

Church and Theology

Where the Bible and the Local Church Meet

Studies in the Book of Daniel¹

#4—Three Millennial Systems

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The subject of frequent abuse and widespread disagreement, sadly neglected throughout most of the history of the Church, always fascinating—biblical prophecy is at the core of God’s written revelation. Far from being icing on the cake and a topic of marginal value (some evangelical seminaries essentially avoid the subject), the Bible’s description of things to come has its roots in the plan of God for the ages. Understanding the purpose of God in human history and unraveling prophecy not yet fulfilled are complementary tasks.

Needless to say, prophecy that has not yet come to pass is only a portion of the totality of biblical predictive material. Fulfillments have occurred at different times and at varying distances from the time of utterance. For example, some of the prophecies in the book of Daniel were fulfilled within the time covered by the events of the book itself (e.g., the fall of Babylon), some within the inter-testamental period (the rise of the Greek and Roman Empires) and some during New Testament times (the Roman destruction of Jerusalem). Some have not been fulfilled even by our day. A discussion of all biblical prophecies and their fulfillment would demand a very large volume. The area of theology that deals with events that have not yet taken place is called eschatology, or the doctrine of last things (*eschatos* in Greek means ‘last’). Most students of the Bible agree that the details yet to take place will bring human history as we know it to a close. In this sense, unfulfilled prophecy describes final or last events.

For several reasons, the kingdom promised to Israel is a key issue in biblical prophecy. It is portrayed as a goal of God’s activity among human beings, the culmination of the agonizing progress of the ages. Further, as far as interpretation is concerned, it is the watershed of three currently competing and major systems of approaching the Bible espoused by theological conservatives—amillennialism and postmillennialism on the one hand, and premillennialism on the other. We are fully justified, then, in saying that the issue of the kingdom is important not only for the interpretation of prophecy, but also for our understanding of the Scriptures as a whole. Put another way, if you were to ask a person what he believed about the kingdom, the answer would enable you to anticipate many of his views on the rest of the Bible.

This study will provide condensed background for understanding Nebuchadnezzar’s statue vision in Daniel 2. We will focus on the Messianic Kingdom that is predicted in the OT and NT. That term is actually not used anywhere in the Bible, but even though different words are used to describe it, there is agreement among most Bible interpreters that there is something that can be called a Kingdom that is associated with the Lord Jesus Christ.

We will look at the three major views of the Kingdom that are held by people in the conservative Christian world today. In the next study we will see how some of the key features of the systems fit or don’t fit with the statue vision. Actually, some of the systems are falsified by the statue! We will see that these three systems involve far-reaching issues, such as the relative timing of the return of Christ, the place of Israel vis-à-vis the Church today and since the first century, and the nature of the expectations that Christians can or should have concerning God’s unfolding of history to come—and there are many other connections.

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We will see that the systems differ most basically in where they place the return of Christ to the earth and what he is returning to. All agree that Jesus will return, but where will that event come in relation to other prophesied events and even in relation to events that have already occurred?

Here are some preliminary definitions that we need in order to get started:

1. Millennium—a thousand-year period (can refer to any such period , biblical or otherwise).
2. Millennial—having to do with a period of a thousand years.
3. Millennialism—a position that espouses a millennium.
4. Chiliasm—belief in a thousand-year kingdom, on earth or otherwise (but usually a chiliast believes in a thousand-year earthly kingdom); it has the same meaning as millennialism.
5. Kingdom—a sphere of God’s rule as a king; may describe the whole universe, a spiritual rule, or an earthly rule.

The study of or the belief in a kingdom is sometimes referred to as ‘chiliasm,’ a word taken from the Greek word for thousand. The number 1,000 occurs in Rev. 20, but not all of the three views we will study see the kingdom as 1,000 years in length. The word millennium is taken from the Latin word for 1,000. Thus, the name of each system consists of a prefix on *-mill*, meaning 1,000, as follows:

<u>System name</u>	<u>English word division</u>	<u>Meaning of components</u>
postmillennial	post-millennial	after 1000 years
amillennial	a-millennial	no 1000 years
premillennial	pre-millennial	before 1000 years

You can see that these three terms are not really parallel with regard to the nature of what Jesus returns to. ‘Postmillennial’ means that Jesus will return after a 1,000-year period. Notice that ‘amillennial’ does not describe the relation of Jesus’ return to the time of the kingdom; it says that there will be no Kingdom at all on earth as a special time of blessing with Jesus present. ‘Premillennial’ means that Jesus will come *pre-* or before a kingdom on earth.

