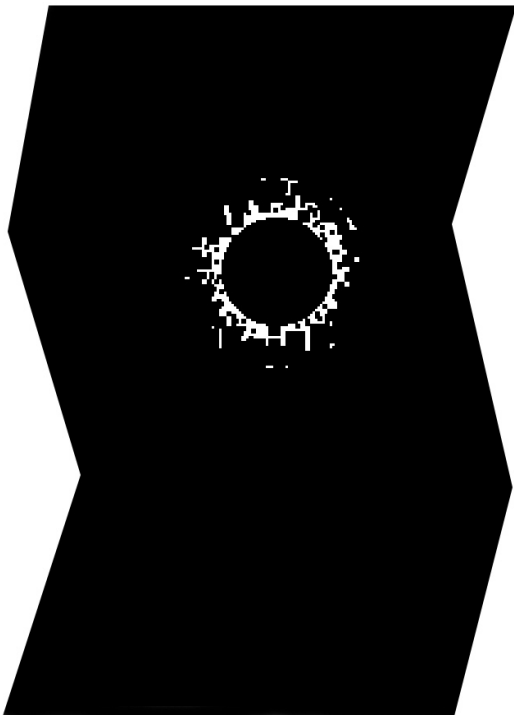


The Still Great Planet Earth

*FOUR SCENARIOS FOR THE
END OF THE WORLD*



WILRENS L. HORNSTRA

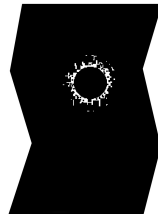


*SCHOOL OF BIBLICAL STUDIES
INDUCTION 2*

Hal Lindsey's "*The Late Great Planet Earth*" was the bestselling non-fiction book worldwide during the seventies. The view of the end times presented in this book determines the end-time view of many Christians – even when they have never read the book. The suspenseful „Left Behind” series has recently popularised a similar scenario in the form of a novel.

We think it is high time to take a critical and biblical look at this kind of belief on the end times. For this reason, the second volume in our *Induction* series deals with the topic of the end times, or – in theological terms – ‘eschatology’.

“The Still Great Planet Earth” is a manual leading you through the labyrinth of end-time theories. All four major views are presented and critically discussed. This leaves you with the overview you need to determine your own position on the topic.



‘Induction 2’...

... is a production of the ‘School of Biblical Studies’ (SBS) in Germany. It is a series of publications designed to be helps for personal Bible study and introductions to important biblical themes. *Induction* aims to be a bridge between evangelical scholarship and the church. The name points to inductive Bible study, an approach to Scripture that puts the individual books of the Bible in the center and seeks to hear what their author intended to communicate. It also seeks to understand things within the context of the entire Bible, rather than through a collection of Bible verses. Inductive Bible study is the foundation for this series.

The Still Great Planet Earth is its second publication. It is based on my master’s thesis. Its topic is what theologians call *eschatology*, the study of things related to the end. It contains an introduction to the four main eschatological systems and the scenario of the end times to which they adhere.

Chapter 1 provides evidence that a critical look at our prophetic beliefs is sorely needed. Chapters 2 through 5 introduce the main schools or systems of eschatology. The final chapter points to an alternative approach, which has the potential of bringing the four views closer together. It also deals with the practical importance and the far-reaching consequences of the view of the end time we adopt.

I have made extensive use of sources representing each of the four views. These sources are given in the footnotes; the bibliography at the end lists the full titles of the longer works quoted.

We would love to hear from you. Please let us know whether this manual has been a help to you. Any comments or suggestions you may have are welcome and may help us to improve this material in the future.

The School of Biblical Studies (SBS): The SBS is a nine-month core course within the University of the Nations, the international missionary university under the auspices of Youth With A Mission (YWAM). The SBS seeks to equip the student with a sound, practical, and in-depth knowledge of the Word of God. Every book of the Bible is studied and analyzed by the student himself. At present, the SBS is offered at over thirty-five locations worldwide. If you would like to know more about SBS, please write to us at the address below.



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Available at: www.sbsgermany.de/wilrens

SBS/JMEM, Schlossgasse 1, 86857 Hurlach, Germany
Tel. 0049-8248-12237, Fax -12241

E-mail: wilrens@sbsgermany.de

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*One of the cardinal mistakes in interpretation is provincialism, i.e., believing that the system in which one has been trained is the only system.*¹

Introduction

I love eschatology². When I was a young teenager, in 1973, the oil crisis hit the Western world. I found out that we only had enough oil and other natural resources left for so many years. Then I happened to read the reports of the Club of Rome, a group of scientists who studied the consequences of unrestrained growth. Their reports were based on a simple presupposition: there are limits to growth, because ‘Spaceship Earth’ is finite. World population and environmental pollution were growing exponentially. Food production was lagging behind. Natural resources were rapidly being depleted. Before long, things would have to collapse; the growth curves in the book showed it convincingly. That discovery shattered my faith in our type of society.

But what could take its place? I could see that socialism and communism had already outlived their credibility. A school trip to East Berlin was enough to convince me of that. What other revolution beside communism was there to join which could offer a ‘realistic Utopia,’ or a road back to Paradise? What long-term hope was there anyway? One day the sun will have burned up its hydrogen, and then it is all over; such is the eschatology that the natural sciences have to offer.

I began to get interested in the ecological movement, and I’m sure the New Age movement would have strongly appealed to me. I suppose it could to some extent have filled the void I felt. But before the Age of Aquarius could find me, Jesus did, and that changed everything. He promised a better future world that was no Utopia. At the same time he provided a program for life now. Jesus saved me from a futureless future (among other things) and gave me hope. That is why I love eschatology. It’s essential. How could we live without it?

Years later I found myself working towards a master’s degree in biblical studies, and I had to select a topic for my thesis. Naturally, there was little room for doubt: the subject had to be related to the field of eschatology. I was especially intrigued by the eschatological aspects of the prophets in the Old Testament and by the challenge to interpret them correctly (no easy task). My topic readily suggested itself: how to interpret *eschatological* prophecy in the Old Testament. To answer that question, I had to acquaint myself with the various views of eschatology, since one’s understanding of this greatly affect how one reads and understands the Old Testament prophets.

What I learned while writing my thesis is the basis for this book.

¹ Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 23.

² *Eschatology* is the study of things related to the end. Eschatology deals with the end and the final destination of both individuals and the world as a whole. This manual deals mostly with the latter, eschatology of the world. It particularly looks at scenarios of the end as they have been developed by the major views.

Chevrolet City

Imagine a city where everybody drives a Chevrolet. There are two dealers in town, but both only carry Chevrolet cars. People have never even heard of other brands. Chevrolet is all there is.

One day, rumors begin to circulate about something called Ford, which some claim is a car as well. The immediate result? Suspicion. Anything that is not a Chevrolet cannot possibly be a car.

Ardent Chevrolet fans may agree with this, but that is not the point here. This imaginary situation seeks to illustrate what provincialism is: you only know one alternative. In eschatology, this is not an imaginary situation. It is quite common. Many people know only one view, the one they have always been taught. Or, if they have heard of other views, they treat them with suspicion, as less than orthodox Christianity.

There is an advantage to living in a one-car country. It makes it a lot easier to choose what car to buy. That doesn't mean you will end up with a better car, though. Think of East Germany, for instance. Before 1990, prospective car buyers had little choice. They were quite likely to end up buying a Trabant, if they managed to buy a car at all. Not necessarily the best value for your money.

Likewise, if you only know one system of eschatology, that will be the one you will believe. It may not be the best one around, but you will never know. If you want to increase your chances to a good buy, there is only one way: you will have to know all the options.

Four Options to Choose from

That may sound discouraging; just how many views would one have to know? Isn't there a Babylonian confusion out there? The answer is no, not really. Not if we keep our heads cool and allow the dust to settle before we start moving around. Then we will be able to see that there are only four major ways to go, with perhaps a fifth one arising recently as a potential way to bring the conflicting camps closer together.

These four views differ in how they see the millennium, the period of a thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20, and in when they expect Christ to return: before or after this millennium. That is why they are called pre-, post- and amillennialism. In passing, it should be noted that this also shows in what the views agree with each other. All believe in the visible and bodily return of Christ to earth, in glory and power, in accordance with the New Testament promise:

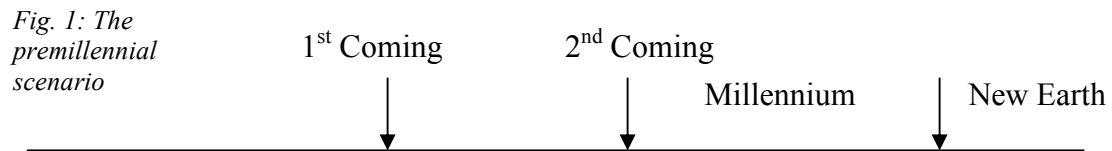
This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. (Acts 1:11 NRSV)

For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. (Mt. 16:27 NRSV)

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. (Mt. 25:31 NRSV)

These are therefore the four options we have for interpreting the millennium and other prophecies relating to the end:

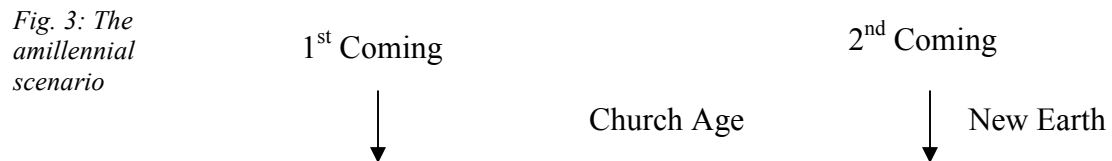
Premillennialism believes that Christ will return before the millennium (*pre* means before; see Fig. 1), which is seen as a time of great peace and prosperity on earth. There are two kinds: *dispensational* premillennialism and *historic* premillennialism. These two varieties are quite different from each other. In fact, they are so different that historic premillennialism is in many ways closer to amillennialism than to dispensationalism. I will therefore treat them as two distinct systems.



Postmillennialism places the return of Christ after the millennium (*post* means after; see Fig. 2). It believes in the victory of the gospel and the kingdom of God within the present age. This victory will result in a mostly christianized world, and a time of great peace and prosperity will arrive *before* the second coming. The second coming will then usher in the new heavens and the new earth. At present, *reconstructionism* or *dominion theology* is the most vocal and active form of postmillennialism.



Amillennialism does not believe in a literal future period of a thousand years (*a* stands for none; see Fig. 3). Instead, it believes that the millennium has a symbolic meaning and coincides with the present era, the church age, in a way I will explain later. In this system, the second coming of Christ also ushers in the final state of the new heavens and the new earth, not the millennium.



The fifth alternative is a view of the kingdom of God rather than an interpretation of the millennium. It will be introduced after the four views have been discussed in more detail.

Two more things are important here. First, the systems are named after their view of the millennium, something that is explicitly mentioned in only one Bible passage, in Revelation 20. It may therefore appear that this is a rather unimportant issue. However, there is a lot more involved than just what is believed about the millennium. The different systems

strongly affect our understanding of the kingdom of God. They not only determine the way we look at the future, but also how we see our own day and age, and our responsibility in it. This is what makes eschatology such a crucial topic: how we see the future will shape our life in the present.

