

# PROPHECY UNCUT

## *The Millennium – Opinions & Historical Background*

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### **INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND**

The word ‘millennium’ is not used in the scriptures. This word is the present day English word used to denote the one thousand year period spoken of in the book of Revelation, chapter 20. Nowhere else in Scripture is the concept of the millennium addressed. The English word, ‘millennium’ derives from two Latin words: *mille* meaning ‘one thousand’ and *annum* meaning ‘year’.

There are many diverse opinions and teachings with regard to the specifics of the millennium. However, all these different opinions can be divided up into three broad categories: (1) Postmillennialism; (2) Amillennialism; (3) Premillennialism.

### **WHAT IS POSTMILLENNIALISM?**

*Postmillennialism* is regarded as an optimistic view in the light of the fact that it regards the proclamation of the gospel by the church as gaining the inevitable victory over evil in the world to the extent that the entire earthly society will be transformed and Christianised.<sup>1</sup> The postmillennial belief holds that the growth of the kingdom of God “will be so gradual that the onset of the millennium may be scarcely noticed by some.”<sup>2</sup> That is to say, prior to the second coming of Jesus this world will experience the dawning of a golden age of righteousness and peace.

Importantly, the millennium is not necessarily regarded as being a literal one thousand year period.<sup>3</sup> The millennial era is ushered in by the church fulfilling the gospel commission and will then last an indefinite period of time. Only at the end of this period will the second coming of Jesus take place.<sup>4</sup> As such, the millennium will begin without any climactic, decisive, divine intervention.

Because of the ‘optimism’ inherent in postmillennialism, this view lends itself in a complementary fashion to the concept of human evolutionary progress.<sup>5</sup>

In Christian Reconstructionism (one of the more extreme forms of postmillennialism) it is believed that the United States must become a theocracy adopting all the Mosaic laws and judicial punishments for transgressors of that law – including capital punishment.<sup>6</sup> In this view, “Christ has already established the kingdom, it is now gradually being realized, and it will be fully present in the last days.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 1213-4.

<sup>2</sup> Erickson, 1215.

<sup>3</sup> Erickson 1219.

<sup>4</sup> W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 1111.

<sup>5</sup> N. Gulley, *Christ is Coming*, (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald Publishing Association, 1998), 444-6.

<sup>6</sup> Gulley, 441-2.

<sup>7</sup> Gulley, 442.



# PROPHECY UNCUT

## *The Millennium – Opinions & Historical Background*

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### **WHAT IS AMILLENNIALISM?**

*Amillennialism* and postmillennialism are in some regards very difficult to distinguish from one another. This fact is seen in that adherents to both views at times claim the same authors as the father of their particular view.<sup>8</sup>

Amillennialism “maintains that there is no future millennium yet to come.”<sup>9</sup> While in postmillennialism the church age ultimately leads up to the ushering in of the millennial age on earth, amillennialism holds that the entire Christian era, from the first advent of Jesus all the way through to the second advent of Jesus, *is* the millennial era. In this understanding, the thousand year period spoken of in Revelation 20 is not to be regarded as a literal time period, but rather a symbolic one – one which takes place prior to the second advent of Jesus.<sup>10</sup> Dr. Norman Gulley well notes that in effect the amillennialist interpretation completely negates the concept of a millennium: “Amillennialism means there will be no future millennium. Its advocates associate the thousand years with the Christian age itself. In terms of time, it also occurs before the Second Advent, similar to postmillennialism.”<sup>11</sup>

The reign of Christ takes place on earth in the lives of His saints who have experienced a spiritual resurrection through accepting Jesus as their personal Saviour. Satan’s being bound is understood to have been effected through the ministry of Christ during His first advent, and is seen in Satan’s inability to prevent the spread of the gospel.<sup>12</sup>

There is believed to be only one bodily resurrection (of both saints and non-believers) at Christ’s second advent at which time the final judgment takes place immediately leading directly into the eternal state. Thus, all the end time events take place immediately at Jesus return.<sup>13</sup>

### **WHAT IS PREMILLENNIALISM?**

*Premillennialism* had been the dominant view held by the early Christian church. However it gave way to postmillennialism during the middle ages and only really became a popular interpretation again around the mid-1800s.<sup>14</sup>

There are two main categories of premillennialists. The first category is known as classic or historic premillennialism. The second category is dispensational premillennialism.<sup>15</sup>

In general, premillennialism holds that the thousand year period is introduced by a literal resurrection of the righteous dead when Jesus returns.

However, in dispensational premillennialism there is a secret coming of Jesus to remove his faithful saints from the earth for a period of seven years during which there is an incredible

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<sup>8</sup> Erickson, 1219.

<sup>9</sup> Grudem, 1110.

<sup>10</sup> Grudem, 1110.

<sup>11</sup> Gulley, 439.

<sup>12</sup> Gulley, 444-6.

<sup>13</sup> Grudem, 1110.

<sup>14</sup> Erickson, 1215-6.

<sup>15</sup> Grudem, 1111-1114.



