

Thy Kingdom Come

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Do we have to be Premillennial?

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ABSTRACT:

Many Premillennialists believe that Premillennialism alone establishes a proper biblical foundation for establishing a future hope for the Jewish people. Historically, however, some Amillennialists and Postmillennialists have also believed in a bright future for the nation of Israel. Furthermore, though Premillennialism insists on a literalistic hermeneutic, Premillennialists tend to be selectively literalistic in their interpretation of the words of Scripture in general and the words of Jesus in particular. While Premillennialists are, in the main, committed to obeying the Great Commission, there is a tendency to be pessimistic about the future.

This paper addresses the following questions of Premillennialism: Does one have to be Premillennial to hold a future hope for Israel? Does one have to be Premillennial to rightly understand the Bible? Does one have to be Premillennial to rightly understand words of Jesus? Does one have to be Premillennial to rightly understand the Great Commission with a view to encouraging an optimistic, as opposed to a pessimistic, view of the future?

INTRODUCTION

I became a Christian in a denomination that preached Jesus as ‘Saviour, Healer, Baptiser in the Holy Spirit and Coming King.’ The Second Advent was part of the gospel we preached and until I went to study at the denomination’s Bible College in 1971 I’m not sure I was aware of any other way of thinking about the Second Advent other than as a Premillennial event. At college I learned that Amillennialism was pretty much Liberalism, that Postmillennialism was the domain of a tiny group of cranks and that Preterism was so ridiculous that only hardcore theological Liberals subscribed to it.

In my early years as a believer, two subjects dominated my thinking: creation and the future, and I devoured books on prophecy, including the classic *Things to Come* by J Dwight Pentecost

and, of course, Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* and I was able to critique with little difficulty the few A-mill works that came into my hands. In fact, forty years ago I knew everything there was to know about biblical prophecy. All I know for sure about the End Times now is how *little* I know.

The Basis of Faith of Christian Witness to Israel, the mission with which I work, is the consensus of the Protestant Reformed Confessions. There being no consensus on eschatology, CWI allows its workers to embrace whatever position they believe is taught in Scripture. Premillennialists, Postmillennialists and Amillennialists work with CWI but I can’t recall a single argument ever taking place between any members of staff over anything

relating to the End Times. Our primary focus as a mission is the proclamation of the gospel to Jewish people.

In 1983, when I was invited to work with CWI, the classic Premillennialist position I held was not seen as an issue. However, although I identified as a Premillennialist, for some time I had been privately questioning the position. Although I no longer describe myself as a Premillennialist, I continue to respect those who do and it is not my purpose in this paper to attack my more learned brethren who have presented far more erudite papers than this one. Nor is it my intention to state my own position, which I'm not sure fits comfortably into any of the standard frameworks. I simply wish to put forward a question: Do we have to be Premillennial in order to understand the Kingdom of God?

For most people at this conference, the question is a no-brainer. Some months ago, a pastor who was interested in having me speak at his church called to ask me some questions. Actually, he had only one question: 'Are you Premillennial?' When I asked if it would matter if I wasn't, the reply was, 'Yes.' For the pastor, it didn't matter how faithfully I evangelised the Jewish people; if I was not a Premillennialist I was suspect. In fairness to him when we met face-to-face he bought me a very nice lunch and opened his pulpit to me!

THE STRENGTH OF PREMILLENNIALISM

The great strength of Premillennialism is that it seeks to take the Bible literally. I seriously doubt that a liberal theologian could be Premillennial. Nevertheless, just because someone is not Premillennial – be they Amillennial,

Postmillennial or even Preterist – does not, by default, make them liberal.

Throughout history, great men of God have held to the three main schools of prophetic understanding and there needs to be an attitude of mutual respect for those with whom we differ. That is not to say there cannot be disputes – indeed there should be disputes – but in my arguments with a well-known evangelical anti-Christian Zionist author, I have reminded him that he has more in common with the Dispensationalists and extreme Christian Zionists he opposes than he does with the liberal theologians, radical Muslims, anti-Semites, Holocaust deniers, and anti-Christians with whom he frequently shares platforms in order to denounce Israel and Christian Zionists.

My brief in this paper is to present an alternative understanding of the Kingdom of God to the Dispensational/Premillennial positions held by the other speakers. I wish, therefore to apply the question 'Do we have to be Premillennial?' to the themes of four of the other papers. Do we have to be Premillennial to believe Israel has a future hope? Do we have to be Premillennial to interpret the Bible properly? Do we have to be Premillennial to understand the words of Jesus properly? Do we have to be Premillennial to be serious about the Great Commission?

