

D. A Consideration of the Arguments for Premillennialism. The position advocated in this book is historic premillennialism. The arguments against the premillennial position have essentially been presented in the arguments for amillennialism and postmillennialism and will therefore not be repeated again herein a separate section, but incidental objections to these arguments will be considered along the way.

1. Several Old Testament passages seem to fit neither in the present age nor in the eternal state. These passages indicate some future stage in the history of redemption which is far greater than the present church age but which still does not see the removal of all sin and rebellion and death from the earth. Speaking of Jerusalem at some time in the future, Isaiah says:

No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the child shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed. (Isa. 65: 20) Here we read that there will be no more infants who die in infancy, and no more old men who die prematurely, something far different from this present age. But death and sin will still be present, for the child who is one hundred years old shall die, and the sinner who is one hundred years old “shall be accursed.”

The larger context of this passage may mingle elements of the millennium and the eternal state (cf. vv. 17, 25), but it is in the nature of Old Testament prophecy not to distinguish among events in the future, just as these prophecies do not distinguish between the first and second comings of Christ. Therefore in the larger context there may be mixed elements, but the point remains that this single element (the infants and old men who live long, the child dying one hundred years old, and the sinner being accursed) indicates a specific time in the future that is different from the present age.

Isaiah seems to predict a millennial kingdom in another place when he says:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. (Isa. 11: 6 — 9)

This passage clearly speaks of a momentous renewal of nature that takes us far beyond the present age, a time in which “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (v. 9). Yet in the very next verse Isaiah says:

In that day the root of Jesse shall stand as an ensign to the peoples; him shall the nations seek, and his dwellings shall be glorious. In that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant which is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia. (Isa. 11: 10 — 11) Here some are still seeking the Messiah and apparently coming to salvation, and here also the Lord is still gathering the remnant of his people from various nations of the earth. It does not seem, therefore, that the eternal state has begun, yet the reversal of nature far exceeds anything that will happen in this present age. Does this not indicate a future millennial kingdom?

Psalm 72 seems to go beyond a description of Solomon's reign and to predict the glories of the reign of the Messiah:

He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. The desert tribes will bow before him and his enemies will lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts. All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him. For he will deliver the the afflicted who have no-one to help. He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight. (Ps. 72: 8 — 14 NIV) 32

This passage certainly speaks of a messianic rule far more extensive than that experienced by David or Solomon, because this Messiah's kingdom extends "to the ends of the earth" and "all nations will serve him" (vv. 8, 11 NIV; note that the psalm also says: "He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations" in v. 5 NIV). This will be a reign in righteousness, in justice — but it certainly will not be the eternal state. There are still "the needy who cry out" and "the afflicted who have no one to help"; there are still people who need to be rescued "from oppression and violence" (vv. 12 — 14). There will still be enemies who "will lick the dust" under the reign of this righteous King (v. 9). All of this speaks of an age far different from the present age but short of the eternal state in which there is no more sin or suffering.

Zechariah also prophesies a coming age in which there is great transformation in the earth, in which the Lord is King over all the earth, and in which there is still rebellion and sin, suffering, and death:

Then the LORD your God will come, and all the holy ones with him. On that day there shall be neither cold nor frost. And there shall be continuous day (it is known to the LORD), not day and not night, for at evening time there shall be light. On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea; it shall continue in summer as in winter. And the LORD will become king over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be one and his name one.

And this shall be the plague with which the LORD will smite all the peoples that wage war against Jerusalem: their flesh shall rot while they are still on their feet, their eyes shall rot in their sockets, and their tongues shall rot in their mouths. And the wealth of all the nations round about shall be collected, gold, silver, and garments in great abundance. . . . Then every one that survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the feast of booths. And if any of the families of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, there will be no rain upon them. (Zech. 14: 5 — 17)

