

# Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you  
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## The Millennial Hope and the Church

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*And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the 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 upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. 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.* (Revelation 20:4-6)

Because the doctrine of the end times (eschatology) has caused so much dispute in the church, many have determined to sit on the sidelines. Over twenty years ago I first heard someone say, "some are amillennialists, some are postmillennialists, and some are premillennialists — I am a panmillennialist; I believe it will all pan out." This humorous trivializing of an important Biblical issue has become the standard answer for many evangelicals. It means a refusal to study the matter and come to an informed decision. It implies that Biblical prophecy is inconsequential and debated only by misguided, theological "eggheads."

Those who laugh at eschatology perhaps do not realize that they are making light of the Judeo-Christian view of history — that it is linear and has a purpose. Far from history merely "panning out," Jesus said to His disciples, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44). Biblical prophecy is linked to the purpose of God and its outworking in human history. The Biblical view of history is that it has a beginning (creation) and an end (judgement) with many key events along the way that provide it with meaning. The cross is the most important event on God's historical

time line; those things preceding it look forward to it and those things following it look back to it to find significance.

After the passage cited above about the compelling necessity of Old Testament prophecy being fulfilled, Jesus said, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46,47). The death and resurrection of Christ always stand central and provide meaning to the other events of human history. Whatever promises the Bible makes about Jesus' return, His dealings with all people are not merely going to "pan out" as if fate or luck were governing the process; **they must be fulfilled.**

## What is the Millennium?

The particular promise that I will address in this article is the millennium. The term "millennium" means, "a thousand years." Those who take the passage in Revelation 20 literally believe in a millennium. They are also called "chiliasm" from the Greek word for "thousand." I am a premillennialist. That means I believe Jesus will return **before** this thousand year reign begins. This reign will involve a restored, national Israel and will entail the fulfillment of Biblical promises that are found from Genesis to Revelation.

The terms "amillennial" and "postmillennial" have had varied meanings throughout church history. Briefly, "amillennial" means that there will be no literal millennium and "postmillennial" means that Jesus will return **after** a golden age in which the church shall have taken dominion over the nations. This is a simplification, but one necessary for the purposes of this article. One traditional view is that the millennium is the entire church age. This is the position of the Roman Catholic Church and some Protestant denominations. Only premillennialists believe in a literal thousand year reign of Jesus after His return and before the final judgment.

The millennium is **not**, however, the final, eternal order of things. Revelation 20:7-15 shows that Satan will be released to incite yet another

rebellion at the end of this period. Then God will judge Satan and consign him to the lake of fire — and everyone whose name is not in the Book of Life. After this, the new heavens and new earth will be established and the eternal order of things consummated (Revelation 21).

## Objections to the Millennium

### Objection #1

#### Why a Literal Thousand Years?

Although the issue is cut and dried for those who take Revelation 20 literally, there continue to be numerous objections to the doctrine of the millennium. The most obvious one is that the "thousand years" in Revelation 20 ought not to be taken literally. It is argued that since Revelation has many passages that obviously are not literal, and that the term "thousand" is used elsewhere in the Bible figuratively to mean a "great period of time" (such as in 2 Peter 3:8) then it should not be taken literally here either.

There are, however, sound exegetical reasons to take the thousand years of Revelation 20 literally. For one, this time period begins and ends with a resurrection. A technical look at the grammar of this passage will show why this thousand years must happen after Christ's return.

Revelation 20:4 speaks of those who "came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years." In this passage, "came to life" is a translation of the Greek word *ezēsan*. This word is used in John 11:25, Revelation 2:8 & Romans 14:9 to refer to resurrection. In Revelation 20:5, *ezēsanō* is particularly referenced as the "first resurrection." The problem is that if *ezēsan* means something other than a bodily resurrection in verse 4, there is no clue in the context why it clearly means a literal resurrection in verse 5.<sup>1</sup> The phrase, "the rest of the dead did not come to life until . . ." links verse 5 with verse 4, with "the rest" experiencing after the thousand years what the others did before.

This means that the thousand years of Revelation 20 has to happen after a bodily resurrection of God's faithful saints, which rules out the millennium being the church age. There is also no indication in the text that "a thousand years" is to be taken figuratively. When 2 Peter 3:8 says that "one day is as a thousand years" to the Lord, it is obviously using the common figure of speech — simile. In showing what days are to the Lord relative to His eternal, timeless being, Peter uses a thousand years figuratively. It would not alter his

meaning had he said that a day was like **ten thousand years**. However, **Revelation 20** provides us with no such literary evidence of a figure of speech. Satan, Christ, the saints, the resurrection unto final judgement, etc., are all literal. If John meant, any long period of time, he gave us no evidence to that effect in the text. **Revelation 20** is not about what time is compared to God's eternal perspective, but time as it applies to literal people with whom God is dealing.