THE HOPE OF ISRAEL

Before Premillennialism became as popular as it is today and before Dispensationalism existed as the complex system it now is, there existed (and still does exist) a hope for the national and spiritual restoration of the Jewish nation among Christians. For example, Question 191 of *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, compiled

in 1648, asks what is meant by the second petition of the Lord's Prayer: 'Thy kingdom come.' The answer given is: 'In the second petition . . . acknowledging ourselves and all mankind to be by nature under the dominion of sin and Satan, we pray, that the kingdom of sin and Satan may be destroyed, the gospel propagated throughout the world, *the Jews called*, the fullness of the Gentiles brought in . . .'

In his massive seven-volume commentary on Hebrews, the Postmillennial English Puritan John Owen (1616-1683) wrote: 'There are many promises on record in the Scripture concerning their [the Jews] gathering together, their return to God by the Messiah, with the great peace and glory that shall ensue thereupon... *Return they shall to their own land, to enjoy it for a quiet and everlasting possession*, their adversaries being destroyed; filled they shall be also with the light and knowledge of the will and worship of God, so as to be a guide and blessing to the residue of the Gentiles who shall seek after the Lord; and, it may be, be entrusted with great empire and rule in the world.' (*Hebrews*, Vol. 1, p. 445. Emphasis added.)

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) the Postmillennial New England Puritan, wrote: '*The Jews shall return to their own land . . . [they] shall . . . flow together to the blessed Jesus, penitently, humbly, and joyfully owning him as their glorious king and only saviour*, and shall with all their hearts as with one heart and voice declare his praises unto other nations...' ('A History of the Work of Redemption' in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1, p. 607. Emphasis added.).

In the preface to his 1968 book *The Restoration of Israel*, Postmillennialist Erroll Hulse wrote: 'The territorial restoration of the ancient land of Israel to the Jewish people . . .

has involved a series of events which even non-religious people describe as miraculous . . . The conviction that these events form the prelude to a much greater miracle – the conversion of the Jewish people to New Testament Christianity – has resulted in this book.' (Erroll Hulse, *The Restoration of Israel*, p.5.)

Amillennialist D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones told *Christianity Today* in 1980: 'Luke 21:43 is one of the most significant prophetic verses: "Jerusalem," it reads, "shall be trodden down of the Gentiles until the time of the Gentiles be fulfilled." It seems to me that that took place in 1967 — something crucially important that had not occurred in 2,000 years . . .'

In his sermons on Romans 11, Lloyd-Jones stated that at some future point, 'the bulk of the nation of Israel shall be converted to Christ.' (*Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 11*, p. 91.)

Vern Poythress, another Amillennialist, believes 'Jesus will return bodily to the world, that all people will be judged, and that the earth itself will be renewed, Jesus will reign over the nations and usher in an era of great peace and prosperity. Faithful Jews will possess the land of Palestine [sic!], as well as the entirety of the renewed earth.

Though not all Amillennialists and Postmillennialists hold such positive future hopes for Israel – geographical and/or spiritual – these quotations demonstrate that a non-millennarian theology does not necessarily exclude the Jewish nation from future blessing. Iain Murray's *The Puritan Hope* presents abundant evidence that among the seventeenth century postmillennial Puritans there was a widespread belief in the return of the Jewish people to their ancient homeland, after which they would turn to their Messiah.

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Premillennialism claims to be founded on a strictly literalistic hermeneutic. In other words, Premillennialism claims that the right way to understand the Bible is to read it ‘literally’ unless the context dictates otherwise. But is it possible to apply a consistent strict literalism to our interpretation of the Bible? For example, does any Premillennialist believe that *literal* stars will one day *literally* fall from a *literal* heaven? Or that the *literal* moon will turn *literal* blood? Or that the *literal* sun will turn black? Or that the *literal* heavens be *literally* be rolled up like a scroll?

In his commentary *The Revelation Record*, Henry Morris attempts a consistently literal approach to the interpretation of the book of Revelation: ‘I have tried to follow a strictly literal and sequential approach to the events narrated, on the assumption that the *best* interpretation of a historical record is *no* interpretation . . . Although many other writers have also tried to follow such an approach, the student may well find this to be the most literal approach he has encountered . . .’ (Henry M. Morris, *The Revelation Record*, pp. 13,14.). But when Morris reaches verse 4 of the book, he has to explain that the ‘seven spirits’ are really the one Holy Spirit.

