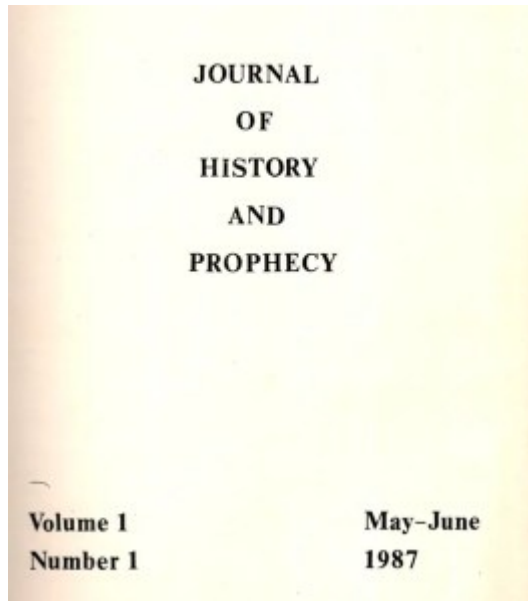


Premillennial Historicism by Dr. Oral Collins



My friend Ron Bullock sent me books that contain insightful articles about Bible prophecy based on the Historical School of interpretation, also known as Historicism. The article I am posting, from one of the books I am reading today, defends the doctrine of Millennialism, the literal reign of Jesus Christ on earth as revealed in Revelation, chapter 20. I always liked that doctrine but started to have doubts about it after I left Futurism for Historicism. However, according to the author of this article, Millennialism was taught *before* Darby and Scofield's futurism! This is very encouraging to me because I believe the prophecy in Isaiah chapter two is about Christ's millennial reign on earth.

Ron compiled the articles in the booklet in 1987. I didn't come out of Dispensationalism / Futurism until December of 2014. Debunking it is now one of the primary purposes of this website.

The following article is adapted from an address given by the author at a pastor's conference on prophecy. Dr. Collins is Professor of Biblical Studies at Berkshire Christian College. He is a graduate of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and holds the M.A. and Ph.D. degree in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies from Brandeis University.

INTRODUCTION

The term "premillennialism" does not belong to the futurists. It has been used for centuries within the historicist school.

What is premillennial historicism? **Historicism** holds a principle that biblical prophecy is a forecast of redemptive history. As such, it is

concerned with God's covenant people and their redemption, their opposition to evil and their mission to the world. Historicists have understood that the Gentile church is "grafted in" to Israel and that prophecy includes both national and spiritual Israel, both Israelite-Jewish history and the history of the church. The so-called "church-age" is therefore in the mainline of biblical prophecy. Premillennial historicism sees in prophecy an intermediate, millennial kingdom during which Christ will reign visibly over the nations of the world after his second advent.

In our search for truth regarding prophetic interpretation, careful exegesis must be our final court of appeal. But we approach the Word with nineteen centuries of prior interpretation. We should give due consideration to the works of godly and learned men.

THE HISTORY OF THE PREMILLENNIAL HISTORICIST SCHOOL

1. First three centuries. Although futurists lay claim to much the same ground, the church of the first three centuries was both historical and premillennial. A fundamental aspect of historicist interpretation is the recognition that the church age is an integral part of prophecy. It is not a parenthesis. The seventieth week in Daniel is connected to the sixty-ninth; and the events prophesied in Revelation chapters four and following began in the days of the early church. This was affirmed with a nearly unanimous voice.¹

The early church was also premillennial until the eschatological shift which occurred with the Constantinian revolution.² Rome, formerly viewed as Antichrist, then became the protector of the church. With a state church arose a new allegorized millennialism which taught that Christ already reigned and Satan was already bound by the church and its spread of the gospel. Eventually in A.D.373 Pope Damasus I and the Council of Rome formally condemned premillennialism and put it under a ban, from which it appears not to have escaped until the Protestant Reformation (Taylor, p.115).