Just as important as the details of the three systems is the manner in which they have arrived at their conclusions. This constitutes their assumptions about how to interpret the Bible, what we call biblical hermeneutics. If you look up ‘hermeneutic’ you’ll find that it means the study of principles of interpreting a document.

If you are listening to this study online, you may want to look at timeline charts that are available if you search on any two of the views, e.g., “postmillennialism and premillennialism.” Or you could search on “millennial views” and look for graphics. Most of what you will find is reliable, but not everything is.

1. Postmillennialism

Although this is not a view that is widely held today, we will describe it for purposes of distinguishing it from amillennialism and premillennialism. The essence of this view is that there is a period of special blessing from God, a millennium, on the earth during the present age. The length of the time of blessing varies within this position, and a definite thousand-year period is not essential to it. The Church is responsible for bringing in an age of unprecedented prosperity and spiritual health. At the end of this time, Christ will return. His coming is thus *post* or after the millennium. Interestingly enough, Christ is not visibly present on the earth during this time. If the period is considered in any sense a kingdom, then the King misses his kingdom! As a system of interpretation, postmillennialism does not allow literal fulfillment of OT prophecies of a kingdom for Israel on earth. Instead, such predictions are given meanings other than those that would be assigned if they were taken at face value. This enables postmillennialists to apply them to the Church Age. Postmillennialism is very

similar to amillennialism in its approach to OT kingdom promises. Because it does not fit the facts of history—we are obviously not in and have never been in such a golden age—postmillennialism has declined from the position of favor it enjoyed at the beginning of the 20th century.

At the heart of postmillennialism is the assumption that the gospel will progress and triumph during this age, leading to a golden time on earth, followed by the second advent. Here are some more key features (there is variation in some of these among postmillennialists):

1. Christianity will flourish until Jesus returns under the mustard seed and leaven principles. Humanity gets better and better. After Jesus returns, the dead of all ages are raised and judgment and the eternal state follow.
2. There is no literal fulfillment of OT passages concerning the promises to Abraham for land, large progeny and spiritual blessing for the earth through his descendants. The OT predictions of blessing for Israel are transferred to the Church Age and particularly the golden time just before Jesus returns. This is a central feature of the hermeneutic of this position.
3. Satan is bound during the golden time.
4. Some postmillennialists take the 1,000 years of Rev. 20 literally, some symbolically (i.e., a period of indeterminate length).
5. Postmillennialism views the events of Rev. 6-18 as fulfilled in the persecutions of the Church in the last few years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. This results in very odd interpretations of the details of those chapters, since they are all completed and all apply to the trials of Christians during that time.
6. The kingdom is actually a time of blessing for the earth during the time following the period of trial in the first century. Keep in mind that while in Dan. 2 Nebuchadnezzar's statue is destroyed quickly and God's Kingdom follows, postmillennialism has their time of blessing come in gradually, over a long period of time.

Postmillennialism probably has the fewest adherents among the three views. It was popular 120 years ago, but lost supporters due the horrors of the First World War. It appears, though, to be having something of a resurgence in the early part of the 21st century. The home-school movement of the 20th and 21st centuries was strongly influenced by postmillennialists, among them Rousas Rushdoony, Gary North, Kenneth Gentry, and Greg Bahnsen.

2. Amillennialism

Held by many evangelicals, including Reformed churches in general, it is the position of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as many Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Southern Baptists. Our discussion in this study will center on the Protestant versions of it. As implied by the name, it is essentially negative. Here are some of its features:

1. There will be no literal kingdom on earth with Christ reigning over it (the *a* prefix indicates the denial of a millennium). Strictly speaking, the name is not quite accurate, since a kingdom of unspecified length is allowed for. But what is denied is a visible, physical kingdom with Christ present.
2. Promises to Israel of a future time of blessing on earth are viewed as absorbed by the Church. In doing this, amillennialists are said to 'spiritualize' the promises.
3. According to amillennialists, we are in the kingdom in some way right now. Some see the kingdom as Christ ruling in the hearts of Christians, others see him ruling from heaven invisibly. Christ will return after the Church Age has run its course, and subsequently the "eternal state" will begin.
4. Many amillennialists see a tribulation period at the end of the present age, but, in any case, the creation of the new heavens and new earth (Rev. 21:1) could not be far away from any point during this present

age. The return of Christ is his coming to resurrect the dead of all ages, to judge the unsaved dead and to usher in the joy of the redeemed in the presence of God.