Premillennialism tends to be selectively ‘literal’ in its interpretation of the Bible. For example, after 2,000 years, how much longer can we continue to say that we are *literally* in ‘the last days’ or that we are the ‘final generation’? If words mean anything, the term ‘last days’ must signify a relatively short space of time; at the very least considerably less than two millennia.

In 1970, Hal Lindsey cautiously suggested

that the Lord might return around the year 1988. Commenting on Matthew 24: 34 – ‘This generation will not pass away until all these things take place’ – Lindsey wrote: ‘. . . in context, [‘this generation’ is] the generation that would see the signs — chief among them being the rebirth of Israel. A generation in the Bible is something like forty years. If this is a correct deduction, then within forty years or so of 1948, all these things could take place.’ (Hal Lindsey with C. C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, p.54.)

By 1980, Lindsey was far less cautious: ‘But what generation was Jesus talking about? ...He could only have meant the generation that would see the prophetic predictions come together... WE ARE THE GENERATION HE WAS TALKING ABOUT!’ (Hal Lindsey, *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon*, p.162. Capitalisation in the original.)

The term ‘This generation’ occurs six times in Matthew’s Gospel (11:16; 12:41, 42, 45; 23:36 and 24:34) and I know of no reputable scholar who disputes that the first five of those references are to the ‘generation’ alive at the time Jesus was speaking. Why then does the final ‘this generation’ in Matthew’s Gospel suddenly become ‘this people’ or ‘this race’?

The disciples had asked the Lord for the signs of ‘the end of the age’ and his Parousia. ‘Imagine,’ says J. Stuart Russell in his virtually forgotten classic *The Parousia*, ‘a prophet in our own times predicting a great catastrophe in which London would be destroyed, St. Paul’s and the Houses of Parliament levelled with the ground, and a fearful slaughter of the inhabitants be perpetrated; and that when asked, “When shall these things come to pass?” he should reply, “The Anglo-Saxon race shall not become extinct till all these things be fulfilled!”’ (J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia*, p. 87.)

Though he died in 1992, Barry Smith continues to be revered in certain circles as a no-nonsense, tell-it-like-it-is Bible teacher and his books, CDs and DVDs on prophecy still sell. But in 1984, at a series of meetings at Papatoetoe Baptist Church in Auckland, New Zealand, Smith stated categorically that Henry Kissinger was the Antichrist and that the world was about to go 'cashless,' thus inaugurating the Mark of the Beast. Moreover, Smith stated, without presenting any evidence, that a biblical generation is 50 years and declared that 'the rabbis in Jerusalem' had just announced that their Messiah was going to 'return in 1998'!

What happens when the predictions (albeit based on biblical texts) of prophecy experts such as Lindsey and Smith fail to come to pass? In the 1990s, the editor of an American Messianic magazine justified making predictions that failed to materialise on the basis that people needed to be 'kept on their toes.'

If Hal Lindsey was correct and a biblical generation is forty years, Israel came into being as a sovereign state more than a generation-and-a-half ago. Even if Barry Smith's claim that a generation in the Bible is fifty years, the Lord's coming is overdue by almost half a generation. How much longer, then, can we continue to say we are 'literally' in 'the last days' or that we are literally 'the final generation'? According to Peter in Acts 2:17, he and his hearers were even at that time in 'the last days.' Hebrews 1:2 says God had 'spoken to us by his Son' in 'these last days,' while James 5:3 warns the unrighteous rich of his day that they had 'laid up treasure in the last days.'

Some thirty years after Peter stated that the tongues of the Day of Pentecost were a sign of the last days, John (the author of The Revelation) wrote in his first letter: 'Little children, it is *the last hour*, and as you have

heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore *we know it is the last hour*' (1 Jn 2:18). How is it that the world can move within the space of less than forty years from 'the last days' to 'the last hour' and then, 1,900 years later, be back in the last days?

The Revelation opens with the warning that the things revealed in the book must 'shortly come to pass . . . ' The Greek word *tachos* signifies 'speed'; it is the word from which we get our English words 'tachometer' and 'tachograph.' In the New Testament, especially in Revelation, *tachos* indicates something that is to happen soon or to be done soon (see: Luke 18:8; Acts 2:7; 22:18; 25:4; Rev 2:5, 16; 3:11; 11:14; 22:6,7,12,20). That is why the ESV translates Rev 1:1: ' . . . things that *must soon take place*.' Why then do literalist commentators not take *tachos* literally?