2. The Dark Ages. With the establishment of the state church, the persecution of "heretics" gradually developed and evangelical dissenters went underground. In the period of the Dark Ages which followed, it is very difficult to determine with certainty the extent of premillennial doctrine. We have reason to believe, however, that evangelical dissenters from the state church like the Paulicians, at least from the seventh century, were premillennialists. We know them only from the writings of their opponents, who chose to caricature their views rather than address the questions directly.³

With the growing assimilation into the church of such Pagan customs as the worship of saints and images, expositors pointed to Roman institutions and the rising papacy as Antichrist. They often identified the little horn of Daniel seven, the man of lawlessness of Second Thessalonians two, and the ten-horned beast of Revelation thirteen with the predicted Antichrist of John's first epistle (2.18). The term antichrist came to be used in the dissenting churches in the specific sense of the Roman-papal ecclesiastical power. The papal antichrist doctrine was adopted by the Reformers and has

characterized most of the historicist interpretation of the Protestant churches through the end of the nineteenth century. The Reformers saw in the Reformation movement the fall of the antichrist and therefore looked eagerly for the end of the age.

3. Post Reformation. In the post-Reformation reconstruction of the seventeenth century, historicist expositors began to produce commentaries on the book of Revelation. At this point the pendulum swung sharply back to the premillennial view. Of great importance to the prophetic exposition of subsequent centuries was the work of Joseph Mede, *Clavis Apocalypticae*, "The Key to the Apocalypse" published in Latin in 1627."⁴

Of the 168 Protestant commentators cataloged by Leroy Froom, from the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, eleven were postmillennial, eight were amillennial, and 149 were premillennial. All in some way identified the Antichrist with Papal Rome.⁵ From the time that Joseph Mede published his commentary in 1627 until the turn of the 19th century, prophetic exposition was overwhelmingly premillennial historicist.

With the growth of the futurist movement, beginning to flourish near the end of the 19th century, and the preterist movement which rode the wake of higher criticism, the trend has shifted. Other factors were involved. No doubt the failure of several prophetic dates set with too much assurance by historicist interpreters turned some away from a literal approach to the more generalizing and spiritualizing methods of the preterists. Now, late in our century, a new amillennial historicism may be developing, borrowing elements from preterist and spiritualizing interpretations.

I believe, however, that literal interpretation and the Protestant premillennial-historicist consensus of nearly four centuries contributed substantially to the great movement of the post-Reformation and modern church to world evangelization, and to the resurgence of the Advent hope in the nineteenth century.

The renewed prophetic expectation of the restoration of Israel was foreseen in prophecy by leading premillennial historicists of the nineteenth century.⁶ They not only saw the return through a literal interpretation of prophecy, but some in high places who read these prophecies in this light used their influence politically to help secure a homeland for the restored Israel.⁷

THE PROGRESS OF INTERPRETATION IN THE PREMILLENNIAL HISTORICIST SCHOOL

1. The Medean Consensus. The concern for literal interpretation which produced the premillennial restoration of Mede (English scholar Joseph Mede (1586 – 1639) who wrote *Clavis Apocalyptica* Key of the Revelation Searched and Demonstrated) and his successors also resulted in a high degree of agreement within the school. The devout interpreter of prophecy should, I believe, always consider respectfully the deposit left to the church and offer reform or move in new directions only with godly reticence.

Limitations of time preclude our entering into a more detailed review, so I will make only a few more general observations. The first is that the outline

of Mede's analysis of the Apocalypse has been reflected in nearly all of subsequent interpretation within the school. Mede's position can be summarized briefly:

1. The antichrist power of the Apocalypse is the papal ecclesiastical system wielding temporal power for 1260 years (the beast under its eighth head and the harlot Babylon.)
2. The seals forecast the progressive decay and fall of Roman paganism as a political system.
3. The trumpets forecast the downfall of the old Roman Empire under the assaults of the barbarians.
4. The bowls forecast assaults against the papacy and its eventual fall.