5.

2. Premillennialism

I have long held that premillennialism is the most biblically accurate system. Here are the key features:

1. The essence of this position is that the second advent of Christ will occur at the end of the present age, after which he will establish a physical kingdom on earth, over which he will reign as King. He will set up his rule subsequent to his return. This thousand-year reign will be followed by judgements, the re-creation of the universe and the unhindered fellowship of the redeemed of all ages with God.
2. The Kingdom will be populated by saved Gentiles and by a large number of Jews, who will have been regathered prior to this. The Kingdom will fulfill the OT promises of blessing for Israel in the land.
3. The belief in a physical return of Christ is, of course, shared with amillennialism and postmillennialism. However, connected with that return will be another appearance, one having the specific purpose of removing the Church from the earth before the tribulation period, which is for Israel. There are four main views on that lesser coming, or *rapture*, and they will be discussed in a subsequent study.
4. There is little question among historians that premillennialism was the view of the early Church, which believed that Christ could come at any moment to establish his kingdom. Even if it were new (as some assert) there would not be a problem, since many doctrines have been unsettled in the Church for long periods of time. The goal of all Bible interpreters should be to find out what the Bible actually says.
5. Dispensationalism (think Scofield Bible, Dallas Seminary) is premillennial in its view of the kingdom, but there are other premillennialists. In other words, all dispensationalists are premillennialists, but not all premillennialists are dispensationalists. Thus, there are some premillennialists who hold that there will be a future millennium inaugurated by the second advent, but the kingdom will not have a strong Jewish character because there will be no national regathering of Jews to populate the kingdom. This position is usually called 'historic premillennialism,' because it was held in the early Church. In this view, the rapture and second coming essentially occur together, because the believers during this age will go through the tribulation, which is not primarily for Israel. On some diagrams this is represented by coinciding up and down arrows.

In conclusion, a simple summary:

Postmillennialism holds that Jesus will return *after* a physical kingdom is established on earth.

Amillennialism holds that there is *no* physical kingdom on earth at all.

Premillennialism holds that Jesus will return *before* and in order to set up his physical kingdom.

We will compare these views with the statue and its parts in the next study.

Questions for further study

1. What are some of the beliefs that the three systems have in common?
2. What do postmillennialism and amillennialism have in common?
2. What is the place of the promises to Abraham in each system?

Addendum: A Self-Study Project

Reading key passages at face value

Here are several key or test passages that describe a future time for Israel. For each of these passages, please think about what your initial impression is of the future for Israel that is presented. As much as you are able, attempt to put aside what you already think about the fulfillment of prophecy associated with these passages. I suggest what appears to be obvious; you can fill in details from what you observe.

Zechariah 12:1-14:21 (excerpts)

This passage appears to be giving sequential events concerning a large-scale conversion of Jews with accompanying war and the appearance of the Lord on the Mount of Olives, followed by the rule of the Lord Almighty as a King in Jerusalem.

12 This is the word of the Lord concerning Israel. The Lord, who stretches out the heavens, who lays the foundation of the earth, and who forms the spirit of man within him, declares: ²“I am going to make Jerusalem a cup that sends all the surrounding peoples reeling. Judah will be besieged as well as Jerusalem. ³ On that day, when all the nations of the earth are gathered against her, I will make Jerusalem an immovable rock for all the nations. All who try to move it will injure themselves. ⁴ On that day I will strike every horse with panic and its rider with madness,” declares the Lord. “I will keep a watchful eye over the house of Judah, but I will blind all the horses of the nations. ⁵ Then the leaders of Judah will say in their hearts, ‘The people of Jerusalem are strong, because the Lord Almighty is their God.’