Revelation 1:1 actually indicates that the book is not to be understood literalistically. Jesus 'sent and signified [*eeseimenen*] it by his angel . . . ' The Greek word *semeio* is a 'sign'. To coin a phrase, Jesus '*sign-ified*' his revelation to John. The visions John saw were symbols of a greater reality just as each of the miracles recorded in John's Gospel was a 'sign' (*semeio*) of a higher reality.

Why do literalist commentators on The Revelation not interpret the very first verse literally? Why do they not recognise that the book consists of a series of 'signs' of things that were soon to affect the seven churches to whom John was instructed to write? Thus, by insisting on a literalist hermeneutic it can't apply consistently, Premillennialism's greatest strength ironically becomes its greatest weakness.

THE WORDS OF JESUS

Inconsistency of interpretation is not only a weakness of Premillennialists; Amillennialists and Postmillennialists also fail to take some of the sayings of Jesus relating to the Kingdom in a straightforward manner. We will take note of just four statements.

First, does any literalist take Matthew 10:23 at face value: ‘You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel *before the Son of man comes*’? Jesus makes the remarkable statement to his apostles that they will not have completed their evangelistic mission in Israel before ‘the coming of the Son of man,’ a phrase that has only one meaning in the New Testament; it is the standard formula for the Parousia, the second coming of Christ.

Secondly, consider Matthew 16:27-28: ‘For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Truly, I say to you, *there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.*’ The Greek text places the words *mellei gar* at the beginning of verse 27 for emphasis, so that a literal translation of the verse reads: ‘For the Son of Man *is about to come* with His angels in the glory of His Father . . .’ The coming of the Son of Man is impending but is not so close as to be confused with the resurrection of Christ, still less his transfiguration as some scholars suggest.

Thirdly, what about Matthew 24:34: ‘Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place?’ The Olivet discourse – as recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21 – is clearly addressed to the disciples in answer to their question regarding the time of the end of the age and, with it, the

return of the Lord. Jesus speaks of what *the disciples* will see, what *they* will do and how *they* will suffer. The Lord’s words are not addressed to an invisible audience in what was at that time a far distant future; the events he foretells will fall within the parameters of the apostles’ own observation and experience.

But what is a ‘generation’? Unlike a year, a decade or a century, a biblical ‘generation’ is not an exact measure of time. There is a certain indefiniteness or elasticity about the term but there are, nevertheless, certain limits to a generation. In the book of Numbers, for example, the ‘generation’ that provoked God to exclude them from the Promised Land, was to perish in the wilderness within the space of forty years. In biblical terms it would seem, therefore, that, a generation is about forty years, a conclusion supported by Psalm 95:10: ‘For forty years I loathed that generation . . .’

The messianic genealogy in Matthew 1 also confirms that a generation is about 40 years. Verse 17 states, ‘So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.’ The generally held date for the deportation to Babylon that took place in the reign of Zedekiah is 586BC. By dividing 586 by 14, we find that the average length of the fourteen generations was just over 41 years. Thus, according to Jesus, all the events – not some or even most of the events of which he warned the disciples on the Mount of Olives – would take place within the space of about four decades.

Finally, at his trial, in Matthew 26:63-64, after Jesus was put on oath by the high priest to declare to the court if he was ‘the Messiah, the Son of God,’ he replied, ‘You have said so. But I tell you, from now on *you will see the Son*

of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.'

The language implies that the persons Jesus addressed, or some of them at least, would witness the event he predicted. Taken at face value, would the expression 'You will see' not be improper if it referred to an event none of Jesus' hearers would live to witness and which would not take place for thousands of years in the future? If we read Matthew 26:63-64 literally, it is virtually impossible to imagine that Jesus was stating anything other than that that his judges would live to see him coming to judge them.

Space forbids a detailed exegesis of these verses, Suffice it to say that they were among a number of other verses that caused me to re-examine my own presuppositions about the return of Christ and the establishment of his Kingdom.

THE GREAT COMMISSION

Some years ago, after I concluded a presentation about the gospel ministry of Christian Witness to Israel, a troubled-looking lady approached me. 'I think you're working against the purposes of God,' she announced. If the mission for which I worked succeeded in 'getting all the Jews saved,' she said, they wouldn't go through the Great Tribulation. I could live with that, I told her. Probably thinking I was a little dense, she quoted a number of Bible verses relating to the unprecedented horrors she said the Jewish people were destined to endure at some future time. She remained perturbed when I repeated that I had no problem with the Jewish nation escaping the worst tribulation event in history. In the end, I had to point out that an interpretation of prophecy that excludes any ethnic group from the commission to proclaim

the gospel to every creature has to be wrong.