### Objection #2

**Has not the Church replaced Israel, making the idea of a 'Jewish' millennium incongruous?**

The most convenient way to dispose of many difficulties in interpreting Biblical prophecy has been the adoption of replacement theology – the claim that the church has replaced Israel and has inherited all of the promises given to national Israel. This usually also entails the spiritualizing of promises given to national Israel. If not spiritualized, they are deemed having been permanently forfeited because of Israel's rebellion. The conclusion for most who accept replacement theology: the Jews and national Israel have no place in God's plans and no particular significance in history or the end times.

This approach is problematic. The term Israel is used seventy one times in the New Testament and seventy of them refer to the Jews or the nation of Israel. The one exception is the proof text for those who see no particular prophetic significance for Israel. **Galatians 6:16** – *And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.* Paul is speaking of those of the new creation who are crucified with Christ. This includes regenerate Jews and Gentiles who have faith in Christ.

The usage here is similar to the distinction Paul makes in **Romans 2:28-29** and **Romans 9:6-8** between those who are physically descended from Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob and those who are the remnant of faith. This distinction did not begin at Pentecost with the birth of the church, but as **Romans 9** shows, was present under the Old Covenant. Nor does this distinction eradicate the significance of national Israel or ethnic Judaism. **Romans 9** begins with Paul's concern for the Jews and **Romans 3** begins with the advantages of the Jews. **Romans 11** is clearly about ethnic Israel and the attitude of humility the church should have toward the Jews. These verses do not teach that the church is Israel or that a Jewish Israel is forever outside of God's plans.

Consider **Romans 11:25**: *For I do*

*not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation, that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.* Who is partially hardened? – not the church, but ethnic Israel. The contrast with Gentiles makes that clear. **Romans 11:26** says, *And thus all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, 'The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob.'* Clearly (although this verse has a history of being subject to multiple, varied interpretations), Israel in verse 26 is the same as in verse 25 – ethnic Israel. Paul says that Israel's hardening is partial and temporary. He **did not** say that a complete hardening has happened forever – that Israel is now the Gentile church.<sup>2</sup>

Paul teaches in **Romans 11** that Gentiles have been grafted into a Jewish olive tree. This means those among the Gentiles who have faith in Messiah are joined to the remnant of faithful Israel to make up one new man (**Ephesians 2:15**). Yet Israel as a group still has an identity. For example, Paul preached to Jews in **Acts 13:16**, referring to them as men of Israel. In **Acts 28:20**, Paul referred to his arrest as for, the hope of Israel. Paul did not make it his habit to use Israel to mean church.

### Objection #3

**Is not the idea of a literal 'Jewish' millennium a later, historical development, unknown to the early church?**

Because the debate about this matter often involves positions that have been taken in church history, I have done some rather extensive research into the writings of the church fathers about it. The following section contains a brief description of the results of this study. It involves a number of names that may not be familiar to all my readers. I trust that the significance of this material can be appreciated by those who may not have a back ground in the study of church history.

Ironically, the idea that the millennium involves Jesus reigning from Jerusalem over a restored Israel led some in the fourth century to reject the previous millennial belief held by most church fathers. After Constantine (who in 322 AD became ruler of the entire Roman Empire) anti-semitism unfortunately became prevalent in the church. That an idea or practice was Jewish was all the reason it needed to be rejected.

For example, Eusebius (an influential, early church historian of the fourth century) quoted Constantine in

his address to the Nicene Council concerning separating Easter from the Jewish passover:

And first of all, it appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin, and are therefore, deservedly afflicted with blindness of soul . . . Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd . . . let us . . . withdraw ourselves from all participation in their baseness. . . For how should they be capable of forming a sound judgment, who, since their parricidal guilt in slaying their Lord have been subject to the direction, not of reason, but of unguided passion and are swayed by every impulse of the mad spirit that is in them? . . . strive and pray continually that the purity of your souls may not seem in anything to be sullied by fellowship with the customs of these most wicked men.<sup>3</sup>

This virulent denouncement of the Jews was over the fact that they kept the passover in obedience to what God had told them. Whatever the propriety of the church having the celebration of the resurrection separate from the Jewish passover, Constantine's reasoning was based on a hatred of anything that could be considered Jewish. Was it not he who was guilty of being guided more by passion than reason?