Second, there is a lot of variation within each of these four views. The discussion in the following chapters will therefore have to simplify and generalize. Not every pre-, post- or amillennialist will hold to all the elements presented for each view. Just as there is no average American, the average x-millennialist does not exist either.

Still, these generalizations will enable us to understand the issues that are involved. If we are familiar with these four views, it will diminish our confusion about seemingly countless end-time theories. We will begin to find our way. We will also be able to avoid the trap of provincialism and make for ourselves a more enlightened choice.

Before we look at each of these views in more detail, we first need to be introduced to Chicken Little.

Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; be babes in evil, but in thinking be mature.¹

Chapter 1

The Chicken Little Syndrome

Have you heard of Chicken Little? I bet you have. It's a perfect little story: Chicken Little had something fall on her head and thought that the sky was about to fall down. Off she went, as on a mission from God, proclaiming her doomsday scenario to all who would listen.

What Chicken Little did not realize (and what many of us don't realize either) is that things fall out of heaven all the time. For us, it is signs of the end that startle us and get us going on an 'The End Is Near!' tour. In doing this, we join generations of Christians before us, who also thought that theirs was probably the final generation and that they were definitely living in the last days.

We fail to see that the New Testament uses a different definition of the last days than we do, and as a result, we misunderstand the nature and purpose of the signs. For the apostles, the term *the last days* refers to the time that began with Jesus, not to a short time span somewhere in the future, just before the second coming. To them, the entire time period between the first and the second advent of Christ is the last days, even though they may well have thought that this time would be much shorter than it has turned out to be. Here is some of the evidence that this is how they understood it:

This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams". (Acts 2:16-17 NIV; in Peter's understanding, what Joel describes is happening right then and there, on the day of Pentecost; therefore, he must have thought that the last days had begun)

But in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. (Hebr. 1:2 NIV)

Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. (James 5:3 NIV)²

The apostle John even calls his age "the last hour" in 1 John 2:18. He says that many antichrists have gone out into the world; a clear sign to him that the end was near. The amazing thing is that John wrote this almost 2000 years ago. It was true then, and is still true today. The last hour has already lasted more than 1900 years!

This means that the nature of the signs differs from what we usually think it to be. The signs characterize the entire time period of the last days. This makes them potentially delusive. They tell us in what sort of time we live, but they give us no help in measuring how much (or how little) time may still be left. They deal with quality, not with quantity. Therefore, the

¹ 1 Corinthians 14:20.

² See also 1 Timothy 3:1-5.

upheavals of the present day do not necessarily mean that the second coming is close at hand. Yes, we hear the approaching hoof beats of the Apocalypse – but so did people before us. Yes, AIDS, holes in the ozone layer and rampant crime are signs of the end – but so was the bubonic plague epidemic that hit medieval Europe and killed one third of its population. As history proves, it is easy to misread them.

Saddam Boosts Printing Presses

That did not prevent the Chicken Little syndrome from reaching epidemic proportions when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990 and threatened to attack Israel. Interest in biblical prophecy boomed. Book sales on the subject increased. Shortly before the Gulf War started, more than 500,000 copies were produced of a book by Charles H. Dyer, *The Rise of Babylon: Sign of the End Times*.¹

John F. Walvoord did even better: “Since mid-December, 1.5 million copies have been produced of *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis* (Zondervan), an updated version of a 1974 edition by John Walvoord, chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary (...) Only 508,500 were produced after the book first went into print in 1974.”² No doubt other end time books were in high demand as well. Many wanted to find out whether the events in the Middle East had been predicted in the Bible. It was a time of great excitement, and expectations soared high; surely the end was near!

(Of course, things did not quite turn out as expected. When the war came to a quick end, so did the escalation of book sales, and the publishers were left with huge unsold stocks. In its winter-spring catalog of 1992, Christian Book Distributors (CBD) was offering *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis*, which retailed for \$ 8.95, for only \$ 1.95. A pack of 20 sold for 15.00, and a case of 64 copies for 29.44 (that is 46 cents each!). Something must have gone wrong. Hussein boosted the printing presses more than the book sales.)

Newspaper Exegesis

How did Christian leaders respond to the crisis in the Persian Gulf? *Charisma* published an article in April 1991, entitled “The Gulf War and Beyond: Respected Church Leaders Address Questions About War, Peace, Prophecy and the Middle East”. One leader interviewed in this article said this:

Isaiah 21 speaks of the fall of Babylon. Verse 1 mentions a storm coming from the desert: “As whirlwinds in the South (the Negeb) sweep through, so it [the judgment of God by hostile armies] comes from the desert” (Amp.). This could be Operation Desert Storm!³

At first glance, this may sound quite reasonable; there seem to be some remarkable parallels between Isaiah 21 and the Gulf War. But look again. Is this what Isaiah had in mind? When

¹ Joe Maxwell, “Prophecy Books Become Big Sellers”, *Christianity Today* 34.3 (March 11, 1991), 60.

² Ibid.

³ “The Gulf War and Beyond: Respected Church Leaders Address Questions About War, Peace, Prophecy and the Middle East”, *Charisma and Christian Life* 16.9 (April, 1991), 73. The quotation is from Freda Lindsay, of Christ for the Nations Institute.

we read the rest of the chapter, there is not a clue that Operation Desert Storm is in view. The parallels are pure coincidence. In reality, Isaiah paints a vivid picture of the destruction of Israel's enemy Babylon (not Iraq), something that happened centuries ago.

I hope that on closer inspection you can see the flaw. This quotation is a classic example of newspaper exegesis. The word *exegesis* means interpretation of Scripture, and *newspaper exegesis* is interpretation of Scripture in the light of today's newspaper (rather than the other way around!). It means reading current events into the Bible, ignoring the real, intended meaning of the text. It is the only way we will find Desert Storm in Isaiah 21!

Blurred Vision

A few more quotations. First, Charles Taylor:

“Saddam Hussein is just kind of an activator bringing it all together,” said the Rev. Charles Taylor, host of the syndicated television show ‘Today in Bible Prophecy.’ “It’s time to rejoice for the Christians. We’re going home.”¹

Needless to say, we are still here. Moishe Rosen, director of Jews for Jesus, said this:

God's prophetic clock has been ticking since 1948. Saddam Hussein may view himself as the modern Nebuchadnezzar, but Christians need to reread the proverb against the king of Babylon found in Isaiah 14:4-24. My opinion is that the 'Lucifer' of that proverb is embodied in Saddam Hussein today. If he survives this war, he will be hailed as a hero throughout the Muslim world. He could be the one to lead the final assault on Jerusalem. And this would be the archetype of the Antichrist.²

Even Billy Graham was caught up in the excitement:

“History has gone full circle and we are coming back to these lands,” Graham said during a recent crusade. “This is not another Korea, it is not another Vietnam – it is something far more sinister and far more difficult.”³

Graham and Rosen are obviously doing a very commendable work, and I am by no means trying to discredit them here. The reason I quote their words is that they are probably quite typical for what many of us thought. We must now conclude that these respected leaders (and we with them) were wrong. Apparently, their (our) eschatology blurred their vision and they completely misinterpreted what was going on.

Babylon Rediscovered

Due to its location in modern-day Iraq, the ancient city of Babylon was getting a lot of attention during the Gulf Crisis. In fact, the star of Babylon was already rising even before Hussein invaded Kuwait. Some interpreters felt that the role of Babylon in the end times had been underestimated. Old Testament prophecies had foretold how God would judge Babylon. When the city came to its end, those prophecies had not been fulfilled absolutely to the letter,

¹ David Briggs, “Armageddon: Is Current Crisis Beginning of End?”, *West Hawaii Today* (September 30, 1990), 18A.

² “The Gulf War and Beyond”, *Charisma and Christian Life* 16.9 (April, 1991), 73.

³ Briggs, “Armageddon: Is Current Crisis Beginning of End?”, *West Hawaii Today* (September 30, 1990), 18A.

according to these people. Besides, Babylon is also described in the New Testament, in Revelation 17 and 18. The conclusion is simple: Babylon has to be rebuilt. The prophecies can then be really (= literally) fulfilled.

I already mentioned *The Rise of Babylon: Sign of the End Times*. This book promotes such a reassessment of Babylon's future role and is a good representative of this view. The backside cover reads:

BABYLON: Prelude to Armageddon?

The Bible says that ancient Babylon – the mightiest and wickedest city of the ancient world – will be rebuilt before the world's final battle at Armageddon. Lost for centuries under the shifting sands of Iraq, the ruins of this once great city have been rediscovered.

Conclusive evidence and startling photographs show that Saddam Hussein is rebuilding Babylon to the exact specifications and splendor it had in the days of Nebuchadnezzar!

Why does the Bible say so much about Babylon and its role in the end times?

(It should be noted that the Bible nowhere says that Babylon will be rebuilt; this is a deduction the author has made, not a direct statement in Scripture. The 'rebuilding' of Babylon should not be overstated; so far little more than a few walls, gates, temples and other buildings have been restored. It is *not* a rebuilt city, and certainly not a major world power. As to the last question I just quoted – there is a simple reason why Babylon is mentioned so much in the Bible. Babylon's past makes it a vivid symbol for man's rebellion against God. Babylon in the New Testament stands for human civilization in opposition against God. Babylon is not in Iraq; it is everywhere.)

After the Invasion

The fact that Hussein was rebuilding the ancient city was confirmation enough for this theory. He then stepped into the center of world attention. An ominous face-down developed, and people around the globe held their breath. It made Babylon one of the hottest topics in end-time speculation. What dark forces were at work in modern-day Iraq?

Those who thought they had an answer swiftly flooded the market with their insights. The following quote is from an advertisement in *Ministries Today*, offering a series of four videos on "Iraq in Bible Prophecy":

1. IRAQ: THE 'LAST DAYS' CENTER OF DEMONIC ACTIVITY –

This program explains the [*sic*] Iraq's corrupt religion, historic brutalities, and the Lucifarian lusts of Saddam Hussein. Revelation 18 told us the Euphrates would be the dwelling place of every Satanic spirit in earth's last days. Today it is coming true.

2. IRAQ WILL WRECK THE ECONOMY OF THE WORLD –

Nineteen hundred years ago God predicted Iraq would someday make merchants weep around the world. Cheap oil has become earth's economic heroin. The Biblical 'treasures in the sand' enable the Persian Gulf to affect the world's financial destiny. This video explains why.¹

¹ "Iraq in Bible Prophecy", *Ministries Today* 9.2 (March-April, 1991), 50-51.

And so it goes on. Hal Lindsey came out with a special report on Babylon, advertised as follows:

SPECIAL REPORT: THE REBUILDING OF BABYLON

- Will BABYLON be a major world power again?
- Is 'Mystery Babylon' of the Revelation the U.S.? Rome? or Iraq?
- Why has Saddam Hussein spent the past 20 years rebuilding the ancient city? Why has he set 1992 as the goal for completion? What is his secret strategy?
- Will Babylon emerge as the new world center for the 'New Age'?
- Was the original Tower of Babel a means of *extra-terrestrial communication*? If so, will it be again?
- Babylon is mentioned over 300 times in the Bible; Babylon is the only city mentioned 3 times in the genealogy of Jesus Christ! This sets it apart as a major factor in Bible prophecy.¹

This too is great newspaper exegesis. It seems to assume that today's events guide us to the meaning of Scripture (if not in theory, at least in practice). The Bible is read in the light of a newspaper! The text is interpreted as if it was written for the twentieth, or twenty-first, century, instead of for the author's contemporaries. The interpretation fails to ask a crucial question: What did *the author* have in mind? Certainly not modern-day Iraq! The end result of newspaper exegesis is both misinterpretation of Scripture and a failure to understand what is really taking place, in Iraq and elsewhere.