The downfalls of the Roman system reflected in the above outline are, of course, viewed by Mede and his successors as divine judgments.⁸

Mede saw the bowl judgments as being fulfilled in his time through the progress of the Reformation. With the change which occurred in Roman Europe through the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, the leading expositors came to see the resulting loss of Papal temporal power as the true fulfillment of the earlier bowl judgments. This realignment resulted in the continuous-historicist view, in which the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls are understood to represent a continuous chronology within the structure of the book of Revelation. In this view, the sixth bowl represents the fall of the Ottoman Turkish Empire and the seventh some final judgment at the end time.

2. Continuous-Historicism. The premillennial historicist interpretation came to its classic expression in the work of E.B. Elliott, *Horae Apocalypticae* (five editions, 1844-1862). Perhaps the greatest student and writer of the continuous historicist school was H. Grattan Guinness. He wrote nine major scholarly works on prophecy between 1878 and 1905, published in many editions in both Britain and America. *The Approaching End of the Age* passed through fourteen editions. Guinness was also a great preacher, a missionary to several countries, and a great missionary educator.⁹

Another outstanding British expositor was E.P. Cachemaille. He was also an educator and secretary of the South American Missionary Society. His commentary, *The Visions of Daniel and the Revelation Explained*, was published in several editions starting in 1911. These books have never been updated, and they are so much in demand that they seldom appear in the catalogs of the second-hand book trade.

THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION OF THE PREMILLENNIAL HISTORICIST SCHOOL

The doctrine of the millennium is found principally in Revelation 20:1. The principal aspects of the millennial doctrine addressed in the above texts are: (1) the binding of Satan, (2) the promise of two resurrections, and (3) the concept of an intermediate, messianic kingdom between the present and the

eternal age.

1. A literal hermeneutic. The determination of the question of the millennium, as also of the restoration of Israel, rests with the literal method of hermeneutics. If biblical language, when due allowance is made for apocalyptic symbolism and figures of speech, is understood in its ordinary and natural sense, premillennial doctrine will emerge. Contrariwise amillennialism and postmillennialism require unnatural allegorizing of certain texts. In our brief review of the question, I will illustrate and defend this judgment.

2. The binding of Satan. Our text begins with the prediction of the binding of Satan (Rev.20.3). The language is clearly that of apocalyptic symbolism. Some of the symbols are familiar to the reader from earlier chapters of the book (especially chs. 12,13). If the reader allows the normal sense of the language, several conclusions should follow.

First the binding of Satan reverses the role of Satan described earlier in the book. Satan is "bound to keep him from deceiving the nations any more" (vs.3). In the symbolic language of the book, "Israel" denotes the people of God (14:1-4) and "the nations," Gentiles, are the unbelievers (see 13:3b,4,7,8,etc.). Deceiving the nations is precisely the role of Satan (the Dragon) in his war conducted through the Beast and the false prophet, "who had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast." The Beast and the false prophet are destroyed (19:20) and the dragon, Satan, is bound "to keep him from deceiving the nations any more" (20:3).

The normal sense of language requires that Satan's war of deception and his binding be consecutive events, not contemporaneous as Amillennialists affirm. This understanding is supported also by the imagery used to describe Satan's imprisonment. He is bound with "a great chain" and "locked and sealed" in the abyss (20:2), language inappropriate to denote partial limitation. Moreover Satan is prevented from deceiving unbelievers (the "nations"), not the elect, as amillennialism requires.

The question is not whether Satan is in any sense bound during the present Gospel age. Jesus does indeed speak of a binding of "the strong man," Satan, in connection with the work of the Spirit within chosen individuals in this age (Mt.13:29; Mk.3:27). Nevertheless, this use of the figure does not fit the language of Revelation 20:1-3.