The fourth century church's treatment of the issue of the millennium was guided by similar passions. It seems that the third century Alexandrian, Origen, set the stage for the rejection of the church's millennial hope. Origen is known for allegorizing Scripture and combining Christianity with the philosophy of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. Historian Justo Gonzalez remarks, . . . it is also important to note that on many points Origen is more Platonist than Christian.<sup>4</sup> Though a brilliant man who was dedicated in his Christianity, Origen had many distorted teachings that when far afield from Biblical Christianity, including: two creations, the ultimate salvation of the devil, the pre-existence of souls, and other unusual doctrinal innovations.<sup>5</sup>

Origen was the first to denounce the doctrine of the millennium. For Origen the Chiliasts [believers in the millennium] were visionaries, deluded fools, and what was worse, literalists.<sup>6</sup> Origen spiritualized Biblical texts and devalued that which was material or of the body.

Origen wrote, Certain persons, then, refusing the labour of thinking, and adopting a superficial view of the letter of the

law, and yielding rather in some measure to the indulgence of their own desires and lusts, being disciples of the letter alone, are of opinion that the fulfillment of the promises of the future are to be looked for in bodily pleasure and luxury . . . And consequently they say, that after the resurrection there will be marriages, and the begetting of children, imagining to themselves that the earthly city of Jerusalem is to be rebuilt . . .<sup>7</sup>

The problem for him was the physical reality of an earthly millennium. He elaborates, ö . . . many other scriptural illustrations are adduced by them, the meaning of which they do not perceive is to be taken figuratively. . . Such are the view of those who, while believing in Christ, understand the divine Scriptures in a sort of Jewish sense, drawing from them nothing worthy of the divine promises.ö<sup>8</sup>

The öJewishö view was too literal thought Origen, and other subsequent fathers; but an allegorical interpretation that was inspired by Greek philosophy could save the promises from any physical realities that were considered unworthy of spiritual things. Eusebius felt that millennial promises ought to be understood mystically and chides Papias, a very early father, for teaching a literal millennium: öIn these [accounts he claimed to have received from unwritten tradition] he says there would be a certain millennium after the resurrection, and that there would be a corporeal reign of Christ on this very earth; which things he appears to have imagined, as if they were authorized by the apostolic narrations, not understanding correctly those matters which they propounded mystically in their representations.ö<sup>9</sup> He blames Papias for the fact that, ömost of the ecclesiastical writers, urging the antiquity of the man, were carried away by a similar opinion . . .ö<sup>10</sup>

Eusebius was right about one thing – that most of the earliest church fathers believed in a literal millennium. Bietenhard's excellent essay has a thorough description of the issue as addressed by the early church, the best I have found. He lists Papias, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, Irenaeus, the *Testament of Isaac*, Justin, and Tertullian as the earliest fathers who taught a literal millennium.<sup>11</sup> I checked his references with the primary sources and have found him completely accurate. These early writers did not agree on the details of life in the millennium and some held to a theory of ödaysö being a thousand years that supposedly enabled them to predict when history would end.<sup>12</sup> Yet they affirmed a millennial hope for the church.

It is true that some of the early fathers had fanciful ideas about what the millennium will be like. Sadly, rather than searching the Scriptures for the truth, the church adopted an allegorical method of Biblical interpretation that allowed the rejection of öJewishö literalism and the adoption of Christianized versions of ancient Greek philosophy.

Bietenhard comments on Nepos of Arisonoe: öHe attacked the allegorizing method of the Origenists and revived a true Chiliasm. This fact is highly significant, for it shows us that the exegetical choice was between allegorizing and the rejection of the millennium on the one hand, and literalism and Chiliasm on the other.ö<sup>13</sup> The allegorical method won the day and became the mainstay of what became historic Roman Catholicism.

A literal millennium was the teaching of the earliest historical church; but was later replaced as the church became more comfortable with the Roman Empire, Greek culture, and an a hope of success now, before the return of Christ. Like our present situation, the excesses and failed predictions of overly zealous öprophetsö or interpreters of Biblical prophecy led many to reject a futuristic fulfillment of millennial promises rather than search out the truth of the matter Biblically.

#### Objection #4

#### “Is not amillennialism the ‘classical’ teaching of the church?”

Amillennialism was developed primarily in the fourth century, after Constantine had Christianized the empire. Several writers such as Commodianus, Victorinus of Pettau, and Lactantius taught a literal millennium after the early fathers cited previously.<sup>14</sup> But Jerome, Tyconius, and finally Augustine were to decisively reject the millennium and replace it with an interpretation of Revelation 20 that made the present age the millennium.