The scenario presented above holds that Hussein and Babylon will play a vital role in the end times. If that is true, then Operation Desert Storm has significantly delayed the second coming of Christ. Iraq will not be ready to fulfill its role any time soon.

It seems better to admit that we missed it. Our view of the end time functioned like a bad pair of glasses. It distorted our vision. We saw things out of focus. It even made us see things that weren't really there.

Needless to say, the Gulf War was neither the first nor the last event to inspire this kind of prophetic speculation. Dwight Wilson in *Armageddon Now!* documents how every international crisis of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been interpreted by premillennialists as a prophetic sign of a very near end, indeed, the beginning of that end. They were constantly trying to 'read the stars' (sometimes quite literally) and faring no better than astrologers.² John Hagee saw great significance in the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in November of 1995. Rabin had, with Arafat, been responsible for the Oslo Peace Accord, which granted the Palestinians self-rule over parts of the West Bank and Gaza. Hagee writes: "The shot that killed Yitzhak Rabin launched Bible prophecy onto the fast track".³ He saw this event as a crucial turning point. Rabin's martyr death would catalyze the peace process, since it would stimulate great support for Rabin's heritage, thereby generating the momentum to press ahead. Since Hagee believes this peace process is the path that leads to the eschatological war, he responded to Rabin's death with a book: "This book was written to reveal how the peace process will likely develop" – it will lead to a

¹ "Special Report: The Rebuilding of Babylon", *Countdown...* 1.9 (December, 1990), 22. Emphasis his.

² Passim, esp. 119-120, 216.

³ John Hagee, *The Beginning of the End*, 8.

war over Jerusalem. ¹ Things developed quite differently; by now it is clear that Hagee, too, fell into the trap of newspaper exegesis, which led him to adopt a highly dated prophetic scenario.

If Not Today, Then Tomorrow

Speculation on the end time is nothing new, of course. Chicken Little has been with us for a long time. As a result, numerous dates have been set for the second coming. So far with little success. One of the more famous date-setters was William Miller. He concluded, after fourteen years of Bible study, that the second coming was going to take place some time in 1843 or early 1844. When the event did not take place during this period, he changed the date to the twenty-second of October, 1844. Needless to say, he was disappointed again.

Many of Miller's contemporaries took his predictions very seriously. When the twenty-second of October came, crowds of people were waiting in church, quite convinced that the Lord would appear during the service. The movement Miller started surprisingly survived the failed prediction and is still with us today as the Seventh-Day Adventist Church.

In England, a man by the name of John Cumming published several books on the end times and became in many ways the Hal Lindsey of his time. He proposed several dates in the 1860s.² His books became bestsellers.

More recently, a man by the name of Edgar Whisenant thought he had solved the riddle. He published a booklet with the title *Eighty-Eight Reasons Why the Rapture Is in 1988*, predicting the second coming on one of three days in September 1988 (after all, Jesus said we would not know the day or the hour; he said nothing about week, month or year). Like Miller, Whisenant, too, had to readjust his calculations when nothing happened. In a second publication³, he claimed he had been wrong by one year, since the first century included only ninety-nine years instead of a hundred. Therefore, the new date was in September 1989.

Interesting is a second parallel between Miller and Whisenant: the amount of time spent in study. This is what Whisenant tells us:

When I started my full-time Bible research of the end-time, it was with the knowledge that the Bible is the only absolute truth in this world. Therefore, the first thing I did was read the Bible from cover to cover, studying the three most accurate versions as intently as a college student prepares for a final exam. *After ten years of courses in electrical engineering, accounting, and naval science, as well as a master's degree in business administration, I know how to study!*

Once I felt reasonably familiar with Scripture, I turned to books about prophecy to make sure my background was solid in this area. I read all the prophecy books from the fundamental churches that I could find so I would be familiar with all the views. After four years of studying prophecy, I returned to the Bible, reading and memorizing what the Bible has to say about the end-time. I compiled 886 major prophecies in their order of

¹ Ibid., 13.

² Wilson, *Armageddon Now!*, 25.

³ Whisenant and Brewer, *The Final Shout*. Apparently, Whisenant has continued to update his *Rapture Report*, publishing at least 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993 and 1994 versions (Abanes, *End-Time Visions*, 94).

occurrence. Ten years later, I still had unanswered questions; nonetheless, I was beginning to see patterns developing.¹

The publisher of the booklet tells us: “Since we published *88 Reasons ...*, we have been flooded with dozens and dozens of manuscripts from people who have spent years studying the end times (eschatology).”² Many, no doubt, claiming to know the time of Christ’s return. Can you imagine the amount of wasted time to which all of this adds up? And all because people set out to answer an unanswerable question: When is Jesus coming back?

When Jesus said in Mark 13:32 that we can know neither the day nor the hour, he didn’t mean that we can at least know the week or the year! He wanted to say emphatically that no one knows the time of his return. This is why he went on to warn his disciples in the very next verse: “Be alert! You do not know when that time will come” (Mk. 13:33 NIV).

The details of how Edgar Whisenant determined his date don’t really matter here. What does matter, however, is that he is not alone. “At the 6000th year, the Christ is to return and establish His Kingdom on planet earth. To the world this is terrifying. I predict that by 2000 AD that fateful day will arrive....”³ Charles Taylor has predicted, or suggested, the following years as quite possibly the year of the rapture: 1975, 1976, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1991 and 1992.⁴ Numerous examples could be added.

Why are we so preoccupied with dates and signs of the second coming? When Jesus ascended into heaven, his disciples “were looking intently up into the sky” (Acts 1:10 NIV). Two angels had to come and reprove them: “Men of Galilee”, they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky?” (Acts 1:11 NIV). They had to stop staring into heaven and get back to work; and so do we. The date of Christ’s return is God’s business, not ours: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority” (Acts 1:7 NIV).

Excursus: The Fig Tree Myth

In 1970, Hal Lindsey published *The Late Great Planet Earth*. The book quickly became a bestseller and probably did more to shape the average evangelical’s beliefs on the end times than any other – even if he never read the book. Hal Lindsey, too, ventured a guess, be it a cautious one, as to when the Lord might return, based on the well-known fig tree analogy:

But the most important sign in Matthew has to be the restoration of the Jews to the land in the rebirth of Israel. Even the figure of speech ‘fig tree’ has been a historic symbol of national Israel. When the Jewish people, after nearly 2,000 years of exile, under relentless persecution, became a nation again on 14 May 1948 the ‘fig tree’ put forth its first leaves.

Jesus said that this would indicate that he was “at the door,” ready to return. Then he said, “Truly I say to you, *this generation* will not pass away until all these things take place” (Matthew 24:34 NASB).

¹ Whisenant and Brewer, *The Final Shout*, 5. Emphasis added.

² *Ibid.*, i.

³ Lester Sumrall, *World Harvest* 16.4 (September-October, 1987), 3. The Bible nowhere supports the idea that because there were seven days of creation there will be seven thousand years of history, with the final thousand years as the ‘sabbath’ of the Millennium; this is an extra-biblical conception!

⁴ Alnor, *Soothsayers of the Second Advent*, 136-140.

What generation? Obviously, in context, the generation that would see the signs – chief among them 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. Many scholars who have studied Bible prophecy all their lives believe that this is so.¹

Well, those scholars, whoever they were (none are listed), were wrong, and so is this interpretation of the ‘fig tree’. Nowhere in the Bible is the fig tree a metaphor for Israel; only the vine and the olive tree are used in this way. The fig tree in Matthew 24 is – a fig tree! The Gospel of Luke confirms this view by adding something to the statement: “Look at the fig tree and *all the trees*” (Lk. 21:29 NIV). We are dealing with a simple illustration taken from nature.

Jesus meant to say nothing more than this: “When the trees put forth their leaves, you know that spring time (or summer) is near.” When you see certain signs, you can tell what is about to happen. The signs Jesus described in Matthew 24 and Mark 13 would be like the greening of the fig tree: they would indicate that certain events were about to take place. What events? Those surrounding the fall of Jerusalem (not the second coming), since that is the topic Jesus is dealing with. Jerusalem was taken and destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. That is exactly forty years after Jesus spoke the Olivet Discourse!

So what generation was Jesus speaking about? Obviously, in context, his own. As he spoke around the year AD 30, that generation did indeed live to see the event he prophesied.

Still, the myth of the fig tree as an indicator of the second coming lives on:

The generation which sees the rebirth of Israel is the terminal generation.²

I believe this generation - the people living during the 40 years between 1967-2007 - will see the Messiah come again to the Mount of Olives. He will walk into the Eastern Gate of Jerusalem and establish His Throne, the Throne of David, His Father, and reign for 1,000 years. His rule will bring 1,000 years of peace to this earth.³

Notice how in the second quotation 1948 has been shifted to 1967 (the year the Jews conquered Jerusalem). And it does not actually say that Jesus will come in 2007, just that the generation living within the forty year period preceding that year will see it (an ambiguous statement; does this mean before 2047?). It is also interesting to read how Hal Lindsey had adjusted his forecast by 1994:

Jesus promised us that the generation that witnessed the restoration of the Jewish people to their homeland would not pass until “all these things” – including His return to Earth – would be done. The Jewish people declared the rebirth of their nation in 1948. They recaptured Jerusalem in 1967. A biblical generation is somewhere between 40 to 100 years, depending on whether you take the example from Abraham’s day or from the discipline of Israel in the Wilderness of Sinai. In either case, you do the arithmetic, folks. No matter how you cut it, there’s not much time left.⁴

Again, a time limit is set on the basis of a wrong interpretation of the Olivet Discourse.

¹ Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, 53-54. Emphasis his.

² Hagee, *The Beginning of the End*, 93.

³ Marty Waldman, “Can Israel Be Destroyed?”, *Christ For The Nations* 44.2 (May, 1991), 7.

⁴ Lindsey, *Planet Earth - 2000 A.D.*, 3. In 2001, Don Finto clearly implied exactly the same thing; *Your People Shall Be My People*, 34.

This prediction Lindsey will not have to correct. He has now provided himself with sufficient time – he will not live long enough to see 2067 (1967 + 100).

The Antichrist Is Coming

The identity of Antichrist has been another hot topic of prophetic speculation. It won't be Napoleon or Mussolini, that much we now know. But at one time they were serious candidates:

At the beginning of the nineteenth century there was considerable literature insisting that Napoleon Bonaparte was the Antichrist, and even larger literature, a few years later, claiming that Napoleon III was the Antichrist. Indeed, such a careful student as Dr. Ironside (...) devoted three pages to the significance of Mussolini, when we now know that Mussolini had no prophetic significance at all.¹

The mistake is understandable: Mussolini ruled in the former capital of the Roman Empire, and Napoleon conquered much of Europe and almost managed to take Palestine from the Turks. He even issued a call to the Jews to return to their homeland – the fulfillment of Daniel 9:27 (Antichrist's presumed covenant with Israel) seemed near indeed.