3. Two literal resurrections. Revelation 20:4,5 speak of the millennial age as bounded by two resurrections: "They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.)" The second resurrection of "the rest of the dead" is referred to again in connection with the judgment in verse 13, where literal death and resurrection is required by the context. The question then must be asked whether the "first resurrection" may be figurative, as amillennialists and postmillennialists affirm.

The Bible does use the concept of resurrection figuratively of the regenerative work of the Spirit. Jesus speaks analogically of two

resurrections, metaphorically of the spiritual resurrection of the believers in this present age and literally of all men in the last day. The question is not whether it is possible so to speak of two resurrections in the same context in which one is figurative and the other literal, but rather whether this is what the language says in Revelation 20. In the text in question there is no analogy between literal and figurative resurrection.

The expression, "the rest of the dead" (vs.5), of necessity implies that the first resurrection is partial and that it is completed by the second. If the "rest of the dead," the second resurrection, are literally dead, grammatical exegesis requires a literal interpretation of the first resurrection.

The context also requires a literal first resurrection. The principal subjects of the first resurrection are "the souls of the martyrs and whoever had not worshipped the beast or his image nor received the mark on their forehead or their hand" (20:4, translation mine). The concept of martyrdom implies death resulting from their witness to Jesus, a concept inappropriate to describe those who might be spiritually dead, (i.e. unbelieving) and subject to spiritual resurrection. The same may be said with regard to their stated disassociation from the beast.

The literal approach to interpretation requires us to take such language in its normal sense. The significance of martyrdom and beast worship should then be seen from the preceding chapters in the book where during the Gospel age the Martyrs are the believers who have given their lives for their refusal to worship the beast (13:7,10,16; 14:4). With chapter 20, the beast is destroyed, Satan is bound, and the martyrs are raised to reign with Christ. The impossibility of the amillennial view can be seen in the supposed fact that the martyrs are "raised" in regeneration before their martyrdom.

The amillennial view of a resurrection of the righteous with the wicked must also adopt an unnatural view of other biblical texts which imply that the righteous will be raised separately from the wicked. Note Jesus' statement that only some "are considered worthy of taking part. . . . in the resurrection from the dead" (Luke 20:25). The language necessarily implies a partial resurrection. Some will not take part in it. Moreover, the expression "from the dead" implies that some will not be raised, the full translation being not "from the state of death," but "that which is out from among those who are dead." The concept of partial resurrection was the common Jewish concept familiar to Jesus' audience and the terminology was commonly used in that sense by the rabbis of his time.¹¹

The Apostle Paul in Philippians 3:10 states his purpose to know Christ and thereby "to attain to the resurrection from the dead." His use of the Greek language is peculiarly constructed to emphasize the partial nature of the resurrection, that only of the righteous dead, and thereby to heighten the effect of his statement. He repeats the definite article with the partitive preposition, alluding to the "out of resurrection" (*exanastasin*) as "out from among the dead", (*ek nekron*). Only by abandoning literal interpretation can this be taken to refer to a general resurrection of all the dead.

Several other texts refer to the resurrection of the righteous as a distinct

event (Dan.12:2; Lk.14:14; 1 Thess.4:16; 1 Cor.15:22,23). They serve further to support premillennial doctrine.

4. An intermediate kingdom. The third aspect of premillennial doctrine is the concept of an intermediate, messianic kingdom between the present and the eternal age. This kingdom is a limited time after the return of Christ when he rules over the nations of the world. The time may be a literal one thousand years or the number may be figurative. Is this concept foreign to the rest of Scripture as some opponents of the premillennial view suggest?

Many prophecies speak of a time when the nation of Israel will be glorified by the Lord among the nations of the world. Jerusalem will be exalted.

"I will bring health and healing to it; I will heal my people and let them enjoy abundant peace and security. I will bring Judah and Israel back from captivity and restore them as they were before. I will cleanse them from all the sins they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me. Then this city will bring me reknown, joy, praise, and honor before all nations on earth that hear of all the good things I do for it." (Jer. 33:6-9)

"Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the king, the LORD Almighty, and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. If any of the peoples of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the king, the LORD Almighty, they will have no rain." (Zech. 14:16,17).