According to Bietenhard, Jerome's reason for rejecting öChiliastsö was that they were too linked to Judaism: öFor Jerome Chiliasm and Judaism are identical. He removes the very foundation of Chiliasm by spiritualizing the Apocalypse [Revelation]. He hesitates to condemn the doctrine outright, for he can see that it was held by many Fathers. He himself, however, does not believe either in a millennial kingdom of Christ or in a restoration of Jerusalem and the Jews.ö<sup>15</sup> Jerome considered the millennium to be the time, öfrom the coming of Christ to the end of the age . . . the first resurrection is when the

soul comes from the death of sin to faith. . .ö<sup>16</sup> This paved the way for an interpretation of Revelation 20 that avoided a literal one thousand year time span after the return of Christ.

Tyconius put the millennium in this present age. The church age is the millennium and those born again in baptism are those who have partaken of the first resurrection. öHis [Tyconius'] view dominated the exegesis of Revelation 20 for the next 1300 years, mainly because Augustine took it over from his Donatist opponent and clothed it with his authority. In the form given it by Augustine it has had an influence which has persisted right up to the present time, especially in Roman Catholic circles.ö<sup>17</sup>

Having recently read Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*, I think that this radical change in belief had something to do with the belief in the minds of many that Christianity had triumphed over paganism and that Constantine was like a öMosesö who brought God's people into the promised land.<sup>18</sup> With persecution and martyrdom seemingly past, it was much easier to accept the idea that Satan was already bound and that Christians were living in a golden age of Christ's rule over the nations. Coupled with an anti-semitic perspective that seemed to explode in the church beginning with Constantine, a millennium that had anything to do with the Jews was off handedly rejected.

Augustine abandoned an eschatological understanding of Revelation 20 because of, ö . . . the wild exaggerations and far too crude ideas of the Chiliasts in their depicting of the millennium.ö<sup>19</sup> For him, Satan is bound throughout the church age. This teaching prevailed throughout the medieval period. I suppose one could therefore call amillennialism the öclassicalö view of the church; **but only if the teachers of the church for the first three hundred years of its life are ignored.** The historical circumstances show that the rejection of premillennialism was made on other than exegetical, Biblical grounds.

#### Conclusion

*öAnd so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, ‘Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?’ He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority’ö (Acts 1:6,7).*

These Jewish disciples had expected a restoration of national sovereignty to Israel when Messiah came. They had met Jesus the Messiah and now, after

His resurrection had vindicated His claims, they are asking Him about the restoration of Israel. Would the King of the Jews reign from Jerusalem in fulfillment of the promise made to David?

Jesus' answer was that the time was fixed by the Father and was not for them to know; but their job was to be His witnesses (verse 8) throughout the world. If there was never to be a restored kingdom, the time could not be fixed. There is no time or epoch for a non-existing event. Jesus did not tell them to abandon this hope or that the promises were to be spiritualized. He did not tell them that, Israel is about to become the church, so forget about a restored kingdom. If there never was to be such a restoration, Jesus' answer was terribly misleading; so much so as to be unworthy of Him who is God who cannot lie.

I believe that there will be a literal millennium, with Jesus fulfilling many yet unfulfilled Biblical promises. Until then we are to do as He commanded His disciples in the Great Commission (**Matthew 28:18-20**).

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#### End Notes

1. see George Eldon Ladd, A Commentary on the Revelation of John, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 1987 edition; 265-267, for a thorough discussion of this matter.

2. see Hal Lindsey, The Road to Holocaust (New York: Bantam, 1989) chapters 6-8.

3. Eusebius Pamphilus, The Life of Constantine, book III chapter 18.

4. Justo Gonzalez, The Story of Christianity Vol. 1, (New York: HarperCollins, 1984) 81.

5. *ibid.* 78-81.

6. Hans Bietenhard, "The Millennial Hope in the Early Church," The Scottish Journal of Theology, Vol. 6 (1953) 20.

7. Origen, de principiis, Book II chapter XI.2.

8. *ibid.*

9. Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book 3 chapter 39.

10. *ibid.*

11. *op. cit.*, Bietenhard, 12-16.

12. see for example, The Epistle of Barnabas, chapter 15.

13. *op. cit.*, Bietenhard, 22.

14. *ibid.* 24, 25.

15. *ibid.* 26.

16. *ibid.* 27.

17. *ibid.* 28.

18. in The Life of Constantine, Book II, chapters XI & XII he compares Constantine's battle with Licinius to Pharaoh and Moses, with Constantine even having a tabernacle of the cross likened to Moses' tent of meeting in which he received supernatural directions as to the course of the battle.

19. *op. cit.* Bietenhard, 29.