Here again the description does not fit the present age, for the Lord is King over all the earth in this situation. But it does not fit the eternal state either, because of the disobedience and rebellion against the Lord that is clearly present. One might object that this is a typical Old Testament prophecy in which distinct future events are conflated and not distinguished in the prophet's vision, though they may be separated by long ages when they actually occur. However, it is difficult to make such a distinction in this passage because it is specifically rebellion against the Lord who is King over all the earth that is punished by these plagues and lack of rain. 33

2. There are also New Testament passages other than Revelation 20 that suggest a future millennium. When the risen Lord Jesus speaks to the church at Thyatira, he says, "He who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations, and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received power from my Father" (Rev. 2: 26 — 27). The imagery used (ruling with a rod of iron; shattering earthen pots) implies a rule of force over rebellious people. But when will

believers who conquer over evil participate in this rule? The idea fits well into a future millennial kingdom when glorified saints rule with Christ on the earth, but does not fit well at any time in the present age or in the eternal state. (The idea of ruling the nations “with a rod of iron” is also found in Rev. 12: 5 — 6 and 19: 15.)

When Paul talks about the resurrection, he says that each person will receive a resurrection body in his own order: “Christ the first fruits, then (epeita) at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then (eita) comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Cor. 15: 23 — 25). The two words translated “then” in this passage (epeita and eita) both take the sense “after that,” not the sense “at that same time.” Therefore the passage gives some support to the idea that, just as there is an interval of time between Christ’s resurrection and his second coming when we receive a resurrection body (v. 23), so there is an interval of time between Christ’s second coming and “the end” (v. 24), when Christ delivers the kingdom to God after having reigned for a time and put all his enemies under his feet. 34

3. With the background of a number of other passages that hint at or clearly suggest a future time far greater than the present age but short of the eternal state, it is appropriate then to look at Revelation 20 once again. Several statements here are best understood as referring to a future earthly reign of Christ prior to the future judgment.

a. The binding and imprisonment of Satan in the bottomless pit (vv. 2 — 3) imply a far greater restriction of his activity than anything we know in this present age (see discussion above, under amillennialism).

b. The statement that those who were faithful “came to life” (v. 4) is best taken as referring to a bodily resurrection, for the next verse says, “This is the first resurrection.” The verb *ezēsan*, “came to life,” is the same verb and the same form of the verb used in Revelation 2: 8, where Jesus identifies himself as the one “who died and came to life,” here obviously referring to his resurrection. 35

c. On a premillennial interpretation, the reigning with Christ (in Rev. 20: 4) is something that is still future, not something that is occurring now (as amillennialists claim). This is consistent with the rest of the New Testament, where we are frequently told that believers will reign with Christ and be given authority by him to reign over the earth (see Luke 19: 17, 19; 1 Cor. 6: 3; Rev. 2: 26 — 27; 3: 21). But nowhere does Scripture say that believers in the intermediate state (between their death and Christ’s return) are reigning with Christ or sharing in rule with him. In fact, Revelation earlier pictures saints in heaven before Christ’s return waiting under the altar and crying out to the Lord to begin to judge evildoers on the earth (Rev. 6: 9 — 10). Nowhere is it said that Christians are already reigning with Christ.

Those who come to life and reign with Christ in Revelation 20 include people “who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands” (Rev. 20: 4). This is a reference to those who did not yield to the persecution by the beast spoken of in Revelation 13: 1 — 18. But if the severity of persecution described in Revelation 13 leads us to conclude that the beast has not yet come on the world scene, but is yet future, then the persecution by this beast is still future as well. And if this persecution is still future, then the scene in Revelation 20 where those “who had not worshiped the beast . . . and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands” (Rev. 20: 4) is still future as well. This means that Revelation 20: 1 — 6 does not describe the present church age but is best understood to refer to a future millennial reign of Christ.

These considerations combine to make a case in favor of premillennialism. If we are convinced of this position, it really is an incidental question whether the thousand-year period is thought to be a literal thousand years or simply a long period of time of indeterminate duration. And though we may not have much clarity on all the details of the nature of the millennium, we can be reasonably certain that there will be a future earthly reign of Christ that will be markedly different from this present age.

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