In this century, not only Mussolini, but also “Hitler, Stalin, Khrushchev, Henry Kissinger and even Ronald Wilson Reagan (six letters in first, middle and last name = 666), plus a host of others”² have been identified as Antichrist. William Alnor, in a recent book, adds Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, Anwar Sadat, Kurt Waldheim, Willy Brandt, Jimmy Carter, Karl von Hapsburg, Moammar Qadhafi, Gorbachev, King Juan Carlos of Spain and even Pat Robertson; all these people have been considered candidates for the role of Antichrist at some time or other.³ Paul Boyer adds Moshe Dayan and Sun Myung Moon.⁴ Naturally, Lenin has been proposed as well.⁵ Apparently, everybody who is anybody runs this risk.

The accompanying feeling of such Antichrist-guessing is that Antichrist has already been born and is alive today. This sentiment dates back at least to Martin of Tours (ca. 316-397), who believed the same about his own days.⁶

Obviously, speculation about the Antichrist did not begin with the twentieth century. Mohammed has been called Antichrist.⁷ Virtually every pope has been branded the Antichrist by at least someone, and the papacy as an institution has been considered the Antichrist by very many. The same has happened to the Turks, the Church of England, the Westminster Assembly of Divines, the Anabaptists and a multitude of other groups, even if this clearly moves away from the idea of a personal Antichrist.

Antichrist fever ran high in seventeenth-century England, especially in the middle of the century. That was the time of the Civil War, with Oliver Cromwell taking control of the

¹ Wilbur M. Smith, “Signs of the Second Advent of Christ”, in: *Prophecy in the Making*, Ed. Henry, 191.

² Ed Hindson, “The End Is Near... Or Is It?”, *World* 5.26 (November 24, 1990), 12.

³ Alnor, *Soothsayers of the Second Advent*, 20-24.

⁴ Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 275.

⁵ Hill, *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England*, 155.

⁶ Abanes, *End-Time Visions*, 119

⁷ Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 63.

country. Could he be the Antichrist? Someone by the name of John More “added Cromwell’s name and titles up to make 666”¹ and another contemporary called Cromwell “the Man of Sin, the Old Dragon.”²

The fact of the matter is that at this time in England everybody and everything was called the Antichrist or the beast by at least someone. “‘Anabaptists’, said the poet Ralph Knevel satirically, ‘see new Antichrists everywhere.’”³ Many examples could be cited. It was discovered that the lettering round English coins added up to 666.⁴ By implication, true believers should not have bought or sold anything to avoid the mark of the beast! Antichrist-mania escalated to such absurd proportions that it turned self-destructive and largely died out.

The Antichrist was a popular subject in the Middle Ages too. At least some of this will sound familiar to you:

In medieval tradition Antichrist was to be a Jew, born in Babylon of the tribe of Dan. He will reign in Israel, rebuild the temple at Jerusalem, and persuade the Jews that he is the Messiah. He will also succeed in deceiving many Christians, though two witnesses will defend the faithful against him until Antichrist slays them. Three and a half years of terrible persecution will follow, until God finally destroys him on Mount Olivet. The millennium will then begin. This mythical biography (...) seems to have enjoyed a good deal of popularity.⁵

By the end of the fourteenth century Matthew of Janov could say that Antichrist was so well known that when he appeared even small children would recognize him. A century and a quarter later Luther wished that his ancestors had inculcated the doctrine of Christ with as much diligence and zeal as they discussed Antichrist.⁶

Norman Cohn, in *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, also documents the pervasive eschatological interest of the Middle Ages. Eschatology was a strong motivational force in the crusades. The feeling of many was that “Antichrist is already born – at any moment Antichrist may set up his throne in the temple at Jerusalem”.⁷ The crusades were thus seen as leading up to the climax of history. Numerous cults, often popular among the urban poor, set out to pave the way for the millennium on earth. In a number of cases such attempts were accompanied by murdering Jews, clergy and nobility, as they frequently turned revolutionary and violent.

Medieval eschatology proved as adaptable to changing circumstances as modern eschatological ideas. The eschatological scenario kept changing and in many of its aspects looks quite foreign to us. For instance, the idea of a figure like Charlemagne or Frederick returning as a messianic ‘last emperor’ to establish and rule the millennium hasn’t been

¹ Hill, *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England*, 122.

² *Ibid.*, 123.

³ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 178-179.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁷ Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 75.

promoted recently.¹ Still, even if the form sometimes differed, eschatological speculation was clearly very much alive throughout the Middle Ages.

Missing the Point

Nineteen centuries of fruitless speculation, is that why God gave us the prophetic Word? Or could it be that we have missed the point? I think we have. Let's take a look at 2 Thessalonians 2, one of the cornerstones of Antichrist theology. Paul is writing in that chapter about events that will precede the day of the Lord. The rebellion will occur and the "man of lawlessness" will be revealed. He tells us what this man will do, and what will happen to him at the coming of Christ.

Why is Paul telling us all this? What point he is trying to make? It is not something we need to know about the lawless one (so we can see him coming). To be sure, we can learn something about him from this chapter, but that is not why Paul wrote this. He wrote this because he was trying to correct something in the Thessalonian church. People were going overboard in their eschatology. Somehow they had the idea that the day of the Lord had already begun. Excitement (and anxiety: had they missed it?) was running wild. And so here is the point Paul wanted to get across:

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. (2 Thess. 2:1-2 NIV)

In other words, calm down, friends, and don't be swayed by every latest revelation or discovery. Everything else in 2 Thessalonians 2 is brought in to support this call for composure. We have usually overlooked this in our study of prophecy, however; all too often we too have been swayed by the newest insight.

Excursus: Please Panic

Our lack of composure when dealing with eschatology is compellingly illustrated by the following advertisement, taken from *Charisma*. This attempt to make some money out of popular prophetic beliefs gives a revealing look into its nature, as good as any sample could do.

IF YOU HAVE UNSAVED LOVED ONES, YOU MUST READ THIS!

DO YOU BELIEVE:

- Christ's return is imminent?
- The pre-tribulation rapture of the Church?
- Biblical prophecy is without error?

The frightening fact is that unless your loved ones are born again before the rapture they will *not escape the horror of the tribulation hour* (Matthew 24:21). It will be an era of unimaginable terror. Billions will die (Revelation 9:15). *It's coming very soon!*

Stop and think for a minute what your loved ones will endure during that dreadful time...

¹ Ibid., chapter 4-6.

What will they eat? (Rev. 6:6); *What will they drink?* (Rev. 8:11); How will they avoid receiving the *mark of the beast?* (Rev. 13:16-17)?

It is our prayer that they will escape the coming holocaust, but the sad truth is that *millions will starve and suffer* greatly during the tribulation.

If you do not prepare on behalf of your loved ones now – *who will?* Surely the truly, wise Christian will make provision for their loved one's needs today – *before it is too late!* (Gen. 41:35-36).

End-Time partners can assist you by providing the *life-saving necessities* which will be unobtainable during the tribulation.

Let us supply your unsaved loved ones with *long-life foods* produced with technology developed by the U.S. Space Program. These meals are *inexpensive, nutritious and can be stored for many years.*

We beseech you to *act today* and not avoid or delay this urgent and critical matter! Your loved one's eternal destiny may depend on what you do *right now!*¹

We Need Change

So we need a change.² A correction is necessary. Too often we have embarrassed the church, Christianity, and Christ himself with our unfounded speculations on the end. We need to critically rethink this subject, with both feet on the ground and our nose in the Bible.

Change is difficult, however. It was tough for the world to accept that it was round, not flat. Why is change so hard? Because, once we have accepted a particular system or belief, it is difficult to see what could be wrong with it. At the same time it is also hard to see how another system could possibly be right. Usually people will cling to their beliefs unless something causes a 'crack' to appear.

In evangelicalism today, most people believe something we could call 'dispensationalism made popular' (what dispensationalism is will be explained in detail in the next chapter.) Most of us have been raised with *The Late Great Planet Earth* or something similar. That is the kind of stuff our eschatology is made of, and it determines most of what we believe in this area. We have uncritically accepted these popular ideas about eschatology. We have heard them over and over again, so we hold them for biblical truth. We may not even be aware of alternatives. Any other system we learn about will automatically look strange or even suspect. There won't be any change unless a crack appears in our system.

For me that crack was Zechariah 14:20-21:

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. 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. (NIV)

¹ *Charisma and Christian Life* 15.5 (December, 1989), 82. The last statement may well be true of course. All emphasis is original.

² If you are not yet convinced, read Dwight Wilson, *Armageddon Now!*, available for free on the internet at <http://freebooks.entrewave.com/freebooks/>, or Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*.

For a long time I had believed that Israel in the Old Testament meant Israel. After all, we take the Bible literally, right? But when I noticed how Zechariah 14 speaks of sacrifice in the glorious future of Israel, my system began to crack. I knew on the basis of Hebrews that Jesus is the final sacrifice for sin, for all times (Heb. 10:12). We will never need any more sacrifices. This meant I had to reconsider my eschatology. It was the beginning of a major change in my thinking on prophecy. In a way, it was also the beginning of this book.

My wanderings in eschatology had begun earlier than this discovery in Zechariah, of course. Having come to the Lord in charismatic circles, I too started off with *The Late Great Planet Earth*. It sounded very convincing. The only problem was, the more I read in the Bible, the harder it was to see how the scenario of that book could be right. Take the rapture for instance. It was to happen before the rise of the man of lawlessness and the great tribulation. No matter how often I read 2 Thessalonians 2 (where this was supposedly clearly taught), I could not see it. It seemed to assert the very opposite: this man of lawlessness was to be revealed before, not after, “our assembling to meet him”. So even then I was already departing from the (man-made) tradition that had been handed down to me.

“The further I went, the more difficult it became to make it all fit. The more I read the biblical prophets and the less I read the current books about prophecy, the less I understood and the more confused I became. Some biblical texts simply refused to be funneled into the preplanned scheme that I had taken for truth.”¹ This is a quotation from Joel Green’s book, *How to Read Prophecy*, and I can readily identify with him.

Let’s face it: it does not work to force the Bible into an artificial eschatological system or chart. What the popular books have taught us simply doesn’t work. Our eschatology is in crisis, and we have to rethink the subject.

Conclusion

Evangelical assessments of the Gulf War largely missed the point. Our eschatological studies have produced a long list of predicted dates for the second coming and a host of potential antichrists. Popular eschatology offers little that is of value in producing a Christian view of the world or engaging an increasingly non-Christian culture. The record is truly embarrassing. It is high time to reconsider what we believe about eschatology.

So what options are available to us?

¹ Green, *How to Read Prophecy*, 12-13.

View 1: Two Peoples of God

Compared with other eschatological schools, the currently popular *dispensational premillennialism* is brand new. It was first formulated as a distinct and unified system around the year 1830. In spite of its relative youth, it has managed to dominate the evangelical scene for many years. This is the reason we start with it here: it is the view with which most readers will be familiar, even if they don't know it under this name.

The origin of dispensationalism is usually traced to John Nelson Darby. He lived during a time that displayed rather excessive interest in the subject of prophecy. Many new insights and discoveries were being launched, most of which are now forgotten. Out of this melting pot of prophetic speculation arose dispensationalism. John Darby combined his own insights with current ideas and successfully wielded all of it into a unified whole.