Thankfully, most adherents of the three major schools of eschatology tend to be committed to evangelism. Keith Mathison, for example, states. 'Contemporary evangelical Christians tend to equate eschatology with particular millennial views, but to do so means that we miss the bigger picture . . . Biblical Eschatology is good news. It is "gospel"' (Keith A. Mathison, *From Age to Age: the Unfolding of Biblical Eschatology*, p.699.)

However, how many Premillennialists, Postmillennialists or Amillennialists take the order of the Great Commission literally and place the Jewish people at the forefront of mission? There is undoubtedly a land promise for the Jewish people but what will it profit the Jews if they gain the whole land but lose their souls?

The order of the Great Commission at the end of the third Gospel is that 'repentance and remission of sins should be preached . . . beginning at Jerusalem . . . ' (Lk 24:47) and the last words of Jesus before his ascension, as recorded by Luke, were, 'You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the uttermost part of the earth . . . ' (Acts 1:8).

As 'the apostle to the Gentiles,' Paul had a unique calling (Rom 11:13 c.f. Acts 9:15 c.f. 26:17-18). He alone of all the apostles was called to evangelise the Gentiles (Gal 2:9). Nevertheless, wherever 'the apostle to the Gentiles' went on his Gentile missions, he always preached the gospel 'to the Jew first' (Acts 13:2, 44-47; 14:1; 17:1-2, 10, 16-17; 18:4, 19; 19:8) out of a conviction that the gospel was for the Jews first: 'I am not ashamed of the Good news of Messiah, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; to the Jew first and also to the Greek' (Rom 1:16).

In his systematic theology, *The Christian*

Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way, Amillennialist Michael Horton draws a connection between prophecy and Jewish mission. ‘In my view,’ says Horton, ‘amillennialism provides the most satisfying account of the passages adduced by pre-and postmillennialists . . . I do not believe that the New Testament teaches that the church is a replacement for Israel but rather that Gentiles have been grafted onto the vine of the true Israel, from which the original nucleus of new covenant disciples emerged. Salvation has come to the world through the Jews; Jesus was sent to the Jews; the gospel was first brought to the Jews, and the kingdom grew from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. In the end, it will be brought full circle, from the ends of the earth back to Jerusalem again.’ (Michael S, Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*.)

Premillennialism, while seeing a great future for Israel and the nations in the Millennium, tends to be pessimistic about the future prior to the Millennium. According to David Pawson, ‘apocalyptic’ writings (of which Daniel and Revelation are the best known examples) are about the world getting worse and worse then suddenly getting better, by which Pawson means we can expect the world to get worse and worse until Jesus changes everything for the better by returning to inaugurate the Millennial Kingdom. But if, as Mathison argues, eschatology and the gospel can’t be separated, should we not hold to an eschatology of victory rather than one in which the church has to circle the wagons and hold off the forces of darkness until the heavenly cavalry arrives?

‘Postmillennialism,’ says missiologist Thomas Schirrmacher, ‘was the mother of Anglo-Saxon missions . . . As Jesus was not expected to return immediately, missions

made considerable long-term investments in health, education systems, including Christian universities, and political involvement: the campaign against slavery, William Carey’s fight against the caste system, missionary opposition to the burning of widows, and protection of indigenous people’ (Thomas A. Schirrmacher. ‘Eschatology’ in *Dictionary of Mission Theology*, Ed: John Corrie, p.108).

Returning to the lady I referred to at the start of this sub-heading, how does our understanding of the Last Things influence our mission agenda? Does our understanding of the Kingdom motivate us not only to evangelism but also *confident* evangelism and mission? Does our understanding of Israel’s future motivate us to reach Jewish people with the message of Messiah or to support missions that are telling Jewish people the Good News of their Messiah? Are we gripped by the truth of 1 Corinthians 15:25: ‘*He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet*’?

Can those of us in Christian ministry say, as did William Carey (1761-1834) the founder of the Baptist Missionary Society: ‘We are neither working at uncertainty nor afraid for the result . . . *He must reign, till Satan has not an inch of territory*’?

Does our view of the Kingdom help us to believe that Jesus will ‘see of the travail of his soul *and be satisfied*’ (Is 53:11)?

Is our view of the future pessimistic or do we, as William Carey, see a future ‘as bright as the promises of God?’

May it be so.

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