# PROPHECY UNCUT

## *The Millennium – Opinions & Historical Background*

tribulation.<sup>16</sup> Thus the church of God escapes the tribulation. During the seven years of tribulation, the Israelite nation will accept Jesus as the Messiah and will be used by God to evangelize the worldly non-believers still alive.<sup>17</sup> At the end of the tribulation period Jesus will return along with the raptured saints and establish the millennial kingdom on earth wherein He will reign along with His people for one thousand years.<sup>18</sup>

In classical premillennialism there is no secret rapture of the saints that spares them from the final tribulation. Rather the church remains on earth and passes through the tribulation.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, classical premillennialism tends to regard the special place of Israel as being within the Christian church and of a spiritual nature rather than the literalistic and separatist understanding that dispensational premillennialism seems to advocate.<sup>20</sup>

In both the classical and the dispensational premillennial models the one thousand year reign of Christ with His glorified saints takes place on the earth in the presence of non-believers who have an opportunity to accept salvation during this period of time.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in both premillennial views the end of the millennium is marked by a rebellious uprising which is defeated by Jesus.<sup>22</sup> It is at this point that a literal second resurrection will take place – the resurrection of the wicked for condemnation.<sup>23</sup> Once the resurrected wicked have received their judgment the eternal sinless state of God's kingdom begins.

However, it is important to note that there are some premillennialists that differ significantly from the two dominant categories of classical and dispensational premillennialism. This group affirms that there will be a literal one thousand year period immediately following the second advent of Jesus.<sup>24</sup> Thus they are truly premillennialists. However, this group differs in three main areas.

Firstly, they believe the reign of Christ with His saints will take place in heaven as opposed to on earth.<sup>25</sup> Secondly, they hold that Israel as a nation has no prophetic significance during or prior to the millennial period in the light of the fact that in the New Testament the church becomes the new spiritual Israel and is thus the recipient of all God's covenant promises and blessings.<sup>26</sup> Thirdly, they understand that all the wicked are dead and the earth is left devastated for the duration of the one thousand years while Christ is reigning with His glorified saints in heaven.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Grudem, 1112.

<sup>17</sup> Grudem, 1113.

<sup>18</sup> Grudem, 1113.

<sup>19</sup> Grudem, 1112.

<sup>20</sup> Erickson, 1218.

<sup>21</sup> Grudem 1112-3.

<sup>22</sup> Grudem, 1112-3.

<sup>23</sup> Erickson, 1216.

<sup>24</sup> Gulley, 452-3.

<sup>25</sup> Gulley, 450-3.

<sup>26</sup> Gulley, 448-50.

<sup>27</sup> Gulley, 452.



# PROPHECY UNCUT

## *The Millennium – Opinions & Historical Background*

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### **WHAT IS THE REASON THAT THERE ARE SO MANY DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDINGS REGARDING THE MILLENNIUM?**

One may wonder why there is such divergence of opinions and understandings regarding the nature and timing of the millennium spoken of in Revelation 20. Gulley identifies the reason for this state of affairs: “Behind these various theories lie different hermeneutics – different ways of interpreting the Bible. Thus dispensationalists employ a literalistic interpretation that woodenly reads all Old Testament prophecies in the light of physical Israel as if the New Testament has no part in the interpretation process and as if the Christ event makes no difference. Historical [or classical] premillennialists believe in a spiritual interpretation when the new Testament indicates that ethnic Israel is now spiritual Israel (Gal. 6:16), in which the church is now ‘a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God’ (1 Peter 2:9), and ‘a kingdom and priests’ (Rev. 1:5; 5:10). Amillennialists follow a symbolic interpretation, in which the millennium is not a literal time period to come but a symbol for the history of the church.”<sup>28</sup>

These various methods of biblical interpretation are, in turn, supported by specific assumptions. Dispensationalists assume that there is a divide that must continue to exist between national Israel and the church. Classical premillennialists rightly conclude that ultimately the New Testament should be allowed to reinterpret the Old Testament. Postmillennialists (including Christian reconstructionists) and amillennialists allow the concept of optimistic progression – the concept that things are progressively improving – through the gospel proclamation to dominate their thinking.

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<sup>28</sup> Gulley, 449.



# PROPHECY UNCUT

## The Millennium – Opinions & Historical Background

### SUMMARY TABLE OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE VARIOUS MILLENNIAL CONCEPTS:

The following table gives a brief summary of the differences between the three dominant understandings of the millennium concept:

	Amillennialism	Postmillennialism	Premillennialism
<b>Thousand Year Period</b>	Figurative number	Literal time period.	Literal time period.
<b>Timing of the Millennium</b>	Covers the entire Christian age from the first advent of Jesus to the second advent of Jesus	Does not cover the entire Christian age, but does take place prior to the return of Jesus.	Takes place after the return of Jesus.
<b>Location of Jesus &amp; the saints</b>	Jesus remains in heaven but exercises a spiritual reign in the lives of the believers on earth who constitute His church.	Jesus remains in heaven but exercises a spiritual reign through His church which transforms human civilization into an earthly utopia.	Jesus and the saints reign on the earth, being physically present. Some believe the millennium to be experienced by the saints with Jesus in heaven.
<b>Location of the wicked</b>	The righteous and the wicked co-exist until the second coming of Jesus and the final judgment.	The righteous and the wicked co-exist until the second coming and the final judgment	The righteous and the wicked co-exist throughout the physical reign of Jesus for the duration of the one thousand years. Some believe the wicked will all be dead for the duration of the millennium.
<b>Timing of the Final Judgment</b>	Immediately when Jesus returns (no millennium break between the coming of Jesus & the judgment).	Immediately when Jesus returns (millennium will have concluded at His return).	A thousand years after Jesus' final return (at the end of His reign with the saints).



# PROPHECY UNCUT

## *The Millennium - Opinions & Historical Background*

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