⁶“On that day I will make the leaders of Judah like a firepot in a woodpile, like a flaming torch among sheaves. They will consume right and left all the surrounding peoples, but Jerusalem will remain intact in her place.

⁷ “The Lord will save the dwellings of Judah first, so that the honor of the house of David and of Jerusalem’s inhabitants may not be greater than that of Judah. ⁸ On that day the Lord will shield those who live in Jerusalem, so that the feeblest among them will be like David, and the house of David will be like God, like the Angel of the Lord going before them. ⁹ On that day I will set out to destroy all the nations that attack Jerusalem.

¹⁰ “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. ¹¹ On that day the weeping in Jerusalem will be great, like the weeping of Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. ¹² The land will mourn, each clan by itself, with their wives by themselves: the clan of the house of David and their wives, the clan of the house of Nathan and their wives, ¹³ the clan of the house of Levi and their wives, the clan of Shimei and their wives, ¹⁴ and all the rest of the clans and their wives.

13 ”On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity. ²“On that day, I will banish the names of the idols from the land, and they will be remembered no more,” declares the Lord Almighty. “I will remove both the prophets and the spirit of impurity from the land. . . . ⁸ In the whole land,” declares the Lord, “two-thirds will be struck down and perish; yet one-third will be left in it. ⁹ This third I will bring into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The Lord is our God.’ “

14 A day of the Lord is coming when your plunder will be divided among you. ² I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem to fight against it; the city will be captured, the houses ransacked, and the women raped. Half of the city will go into exile, but the rest of the people will not be taken from the city. ³

Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights in the day of battle. ⁴ On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south. ⁵ You will flee by my mountain valley, for it will extend to Azel. You will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him. ⁶ On that day there will be no light, no cold or frost. ⁷ It will be a unique day, without daytime or nighttime—a day known to the Lord. When evening comes, there will be light. ⁸ On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea and half to the western sea, in summer and in winter. ⁹ The Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and his name the only name. ¹⁰ The whole land, from Geba to Rimmon, south of Jerusalem, will become like the Arabah. But Jerusalem will be raised up and remain in its place, from the Benjamin Gate to the site of the First Gate, to the Corner Gate, and from the Tower of Hananel to the royal winepresses. ¹¹ It will be inhabited; never again will it be destroyed. Jerusalem will be secure. . . . ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ If the Egyptian people do not go up and take part, they will have no rain. The Lord will bring on them the plague he inflicts on the nations that do not go up to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. ¹⁹ This will be the punishment of Egypt and the punishment of all the nations that do not go up to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. ²⁰ On that day holy to the Lord will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the Lord's house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar. ²¹ Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the Lord Almighty, and all who come to sacrifice will take some of the pots and cook in them. And on that day there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the Lord Almighty.

Isa. 2:2-5

This passage appears to teach the centrality of Jerusalem in “the last days.”

2 This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem: ² In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. ³ Many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.” The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ⁴ He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.

Jer. 31:35-40

This passage appears to teach the fulfillment of God's promises of an eternal Jerusalem based on his sovereign power.

³⁵ This is what the LORD says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—the LORD Almighty is his name: ³⁶ “Only if these decrees vanish from my sight,” declares the LORD, “will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me.” ³⁷ This is what the LORD says: “Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done,” declares the LORD. ³⁸ “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when this city will be rebuilt for me from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate. ³⁹ The measuring line will stretch from there straight to the hill of Gareb and then turn to Goah. ⁴⁰ The whole valley where dead bodies and ashes are thrown, and all the terraces out to the Kidron Valley on the east as far as the corner of the Horse Gate, will be holy to the LORD. The city will never again be uprooted or demolished.”

Rom. 11:11-32

This key NT passage appears to teach a large-scale conversion of Jews after the conversion of a large number of Jews.

²⁵ I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: “The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. ²⁷ And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”

²⁸ As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, ²⁹ for God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable. ³⁰ Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, ³¹ so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God’s mercy to you. ³² For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.

Rev. 20:1-8

This passage appears to present a time period of a particular length with several connected events occurring before during and after that period. How many times does the phrase ‘thousand years’ occur?

²⁰ And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. ² He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. ³ He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.

⁴ I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. ⁵ (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. ⁶ Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

⁷ When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison ⁸ and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—and to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. ⁹ They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God’s people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. ¹⁰ And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.