The Cornerstone

Before we take a look at the substantial novelties that his system introduced, we need to mention its foundational cornerstone: the 'literal' method of interpretation. Dispensationalism prides itself in being consistently literal when interpreting the Bible, especially when it comes to biblical prophecy. The argument runs like this. So far, all prophecy that has been fulfilled has been fulfilled literally. This can be seen most clearly in events surrounding the birth and death of Jesus. Therefore all prophecy that is still unfulfilled will also be fulfilled literally. Or as Dwight J. Pentecost put it:

Perhaps one of the strongest evidences for the literal method is the use the New Testament makes of the Old Testament. When the Old Testament is used in the New it is used only in a literal sense. One need only study the prophecies which were fulfilled in the first coming of Christ, in His life, His ministry, and His death, to establish that fact.¹

There is no room here for 'spiritual' interpretation, or for seeing fulfillment of prophecy in the church or in some other non-literal way. As we will see in the next section, adopting this position has far-reaching consequences for one's eschatology.

Innovation 1: Separation of Israel and the Church

So what was new in John Darby's teaching? Based on his consistently literal interpretation of prophecy, Darby introduced a strict distinction between Israel and the church. The literal meaning of Israel is always Israel, and the church is the church. Therefore, Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel are to be literally fulfilled to literal (ethnic) Israel, not to the church. Dispensationalism completely separates Israel from the church and treats them as entirely distinct: there are "Two Peoples of God".²

¹ Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 10.

² Paul E. Leonard, "Two Peoples of God", In: *A Guide to Biblical Prophecy*, eds. Armerding and Gasque, 221-230.

There are likewise two purposes of God, one for Israel and another one for the church. Lewis Sperry Chafer, one of the leading dispensational theologians of the early twentieth century, wrote:

Because of a strange inattention on the part of many, it needs to be stated that there are two major divine purposes, both quite apart from that which concerns either the angels or the Gentiles. The distinction between the purpose for Israel and the purpose for the Church is about as important as that which exists between the two Testaments. Every covenant, promise, and provision for Israel is earthly, and they continue as a nation with the earth when it is created new. Every covenant or promise for the Church is for a heavenly reality, and she continues in heavenly citizenship when the heavens are recreated.¹

The Jewish nation is the center of all things related to the earth. The Church is foreign to the earth and related to it only as a witnessing people. They are strangers and pilgrims, ambassadors whose citizenship is in heaven.²

Not many modern-day dispensationalists would still go as far as Chafer, who assigns Israel and the church to different realms even for eternity. A number of them have begun to loosen the rigorous separation between Israel and the church. Most, however, still hold to the view of “two peoples of God” that is unique to dispensationalism.

Innovation 2: The Kingdom Postponed

Another conclusion that follows from the literal method of interpretation is that the kingdom promised to Israel must be of a very earthly, Jewish nature. Israel will rule the world, with as some believe the resurrected David sitting on a throne in Jerusalem. After all, this is what a ‘literal’ fulfillment of Ezekiel 34:23-24 (“David will be prince among them”) would require.

Jesus came to establish precisely this kingdom of God, in fulfillment of the Old Testament promise. He offered a literal, earthly kingdom to the Jews, but was rejected by them. God then responded by postponing the kingdom and his plan for Israel. This means, according to the original teaching of dispensationalism, that the kingdom of God is not now present; it is a wholly future reality, to be fulfilled in the millennium.³

Originally, dispensationalism also taught that parts of the Gospels do not apply to the church. This includes the Sermon on the Mount, which is the rule of life in the coming kingdom, not in the church age.

There is a dangerous and entirely baseless sentiment abroad which assumes that every teaching of Christ must be binding during this age simply because Christ said it.⁴

¹ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Volume IV, 47. This “strange inattention on the part of many” rather reflects a simple fact: for most of its existence, the church held to a very different conviction about the relationship between Israel and the church. Would the church for 1800 years have been ignorant of a distinction “about as important as that which exists between the two Testaments”?

² *Ibid.*, 313.

³ See Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 427-466, for this dispensational view of the kingdom. Not all dispensationalists hold to such an extreme view. The more moderate Erich Sauer, for instance, rejects both this offer and its rejection (Sauer, *Gott, Menschheit und Ewigkeit*, 174-176).

⁴ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Volume IV, 224.

The teachings of the kingdom have not been applied to men in all the ages; nay, more, they have not yet been applied to any man. Since they anticipate the binding of Satan, a purified earth, the restoration of Israel, and the personal reign of the King, they cannot be applied until God's appointed time when these accompanying conditions on the earth have been brought to pass.¹

According to Chafer, it is only with the parables in Matthew 13 that Jesus begins to introduce God's new program and reveals its mystery-form. Many contemporary dispensationalists do not hold to this view anymore; they would see at least some application of the Sermon on the Mount and other early teachings of Jesus for today.

Innovation 3: The Seventy Weeks of Daniel

Before we investigate the consequences of this postponement, we need to discuss a crucial passage for the dispensational system: Daniel 9. It reveals a time period of seventy weeks, usually interpreted as seventy periods of seven years. Within this time period, God's prophetic plan will be completed. John Darby taught that sixty-nine of these weeks were past, and one was still to come. Due to the rejection and postponement of the kingdom, a considerable and unexpected time gap was introduced, separating the seventieth from the sixty-ninth week.

Revelation 12:6 mentions a period of 1260 days. Many interpreters before Darby had taken this number (and others too) as representing years. Using such numbers, they had tried to come up with a date for the second coming. Darby stated that the 1260 days were literal days, not years. This period of three and a half years was part of the seventieth week of Daniel, and became known as the great tribulation.

Innovation 4: The Parenthesis of the Church Age

We are now ready to put innovation 1, 2 and 3 together. Remember that Lewis Chafer claimed that God has completely separate purposes for Israel and the church. Not only that, in the dispensational system he is also dealing with them in separate periods:

(1) God's plan begins and ends with Israel.

(2) This plan for Israel was interrupted by the time of the Gentiles. This time of the Gentiles was revealed to Daniel in Daniel 2; it included the Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman empires. It began in 586 BC (the beginning of the Babylonian exile) and would include the seventy years of the captivity and the 490 years (seventy weeks) of Daniel 9. It could all have been finished some years after Jesus began his ministry.

(3) But then, at the end of the sixty-ninth week, a second interruption took place, unforeseen by Daniel. This is the unexpected gap we mentioned in the previous section, which is due to Israel's rejection of the literal or millennial kingdom. Faced with this rejection, God introduced a new purpose, unknown until then, to be fulfilled in a new body: the church. This parenthesis is therefore called the church age. The New Testament calls it a mystery²,

¹ Ibid., 205.

² See, for instance, Eph. 3:1-11. Again, Sauer is remarkably moderate; in his view, the mystery relates to the way the Gentiles were included in God's salvation during the church age, not the fact as such. He does not
W.L. Hornstra, *The Still Great Planet Earth* 23

because it has not been revealed in the Old Testament. In fact, in Darby's view the church is never even mentioned or referred to in the Old Testament.

During the church age, God is not dealing with Israel as a nation.

(4) The rapture will signal the end of the church age and the beginning of the last week of Daniel's prophecy, which will include the great tribulation. God will again begin to deal with national Israel during this period.¹

Innovation 5: Futurism and Revelation

Up until Darby's time the book of Revelation had usually been understood in a historical sense. It was thought that the book contained predictions concerning the whole course of history, from the first century AD until the end. That didn't work very well, because no agreement could be reached on the details. Interpreters differed greatly in what events they saw predicted in Revelation.

Nowadays, most scholars approach the book as containing three groups of elements: some that are firmly rooted in the book's first-century background, other elements that symbolize general forces and principles that can be recognized in all centuries, and some that are future and deal with events at the end of history. There are, of course, differences about which elements belong in which group, but by and large there seems to be a consensus that these three categories must be balanced in interpreting the book.

Darby, however, adopted an almost completely futurist interpretation of Revelation. To him, most of the book described a still future period. It was all going to happen at the end, mostly during the seven years of the last 'week' and the great tribulation.

Innovation 6: The Secret Rapture

John Darby was probably also the first to teach the secret rapture. In dispensationalism, the second coming takes place in two stages. The first stage is when Christ comes for believers only; this is the rapture. It is followed by the last week of Daniel and the great tribulation. At the end of this seven-year period the second stage takes place, when Christ appears visibly, in glory and power. This has perhaps been the most eagerly debated aspect of Darby's theories: will we go up before the tribulation, or after? Here are some reasons why dispensationalists are convinced the answer is 'before':

- They believe 1 Thessalonians 4 and 2 Thessalonians 2 clearly teach this.
- The tribulation is a time of judgment, and the church may experience God's discipline, but never his judgment; therefore, it must be removed before God begins to pour out his wrath.
- In Revelation 4:1, John is called up into heaven. Some claim that this experience of John parallels the rapture of the church.² Fact is, after Revelation 4 the church is not

believe the church age is completely absent in the Old Testament or that there is no fulfillment of prophecy in and to the church (Sauer, *Gott, Menschheit und Ewigkeit*, 170-174).

¹ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Volume IV, 329-344.

² How this can be harmonized with 'consistent literalism' beats me!

mentioned again until chapter 19 (which refers to the bride), or at least the term *church* does not occur. The promise to the church of Philadelphia, that the Lord will keep it from the hour of trial that is coming (Rev. 3:10), is often seen as additional confirmation that the church will not have to go through the tribulation.

- The system of ‘interruptions’ discussed under innovation 4 is another reason why in dispensationalism the rapture must be pre-tribulational. The church has no place in the time of the Gentiles. It had no place in the first 70 (exile) + 483 (69 weeks) years of this period and it will have no place in the last seven years of this period. It will be as if the church age never intervened. After the rapture, God’s plan will continue exactly where it was at the end of the sixty-ninth week; even the Roman Empire will be revived to make this fit!¹

With these six innovations, John Nelson Darby radically altered the face of eschatology.

The Scenario

So what scenario of the end can be constructed on the basis of dispensationalism? The following overview builds largely on Dwight J. Pentecost’s book, *Things to Come*. This work is an extensive study of the subject of eschatology from a classic dispensational perspective. Since Pentecost taught for many years at Dallas Theological Seminary, a staunch bulwark of dispensationalism, this seems an appropriate choice. Remember that there is considerable variation within the system; this is only an example, be it a representative one.

(1) This present age, the church age, will come to a sudden end with the rapture. All believers will be taken up into the sky at the secret coming of Christ for the church. The resurrection of the church saints takes place at this point. For those with a vivid imagination: yes, it would mean planes fall out of the sky and cars crash, when pilots and drivers suddenly disappear.

The dispensational system does not allow any date setting for the rapture. It could happen any moment, since no signs or events precede the rapture; this belief is called imminence. In practice, however, many dispensationalists have supported such a strong expectation of the nearness of the end, that it comes close to a form of date setting. Even Erich Sauer, who is normally far removed from end-time speculation, writes: “The present age is approaching its end. The dial on God’s world clock is close to midnight.”² This is the sort of thing Christians have been saying for centuries, but in dispensationalism it is particularly common.

(2) The rapture signals the beginning of the final seven years. This is the seventieth week of Daniel 9. It is the time of Antichrist and his one-world religion, the beast and the revived Roman Empire. It will be a period far more terrible than anything that has gone before.

