepts of the present age advanced by the various millennial views. Postmillennialism usually interprets the prophecies of the coming kingdom of righteousness on earth as being subject to a somewhat literal fulfillment in the period just preceding the second advent, a period still future from the contemporary viewpoint. This interpretation has almost vanished among contemporary conservative theologians, being continued only in the evolutionary principle of continued world-improvement to which some still resolutely cling in spite of trends to the contrary. Amillenarians, on the other hand, regard the kingdom prophecies as being fulfilled now, in the present age, either on earth or in heaven, or both. The premillennial interpretation denies both the postmillennial and amillennial views, affirming that the kingdom on earth will follow, not precede the second advent of Christ.

The premillennial concept of the present age makes the inter-advent period unique and unpredicted in the Old Testament. The present age is one in which the gospel is preached to all the world. Relatively few are saved. The world becomes, in fact, increasingly wicked as the age progresses. The premillennial view holds no prospects of a golden age before the second advent, and presents no commands to improve

society as a whole. The apostles are notably silent on any program of either political, social, moral, or physical improvement of the unsaved world. Paul made no effort to correct social abuses or to influence the political government for good. The program of the early church was one of evangelism and Bible teaching. It was a matter of saving souls out of the world rather than saving the world. It was neither possible nor in the program of God for the present age to become the kingdom of God on earth.

Central in the purpose of the present age in the premillennial view is the formation of the church, the body of Christ, out of believers in the gospel. This body of believers is quite distinct from Israel in the Old Testament and is not simply a revamped Judaism. The truth regarding the church as the body of Christ is declared to be a mystery, that is, a truth not revealed in the Old Testament. Composed of Jew and Gentile on an equal basis, and resting on New Testament promises of grace and salvation in Christ, the new entity is a new creation of God, formed by the baptism of the Holy Spirit, indwelt by the Spirit of God, united to Christ as the human body is united to its head. The main body of premillennarians regard the church as beginning at Pentecost, having its program and formation in the present age, and a prophetic future all its own, not to be confused with Israel or Old Testament saints.

### The Premillennial Concept of Israel

There have been, in the main, three interpretations of the theological concept of Israel in Protestant theology. One of these, which can be identified with John Calvin, is the idea that the church is the true Israel and therefore inherits Israel's promises. This is the viewpoint advocated by amillenarians. Allis considers it the only possible amillenarian position. It considers Israel nationally and individually set aside forever and his promises of blessings transferred to the church. Under this concept there is no future hope for Israel whatever.

Some amillenarians such as Prof. William Hendricksen and some conservative postmillenarians such as Charles Hodge hold that Israel's promises of blessings will be fulfilled to those of Israel in the flesh who come to Christ and become part of the Christian church. The promises are to be fulfilled, then, to Israel, but to Israel in the church. Hodge takes this as a final triumph of the gospel and even envisions some regathering of Israel for this purpose. Under both of these forms of interpretation, no post-advent kingdom is required to fulfill Israel's promises. All will be fulfilled in the present age.

It is clear, however, to all that many of the promises cannot be literally applied to present earth conditions. Two expedients are followed by the amillenarian and postmillenarian interpretation. Some promises are cancelled as having been conditional in the first place. Others are spiritualized to fit the pattern of the present age. This interpretation is based upon a somewhat contradictory set of principles. One view is that the promises to Israel were never intended to be taken literally and hence are rightly spiritualized to fit the church. The other is that they were literal enough, but cancelled because of Israel's sin. The concept of Israel prevailing among amillenarians and postmillenarians is therefore confused and inherently contradictory. There does not seem to be any norm or central consistency except in their denial of a political and national future for Israel after the second advent. What unity exists in their system rests upon this denial.

The premillennial view concerning Israel is quite clear and simple. The prophecies given to Israel are viewed as literal and unconditional. God has promised Israel a glorious future and this will be fulfilled after the second advent. Israel will be a glorious nation, protected from her enemies, exalted above the Gentiles, the central vehicle of the manifestation of God's grace in the millennial kingdom. In the present

age, Israel has been set aside, her promises held in abeyance, with no progress in the fulfillment of her program. This postponement is considered no more difficult than the delay of forty years in entering the promised land. Promises may be delayed in fulfillment but not cancelled. All concede that a literal interpretation of Israel's promises in the Old Testament present just such a picture. Again it resolves into a problem of literal interpretation and the defense of this interpretation as reasonable and consistent. The preservation of Israel as a racial entity and the resurrection of Israel as a political entity are twin miracles of the twentieth century which are in perfect accord with the premillennial interpretation. The doctrine of Israel remains one of the central features of premillennialism.

### The Premillennial Concept of the Second Advent

The general facts concerning the premillennial viewpoint of the second advent are well known. Premillenarians hold to a literal, bodily, visible, and glorious return of Christ to the earth, fulfilling the many Scriptural prophecies of this event. They hold that this event is the occasion for the deliverance and judgment of Israel, the downfall and judgment of the Gentiles, the inauguration of the kingdom of righteousness on earth. In contrast to both amillennialism and postmillennialism, they hold that the coming of Christ is before the millennium. Satan is bound at this time. The curse of sin is lifted from the material world. Righteousness, peace, and prosperity become the rule. Jerusalem becomes the capital for the whole world. The kingdom continues for one thousand years and then is merged into eternity attended by catastrophic events--the destruction of the present earth and heavens, the judgment of the wicked dead who are then raised, the establishment of the saints of all ages in the new earth and new heavens. All of these events are interpreted literally by the premillenarian and constitute the blueprint of things to come.

Premillenarians often distinguish between the second advent and the rapture of the church. Usually Scripture is interpreted to sustain the teaching that the rapture comes before the tribulation time, separated from the second advent by a period of about seven years. Some few hold that the rapture comes in the middle of the tribulation, the mid-tribulation theory. Others hold to the post-tribulation view which identifies the rapture with the second advent proper. These three premillennial views will be discussed in full later, under consideration of premillennial eschatology.

### Conclusion

It should be clear from this survey of the field that premillennialism is a distinct system of theology. Opponents of premillennialism are right in part when they charge that premillennialism is essentially different from other forms of theology. The chief differences arise in ecclesiology, eschatology, and hermeneutics. Opponents of premillennialism are wrong when they claim that premillennialism is new, modern, or heretical. Even partisans in the millennial argument usually agree that premillenarians are evangelical, true to Biblical doctrines, and opposed to modern defections from the faith of our fathers.

The task that remains is the large undertaking of presenting the Scriptural evidence for premillennialism in a constructive way, showing that it is consistent with itself and its hermeneutical principles, and that it is the best system of interpretation of the entire Scriptures. The approach will be through the Biblical covenants, beginning with God's covenant with Abraham, which has become increasingly the crux of the millennial issue. The literal method of interpretation will be tested by its practical use in seeking solution of the millennial problem.

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