These and many other prophecies predict a time still future when the Messiah will reign from a restored Jerusalem and in the midst of a cleansed and reunited Israel over the nations of the world. The nations are viewed as recognizing Christ's sovereignty while at the same time they are not beyond disobedience or rebellion (Is. 54:13-17; 60:10-12). Revelation 20:6 states that God's covenant people "will be priests of God and of Christ." This probably should be read as an allusion to Isaiah's prophecy in 61:6:

You will be called priests of the LORD,
You will be named ministers of our God.
You will feed on the wealth of the nations,
And in their riches you will boast.

The millennial reign of Revelation 20 reflects the teaching of the Old Testament prophecies which hold up the glories and blessedness of the of the Messianic reign as the antidote to the suffering of God's people. The prediction of tribulation and martyrdom in the church parallels the earlier sufferings of the faithful in Israel. The millennial prophecy reiterates in explicit messianic terms the biblical hope earlier proclaimed by the Old Testament prophets. At the same time it reaffirms the sovereignty of Christ in the temporal order of nations-"that all rulers will worship and obey him" (Dan. 7:28).

CONCLUSION

The premillennial historicist view is the alternative to a spiritualizing or allegorical approach; it preserves in a systematic manner the true and natural sense of prophecy. The preponderance of biblical interpreters from apostolic times in the early church and in Protestantism have been convinced that the premillennial historicist understanding of prophecy is not only supported by the last book of the Bible but results from the literal method of interpretation as applied systematically to the whole of biblical revelation.

** NOTES **

1. The exception seems to have been the African bishop, Hippolytus, who according to Jerome ended the 69th week with the birth of Christ and started the seventieth week at the time of the end of the world. E.B. Elliott, *Horae Apocalypticæ*, 4th edition, IV, 284, n.2 London, 1851.
2. See Daniel T. Taylor, *The Reign of Christ on Earth*, (Boston: H.L Hastings, 1893), pp. 76-109.
3. See Elliott's defense of the Paulicians as true evangelicals in *Horae Apocalypticæ*, II, 240-258, 286-332, esp. pp. 311-314.
4. The Berkshire Christian College library has a 1677 edition. Also at hand from the library of my colleague, Professor Carl F. Ehle, is a rare copy of the English translation of R. Bransby Cooper (London: Rivington, 1833)
5. Leroy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of our Fathers*, II (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1948), 786-787; III (1946) 252-253; IV (1954), 400-401.
6. Note especially Elliott IV, 45, 46, 122, 123, 239, 240; H.G. Guinness, *The Approaching End of the Age* (New York: Armstrong, 1884) pp. 435-436; *History Unveiling Prophecy* (New York: Revell, 1905) pp. 360-392.
7. See Carl F. Ehle, Jr., *Prolegomena to Christian Zionism in America* (Diss., New York University., 1977).
8. Joseph Mede, *A Key to the Apocalypse*, trans. R. Bransby Cooper (London: Rivington, 1833).
9. W.B. Owen, "Henry Grattan Guinness, "Dictionary of National Biography: Supplement (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1920), pp. 165-176.
10. The first edition appeared under the title XXVI *Present Day Papers on Prophecy: An Explanation of the Visions of Daniel and of the Continuous-Historic System* (London: Seeley, Service, 1911). The work was subsequently reissued by the same publisher as *The Visions of Daniel and Revelation Explained*. One chapter is "A Survey of Ezekiel XXXVI to XLVIII."

11. Nathaniel West, *The Thousand Years in Both Testaments* (Chicago: Revell, 1888), pp. 349-378, especially p. 370; George Foot Moore, *Judaism*, (Cambridge: Harvard Univ., 1966), II, 297-298.