(3) During this time, God will pick up his plan for Israel again. Israel will no longer be set aside as it was during the church age, but will be at the center of all God’s activity on earth. Many Jews will be saved, including the 144,000.

(4) Meanwhile, the church is in heaven, before the judgment seat of Christ, to be rewarded. The marriage of the Lamb will take place.

¹ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Volume IV, 329-344.

² Sauer, *Gott, Menschheit und Ewigkeit*, 35.

(5) The tribulation will end in Armageddon, the great battle on the plains of Megiddo, where millions will gather for the most horrendous bloodbath of all human history.

(6) At this point, Christ will return visibly. Old Testament saints and tribulation saints will be resurrected (Rev. 20:4-6).

(7) Satan will be bound, Israel gathered to its land, the surviving Gentiles will be judged (the judgment of the sheep and the goats, which is described in Matthew 25:31-46).

(8) Then the millennium will begin. In dispensationalism, this is a very Jewish period. David or Jesus will be regent in Jerusalem. The temple will be restored, including animal sacrifice, since this is what a literal interpretation of Ezekiel 40-48 demands. The Gentiles will serve the Jews. Evil will still be present, but held in check by Christ who will rule with a rod of iron.

(9) During the millennium, the resurrected saints of the Old Testament, the church age and the tribulation will be in the heavenly Jerusalem.

(10) The millennium will end with the loosing of Satan and the final rebellion described in Revelation 20.

(11) The unsaved dead will be resurrected and the great white throne judgment will take place (Rev. 20:11-15).

(12) The final state with the new heavens and the new earth is ushered in. There are significant differences among dispensationalists regarding the relative position of the church and Israel, and of Old and New Testament saints during the millennium (see point 9) and in the final state.

Much more could be said than this. The events of the seven-year period after the rapture have been revealed in amazing detail: the rise of Antichrist, his covenant with Israel, the invasion of Israel by Russia, the campaigns leading up to Armageddon, etceteras, but I think the general picture is clear.

In passing over these topics, it has to be noted that they are of more than passing importance. This is the stuff prophecy books are made of and the consequences for people's worldview are considerable. Think of how evangelicals have perceived the threat of nuclear war – it cannot be avoided, since it is predicted in the Bible; attempts at disarmament are therefore futile. The United Nations is often rejected for no other reason than its presumed role in the end times (one would think the UN deserves more nuanced consideration). The Soviet Union was seen as an evil empire to be destroyed in a fiery divine judgment (this honor now goes to either Russia or a coalition of Islamic states). China and the rest of Asia are seen as the kings from the east, and so on. When Gorbachev introduced glasnost, prophecy writers were convinced the opening of the USSR would not last long, since it did not match the scenario.¹ In the first chapter we dealt extensively with the Gulf war and how it was perceived. In short, the distortion of perception by the prophetic scenario is enormous.

¹ Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 176-180.

The Conquest of Evangelicalism

Considering the substantial innovations dispensationalism introduced, the question poses itself how it managed to gain such pre-eminence among evangelicals, particularly in the United States. Its success has clearly been overwhelming. “An estimated two hundred Bible institutes in the U.S.A.” teach dispensationalism.¹ Hundreds of books, not infrequently with editions over 100,000 copies and sometimes surpassing the one million mark², countless radio- and TV-programs, and numerous newsletters and internet sites are devoted to it. Many evangelicals are not even aware of the validity (or existence) of alternative views. Robert Clouse remarks:

The new view replaced the older premillennial outlook to such an extent that when George Ladd restated the historic interpretation in the midtwentieth century it seemed like a novelty to many evangelicals.³

A number of factors have played a role in this remarkable success:

- Towards the end of the nineteenth century, dispensationalism was adopted by the circle around D.L. Moody. Moody was the most influential evangelical leader in the United States at that time. This lent it considerable credibility and contributed to its rapid acceptance.
- C.I. Scofield produced a well-known study Bible, with notes that firmly taught the dispensational system. This Bible became a tremendous success: “Within fifty years three million copies of the *Scofield Reference Bible* were printed in the United States.”⁴ Because the notes were closely linked with the Bible text, they obtained almost equal credibility and authority in the minds of many readers.
- The rise of liberal theology was an important factor as well. The emerging evangelical and fundamentalist movements were concerned about the way liberalism handled the Bible. The dispensational emphasis on literal interpretation formed a welcome refuge for many: here was a theology that still took the Bible seriously.
- The early twentieth century saw the birth of the Pentecostal movement. At first it had little interest in theology, but later it started to realize its need for a more solid theological foundation. For its eschatology, Pentecostalism for the most part adopted the dispensational system, which guaranteed its success in the strongest growth sector of Christianity worldwide.

¹ LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 12.

² Hal Lindsey’s book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, has sold 35 million copies in 52 languages; it was the bestselling nonfiction book during the seventies (Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 5; Abanes, *End-Time Visions*, 84). Tim LaHaye and Jerry had sold 30 million copies of the *Left Behind* series by 2001 (Natalie Nichols Gillespie, “Rapture Fever”, *Charisma and Christian Life* 26.5, December 2000, 68; Mark A. Keller, “Bible Prophecy Boom”, *Christianity Today* 45.15, December 3 2001, 22).

³ Robert G. Clouse, “Millennium, Views of the”, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Elwell, 718.

⁴ Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 12. For more information on ‘Dr.’ C.I. Scofield (the title was probably never earned), see Canfield, *The Incredible Scofield and his Book*.

- No doubt a major factor in the success of dispensationalism is that it has been very good at popularizing its views. This wasn't too hard: it offers a graphic presentation of what is about to happen. The system is easy to understand and readily captures the imagination. It doesn't necessarily have a stronger foundation in Scripture, but it does offer more of a thrill than the other systems. The crowning achievement of such popularization is, of course, the end-times novel, like the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins.¹ One reader, in a review at amazon.de, unwittingly described them as *science fiction*, which isn't that far from the truth – except that LaHaye and Jenkins consider their fiction a tool “to teach biblical truth”.²

Cafeteria Theology

For these reasons dispensationalism has largely dominated the popular marketplace since Moody and the beginning of the twentieth century. As a result, many evangelicals who are not dispensationalists nevertheless have an eschatology that resembles it. Dispensational fragments are everywhere in our understanding of the end times. So much so that dispensationalism has been branded a cafeteria theology: you can take whatever you like and leave the rest on the counter. This is not quite accurate. It describes what people have been doing, but it is not true that you can do this and still make sense. Dispensationalism stands or falls as a system. A pre-tribulation rapture, for instance, does not make sense outside of the dispensational system. By taking certain parts and leaving others out you end up with something that is inconsistent and invalid.

Yet, popular interpretation of prophecy has paid little attention to this. It has often applied the ‘cafeteria’ method. Elements from dispensationalism have been mixed with the prophetic expert’s own insights. The outcome of this mix, dispensationalism-made-popular, is what has fed our preoccupation with items as 666, the rapture, Antichrist and Armageddon. It has led to such absurdities as seeing a sign of the end in a reported increase in the population of vultures in Israel, in preparation for the “great meal” (Rev. 19:17) following the destruction of Gog and the battle of Armageddon.³ Most date-setters hold to some form of dispensationalism. Ironically, the latter is actually embarrassing to more serious dispensational scholars. Fact is, a true dispensationalist will have nothing to do with date setting. He believes the rapture can be any moment and does not depend on preceding signs. No one will know the day or the hour according to ‘orthodox’ dispensationalism, for, after all, it is the *secret* rapture.

Nevertheless, popular eschatology has a strongly dispensational flavor. Much of the end-time furor that surrounds us is the offspring of dispensationalism. This is one way dispensationalism continues to mold our understanding of the end.

¹ The first eschatological novel was published in 1937; Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 106.

² Tim LaHaye: “We are using fiction to teach biblical truth”; Steve Rabey, “Apocalyptic Sales Out of This World”, *Christianity Today* 43.3 (March 1, 1999), 19.

³ Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 171-172. The observation was made in the early 80s; by now Israel must be overflowing with vultures!

Foundational Critique: Literalism

We will now take a critical look at the various elements that make up the dispensational system, following the order in which they were introduced.

To begin with, its literal method of interpretation needs to be questioned. It may sound logical to interpret the Bible as literally as possible, but is it biblical? And is it even logical!? With non-biblical texts, we pay attention to the style and the type of literature we are dealing with, and we interpret accordingly. We readily understand that the right approach for a poem is quite different from that for an instruction manual.

Fact is, much of what the prophets wrote is poetry and not scientific prose. This means that by taking things too literally, we may actually miss the mark in our interpretation. We should rather allow each text to speak on its own terms.

The better dispensational interpreters agree with this, but still argue that prophecy, properly understood, requires a literal fulfillment. How about the dispensational claim that its method is biblical, because in the New Testament prophecy is always fulfilled literally? No one denies that prophecy is at times fulfilled with remarkable literalness; think of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, or the circumstances of his crucifixion. But is fulfillment always literal? A study of fulfilled prophecy in the New Testament shows a very different pattern. Fulfillment is often unexpected and not literal.¹ According to main-line dispensational interpretation, fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy in the church is not possible, since the literal method demands it concerns the people of Israel. Yet, a number of Old Testament prophecies are quoted and applied to the church, as if the church were the fulfillment of these prophecies.²

The conclusion presents itself that the dispensational principle of consistent literalism is artificial. The principle is not derived from Scripture, but seems to be an a priori conviction, which is imposed on the text. It is not the way we normally deal with texts, and it is not the way the Bible interprets itself.

Critique 1: Israel and the Church

We have seen that dispensationalism keeps Israel strictly separate from the church. The New Testament, however, emphasizes the unity of believers from both Israel and the Gentiles, and that of Old and New Testament saints as well.

¹ See for instance Mal. 4:5 in Mt. 17:9-13 and Lk. 1:17; Is. 40:3-5 in Mt. 3:1-3; messianic prophecies like Is. 9:6-7, Ez. 34:23-24 and Ez. 37:24, fulfilled in Jesus (dispensationalists claim these will be fulfilled in the millennium, of course; in other words, at present Jesus has not yet received the throne of David). Erich Sauer is refreshingly different by admitting non-literal fulfillment in the New Testament in many instances (Sauer, *Gott, Menschheit und Ewigkeit*, 162-166).

² See for instance Jer. 31:31-34 in Heb. 8:8-12; Is. 54:1 in Gal. 4:25-27; Amos 9:11-12 in Acts 15:14-15; Joel 2:18 in Acts 2:16-17. Dispensational interpretation needs to go at great length to explain away such surprising quotations, as the critique in Crenshaw and Gunn, *Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow*, chapter 11-13 (133-169) shows for the passages from Jeremiah, Amos and Joel.

According to Paul, in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek (Gal. 3:28).¹ The Gentiles were formerly excluded from Israel's benefits, but have now been brought near (Eph. 2:12-13). They have become "fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (Eph. 2:19 NIV), that is, with Israel. The two have become one (Eph. 2:14).

This is not because there is now a new body or people, in addition to Old Testament Israel. Romans 11 makes clear that the people of God from the Old and the New Testament are in continuity. There is only one olive tree. Some of the Jewish branches were broken off; a number of Gentile branches were grafted in. It is the same picture as in Ephesians 2: Gentile believers have been adopted into the people of God and now share in all the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament.

The unity of God's people of both Testaments is also illustrated in Revelation and in Hebrews. In Revelation 21:12 and 14, the foundation of the New Jerusalem carries the names of the twelve apostles, the gates of the city the names of the twelve patriarchs. Together, they form one city. Hebrews 3:5-6 uses the illustration of a house, in which Moses and Jesus play different roles. Interestingly, the author identifies his readers as part of this house, which again shows continuity between the old and the new. In short, the teaching of the New Testament seems to be that there is only one people of God.

Critique 2: Postponement of the Kingdom

John Nelson Darby taught that Jesus offered the Jews an earthly, millennial kingdom. When they rejected this offer, it was postponed.

In the light of the New Testament, this is again an untenable position. For one thing, it appears from the gospels that the Jews were all too eager to accept just such an earthly kingdom. That was exactly what they were expecting from the Messiah. They thought he would restore David's throne, defeat the Romans, and lead Israel to world domination. We read in the gospels that at times they were ready to make Jesus king by force. Jesus was rejected because the salvation he preached was so very different from their expectations.

An even bigger problem is that the kingdom is very present in the New Testament. For example, in the last verse of Acts we find Paul boldly preaching the kingdom of God. This was about thirty years after its supposed postponement. He told the Colossians that they had been brought into the kingdom of the Son (Col. 1:13). Jesus himself said that the kingdom would not come in such a way that one could say: "Here is it" or "There is it", but: "The kingdom of God is among you" (Lk. 17:20-21). One could perhaps claim there are really two different kingdoms at stake here, one earthly and Jewish, the other spiritual and for the church, but the fact is, the New Testament never makes such a distinction explicit.

Because of difficulties like these, many dispensationalists have adopted some form of an already-and-not-yet understanding of the kingdom.² As dispensationalists Wayne House and Thomas Ice state in their book on reconstructionism: "Premillennialist George Ladd has popularized among evangelicals a view that 'the Kingdom of God is in some sense both

¹ Dispensationalists counter that this is true in Christ, that is, during the church age, but not for the time before and after the church age.

² This 'already-and-not-yet' understanding of the kingdom will be explained in chapter 6.

present and future.”¹ And: “In recent years there has been a trend for some dispensationalists to adopt a conservative version of an ‘already, not yet’ approach to the kingdom.”²

Wayne House and Thomas Ice themselves, however, still hold to the older dispensational view that “the present age is not the kingdom and the kingdom is yet future.”³ Traditional dispensationalism continues to see the kingdom as completely future.

Critique 3: The Seventy Weeks

Daniel’s seventieth week is of foundational importance for the dispensational scenario of end time events. However, there are questions regarding its interpretation of Daniel 9.

First, to make it fit, it has to start counting when Nehemia received permission to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. This happened in 445 BC, more than 90 years after the first Jewish exiles had returned to Jerusalem and begun to rebuild the city. It also has to use years of 360 days⁴, shorter than normal solar years, to fit in the 483 years of the 69 weeks. Both points have not met with much agreement outside of the dispensational camp.

In fact, and this is the second problem, many non-dispensational scholars support the more traditional interpretation that the seventy weeks of Daniel were fulfilled in Christ’s *first coming* and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Others hold that the last week symbolically represents the events of the entire church age. Yet, when reading popular prophecy books, one would never guess that there are any valid and widely accepted alternatives to the dispensational interpretation of Daniel 9.

A third difficulty is the imposed time gap within the 490 years, which has now lasted for almost 2000 years! Imagine that I say that I will be somewhere in an hour, and I don’t arrive until the next day. How can I excuse myself by saying that I didn’t tell about the time gap: an ‘interruption’ of a day between the first fifty minutes and the last ten?

The supposed time gap is never directly referred to in the book of Daniel, nor is this postponement of the final week ever explicitly mentioned in the rest of the Bible. To be sure, none of the other views would get in trouble if this turns out to be the correct interpretation after all. However, if it is not, dispensationalism is finished.

Critique 4: The Church as a Parenthesis

According to dispensationalism, the church is a mystery, not revealed before the New Testament. It was only introduced when Israel rejected the kingdom toward the end of the time of the Gentiles (yet another interruption; this makes the church age an interruption within an interruption). Many dispensationalists believe that the church is never even

¹ House and Ice, *Dominion Theology*, 219.

² *Ibid.*, 220.

³ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁴ This is defended by pointing out that the 42 months of Revelation 13:5 (part of Daniel’s last week) are 1260 days (Rev. 12:6), that is thirty days each. This means one year, or twelve months, would make 360 days. See the footnote to Daniel 9:24 in *The Scofield Reference Bible*.

mentioned in the Old Testament. All the promises in the prophets that were made to Israel do not concern the church, but will be fulfilled to physical Israel, mostly during the millennium.

But what about the many promises to the Gentiles spread throughout the Old Testament? According to dispensationalism, they too are not being fulfilled in the church nor in the gospel, but refer to the millennium. Strictly speaking, not even the promise to Abraham that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed, has a present fulfillment!

This denial of any present fulfillment of Old Testament promises seems rather forced. The early church appears to have been of a different opinion; it deemed the conversion of the Gentiles and their inclusion in the people of God fulfilled prophecy and used numerous quotations from the Old Testament to prove this, as in Romans 9:23-29 and 15:8-12, and Acts 15:14-18. Besides, a number of Old Testament promises to Israel are applied to the church, as we have seen in our critique of the literal method of interpretation.

Now, if the church is the fulfillment of the Old Testament announcement of blessing for the Gentiles, then the church is not completely unknown in the Old Testament after all!

The term *mystery*, used in Paul's epistles, must then be a relative concept. It does not mean that nothing had been made known at all, but rather that no one reading the Old Testament had really grasped what God was up to. No one had foreseen God would go this far, and fully integrate Gentile believers into the people of God.

The system of interruptions constructed by dispensationalism, must also be questioned. We should notice that Daniel does not mention any interruptions, nor does he speak of a time of the Gentiles. Daniel 2 does not introduce such a well-defined time period; it simply predicts the four empires that will fill up the time until God sends his Messiah and establishes his kingdom (which he did in the first century AD). The second parenthesis, that of the church age, is even harder to demonstrate from Scripture. All in all, it seems better to drop the idea that the church is a second program initiated by God, rather than the continuation of his first.

Critique 5: Futurism and Revelation

We have seen how Darby adopted a futurist approach to the book of Revelation. To him, most of the book described the future tribulation within the seventieth week of Daniel. In fact, much Old Testament prophecy is interpreted in a futurist way as well. Whisenant even claims that "90 percent of what all the major and minor prophets said – that's all 16 of them - was speaking of the 70th week of Daniel."¹ This is an extreme point of view (not many dispensationalists will go this far), but it illustrates how dispensational understanding of prophecy is strongly futuristic.

This makes one wonder why God would devote so much space in the Bible to this short period of time. And then give it to people who have no real interest in it, because they will either have died or been raptured beforehand. Is that really what God had in mind?

We have already pointed out, that many scholars would opt for an approach that seeks a careful balance between interpreting elements as already past, still future, or timeless and universal. One great advantage of such an approach is that the book becomes relevant to all generations of Christians and not just to the final one.

¹ S. Lawson, "Edgar Whisenant: His New Predictions", *Charisma and Christian Life* 14.7 (February, 1989), 89.

Admittedly, the Revelation is a difficult book. Adopting a simplistic method of interpreting it may appear to solve the problem, but in reality we are fooling ourselves.

Critique 6: The Secret Rapture

When it comes to the question of the rapture, it must first be pointed out that no one denies the rapture. It is clearly taught in 1 Thessalonians 4 and a few other passages. At stake is whether this rapture happens more or less simultaneously with the visible coming of Christ or whether it happens seven years earlier, as a sudden and secret move by God.

This is perhaps where dispensationalism most radically departed from established Christian doctrine. Before 1830, no one had ever divided the second coming in two stages. Everyone had always seen the rapture and the second coming as simultaneous events.

Dave MacPherson studied the origin of the pre-tribulation rapture and published a book on this subject, titled *The Incredible Cover-Up: The True Story on the Pre-Trib Rapture*. In it, he throws doubt on the origin of this new doctrine; let me quote part of his conclusion:

We have seen that a young Scottish lassie named Margaret MacDonald had a private revelation in Port Glasgow, Scotland, in the early part of 1830 that a select group of Christians would be caught up to meet Christ in the air *before* the days of Antichrist. An eye-and-ear-witness, Robert Norton M.D., preserved her handwritten account of her pre-trib rapture revelation in two of his books, and said it was the *first* time anyone ever split the second coming into two distinct parts, or stages.

Margaret's views were well-known to those who visited her home, among them John Darby of the Brethren. Within a few months her distinctive prophetic outlook was mirrored in the September, 1830, issue of *The Morning Watch* and the early Brethren assembly at Plymouth, England. Early disciples of the pre-trib interpretation often called it a new doctrine.¹

According to Dave MacPherson, this doctrine was first heard of in a hyper-charismatic setting 1780 years *after* Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians. However, his conclusions have failed to convince many scholars and we cannot be sure what influence Margaret MacDonald had on John Darby. He himself was convinced he found the doctrine in the Bible, and it seems unlikely he would base his teaching on subjective revelations. Still, the fact remains that the secret rapture was unknown before 1830. It was certainly a well-kept secret! As someone remarked: "The *secret* pre-trib rapture is so secret that the church never heard of it for 1800 years."² This makes it a questionable doctrine, to say the least.

How about its biblical basis? First, if one rejects the dispensational system of interruptions, or its interpretation of Daniel's seventieth week, the pre-tribulation rapture loses its foundation.

Then, when it comes to the Thessalonian epistles, I must confess that the dispensational interpretation simply does not make sense to me; I don't get it, so I cannot even argue against it. To me, the two passages seem to teach exactly the opposite of what dispensationalists claim. The only part I do understand is the argument based on the restrainer, which has to be taken out of the way (2 Thess. 2:6-7). If the restrainer is the church, or the Holy Spirit within

¹ MacPherson, *The Incredible Cover-Up*, 91. Emphasis his.

² *Ibid.*, 137. Emphasis his.

the church, then clearly the church must be taken out of the way before final events begin. It has to be pointed out, however, that the meaning of this phrase is much debated, and that there are a number of different interpretations. With the identity of the restrainer so uncertain, it seems unwise to give it much weight in our theological system. Besides, it remains unclear how, after this removal of the Spirit, mass conversion among the Jews and a rapid evangelization of the world could take place, as expected by dispensationalists!

Third, that some dispensationalists take resort to Revelation 4 to prove the rapture before the tribulation, seems an act of despair or of ignorance. This is simply too farfetched. There is no clue in the text that John's experience in receiving his vision prefigures the rapture of the church. As to the argument that the church is not mentioned again until chapter 19 (the bride), it needs to be pointed out that phrases like the saints (Rev. 13:7) and those who hold the testimony of Jesus (Rev. 12:17) may well be ways to refer to the church. As to the promise to Philadelphia (Rev. 3:10), its exact meaning is, again, less than clear and hotly debated, and dispensationalism reads a lot out of this short statement. Is "the hour of trial" the end-times tribulation, or could it be a time of persecution under the Roman Empire? Does "keep from" mean to take out of by rapture? Besides, wouldn't literal interpretation demand a fulfillment to the church of Philadelphia, which is no longer extant?

The biblical bases for Darby's new doctrine seems weak. It turns a relatively minor aspect of the second coming into a major event. The "blessed hope" (Tit. 2:13) and the focus of the church in the New Testament, however, is not the rapture, but the second coming.

Eschatology Imposed on Scripture

More criticism of the dispensational system can be added. Dispensationalists have used their principle of strict literal interpretation to develop an extensive system of eschatology. They are avid system builders, and are also good at producing charts of end-time events. Too often, this system is now imposed on the biblical text, and scripture passages are forced to fit the framework.

As a result, dispensationalists have come up with quite a few unique interpretations, particularly of New Testament quotations of Old Testament prophecy, in order to save their system!

Partial Irrelevance of Prophecy

The dispensational separation of Israel and the church makes large portions of the Bible fairly irrelevant to the church. The Old Testament promises to Israel do not apply to the church. Revelation mainly describes the great tribulation, after the church is raptured. According to Chafer, even parts of the gospels address Israel only; after all, during his early ministry Jesus was offering the kingdom to the Jews.

Taken to extremes, this approach leaves us with little more than the epistles, Acts and portions of the gospels as those parts of the Bible that directly address the church!¹ Even

¹ Dispensationalists attempt to compensate this through an exaggerated typology, as can be found in the *Scofield Reference Bible*. This way, Old Testament promises to Israel, which have to be literally fulfilled to Israel, can have a second application to the church.

when applied with more moderation, dispensationalism still leaves us with the question what we are to do with all those minute descriptions of the tribulation and the millennium.

Ezekiel 47, for instance, describes a river flowing from the temple. If this is a literal, millennial river, what is that to us? On the other hand, if it pictures something like the effect of salvation flowing out from God's presence, its application to us would be clear and valuable. Likewise with the restoration promise of the Old Testament. Is it about a literal rebuilding of Israel? Or is this, too, a picture of salvation and of a complete renewal of creation? If the latter option is correct, Old Testament prophecy would be much more relevant to us in the present time than the dispensational system allows.

Absolute Certainty

Popular prophecy writers do not seem to be hindered by any doubts about the correctness of their views. Serious dispensational scholars are more cautious, of course, but the eschatological paperbacks display complete confidence in the prophetic scenario they contain.

From time to time this prophetic scenario needs to be rewritten, due to changes in the world situation. As we have seen, Napoleon or Mussolini are no longer part of it. When the European Union increased its membership to more than ten states, the number of nations expected to make up the restored Roman Empire,¹ a slight alteration was needed. The collapse of the Soviet Union, long the ominous king of the north who would attack Israel, also led to various adjustments. The Gulf War didn't turn out to be the prelude to Armageddon as originally thought.

Fortunately, readers of popular eschatology have short memories, so failed predictions of the past do not hamper the sales of new prophecy books!²

One would wish, though, that these authors would grow a little less confident. The Jews of the first century should serve as a warning. They had well-developed end-time scenarios, but when Jesus appeared, it turned out no one had it right. God usually moves in surprising and unexpected ways, and he may well outmaneuver any end-time scenario at the second coming of Christ.

Dispensational Pessimism

Dispensationalism has tended toward a pessimistic view of the world and a retreat from involvement in politics and other social spheres. One reason for this is its belief that each dispensation must end in failure, as a clear demonstration that man by himself cannot please God or save himself. At the end of the church age, humanity and the church at large (particularly mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics) will be in a state of apostasy, the

¹ Based on the ten horns and the ten toes in Revelation and Daniel.

² As proven by the 30 million copies sold of the *Left Behind* series by LaHaye and Jenkins (Natalie Nichols Gillespie, "Rapture Fever", *Charisma and Christian Life*, 26.5, December 2000, 68; Mark A. Keller, "Bible Prophecy Boom", *Christianity Today* 45.15, December 3 2001, 22).

latter forming a one-world religion. „The end of nominal Christianity is not the final attainment of a Christianized culture, but Anti-Christendom.“¹

Another reason is, of course, the expectation that things will get very bad just before the visible return of Christ, and since this is in the immediate future, improvement of the world's condition is unlikely. One result of this view has been that bad news is transformed into good news, since any sign of decline marks the nearness of the end. Since this development is inevitable and necessary, it is useless to try and stop it. Attempts at reform have been compared to rearranging deckchairs on the Titanic after the ship has hit the iceberg. One does not polish the brass on a sinking ship. To be sure, there have been more than a few exceptions to this tendency, but in general, dispensationalists have expected negative change and many of its leaders actively discouraged social action and attempts to reform society.²

In part this was a reaction against the rosy view of human nature and a more and more secularized belief in humanity's progress championed by liberal theology and characteristic of the nineteenth century. As such, it was an understandable and, up to a point, necessary corrective. Much of postmillennialism had lost sight of the darker side of human nature and society, and the more pessimistic strain that also runs through biblical perspectives on the future. Yet, dispensationalism overreacted into the opposite extreme and largely retreated within the walls of the church, focussing on evangelism and missions.

In recent years, dispensationalists have become more vocal about social responsibility and there has been a clear revival of political interest. However, it is arguable how consistent this really is with a dispensational view of the future.

No Basis for Action

Because of such pessimism regarding the development of society and Christian influence in it, dispensationalism offers little basis for active involvement in its various spheres.

An additional reason for this is dispensationalism's view of the church. Traditionally, it has not acknowledged a commission for the church to reform or redeem society and culture. This is reserved for the millennium. Redemption at present only concerns individuals. The church consists of those who have been „called out“ of the world from all nations; their number is relatively small.³ The church age is an interim time of waiting.⁴ This limited view of the church is incomplete and deficient and has led Christians to lose sight of their social responsibility.

Yet another factor that contributes to this is the expectation of a near end. The following quotation from one of the more successful end-time books illustrates this:

The world today is like a stage being set for a great drama. The major actors are already in the wings waiting for their moment in history (...) The prophetic play is about to begin (...)

¹ Sauer, *Gott, Menschheit und Ewigkeit*, 89.

² As documented in Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 93-96, 107.

³ Sauer, *Gott, Menschheit und Ewigkeit*, 85.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

All the necessary historical developments have already taken place. The trend toward world government, begun with the United Nations in 1946, is preparing the way for the government of the end time. The world church movement, formalized in 1948, is preparing the way for the super-church that will dominate the religious scene after the true church is raptured. Spiritism, the occult, and belief in demons will continue to spread. Communism, through its atheistic philosophy, is preparing the world for a final form of world religion demanding the worship of a totalitarian dictator.

(...) Since the stage is set for this dramatic climax of the age, it must mean that Christ's coming for His own is very near.¹

Typical for dispensationalism, this passage is characterized by a short and closed horizon. There is little time left, the stage is already set for the finale. "Everything is falling into place" has been a favorite phrase of prophecy experts. No great changes or long processes of development are to be expected. Such a view provides little basis for a constructive Christian view of the world, or for dynamic Christian initiative beyond the realm of the church and evangelism. In many areas of life, we are basically just waiting for the rapture.

The Attack on Dispensationalism

These weaknesses in the dispensational system have led to two reactions. One is an undermining of dispensational supremacy. It has suffered from erosion for many years, although it continues to thrive in the popular marketplace. Among respected biblical scholars, dispensationalists appear to be underrepresented. On top of this, dispensationalism has come under increasing attack by the reconstructionist movement in recent years. The following quotation from Gary North gives a taste of the brutal nature of part of this attack:

The culmination and epitaph of the dispensational system can be seen on one short bookshelf: the collected paperback writings of 'serial polygamist' Hal Lindsey and accountant Dave Hunt, plus a pile of unread copies of Edgar C. Whisenant's *On Borrowed Time* and *88 Reasons Why the Rapture is in 1988* (1988), which predicted that the Rapture would take place in September of 1988, and which Mr. Whisenant claims sold over six millions copies in 1988. We could also add all the 1970's titles by Salem Kirban, before he switched his interest to the topic of nutrition.

That these authors best represent dispensationalism in our day is denied (always in private conversation) by the faculty and students of Dallas Theological Seminary, but the embarrassed critics have ignored the obvious: the dispensational movement is inherently a paperback movement, a pop-theology movement, and always has been. It does not thrive on scholarship; it thrives on sensational predictions that never come true.²

Gary North puts on an ugly fight, but his allegations are not completely without truth. So far, dispensationalism hasn't found much of an answer.

Progressive Dispensationalism

A second reaction to perceived weaknesses in the dispensational system has taken place within the movement itself. Throughout this chapter, I have hinted at the fact that some

¹ Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis*, 227-228.

² Gary North, "Publisher's Foreword", in: *House Divided*, Bahnsen and Gentry, xii.

dispensationalists have softened a number of their more extreme positions. A progressive dispensationalism is emerging, which tends to embrace several modifications:¹

- The kingdom is in some way already present and not exclusively future; the already-and-not-yet view of the kingdom, increasingly popular among non-dispensationalists, is accepted by progressive dispensationalism as well.
- The method of interpretation is not strict literalism, but much more in tune with the emerging evangelical consensus on how to interpret Scripture responsibly – something that cannot be reduced to one short motto.
- There is one people of God, be it with some distinctions within it (God will still, in some way, fulfill his national and geographic promise to ethnic Israel). The church is not considered a parenthesis in God's plan. An approach based on multiple or progressive fulfillment of prophecy is adopted, which means there is spiritual fulfillment in the present and the church, and there will be more literal fulfillment, in part limited to Israel, following the second coming.

It remains unclear to me why many of the Old Testament promises apply to all believers, but some only to Israel. Doesn't this undermine the rediscovered unity of the church? Didn't the religious nationalism of the Old Testament come to an end with God's salvation for all nations? Wouldn't an Israel-centered millennium be a step back into the Old Testament system of worship (sacrifice included)? Wouldn't it be an adequate fulfillment of the promise to Israel, if all believers possess the new earth and live on it, fully redeemed?

All of this adds up to a radical departure from 'classical' dispensationalism and can definitely be hailed as an improvement. Its representatives consider this a quest for 'redefinition'. However, it seems that much of this process means dropping or correcting beliefs that have been unique to dispensationalism (even if not supported by all or even a majority of dispensationalists), and affirming or adopting beliefs that are held by many nondispensationalists. One may wonder whether this is redefinition or a dissolving of the system. So far, the movement is largely limited to the scholarly community; it remains to be seen if it can weld itself into a well-defined and successful alternative to the older dispensationalism, which continues to control the popular market place.

In Conclusion

Dispensationalists have been staunch defenders of the Bible. They firmly held their ground when liberalism more and more undermined the Bible as the Word of God. They would not compromise the authority and inerrancy of the Scriptures. This undeniably stands to their credit. However, in this chapter we have found much to criticize in the theological system of dispensationalism: futurism, the pre-trib rapture, the two peoples of God, the popular abuse of the system, its interpretation of Scripture. The final word has to be that, as a theology, it isn't very good. Dispensationalism certainly presumes to have the most detailed knowledge of the future, but this knowledge is of questionable accuracy.

¹ All these issues are discussed in Blaising and Bock, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*. It is interesting that Erich Sauer, a leading German dispensationalist, came to comparable views several decades earlier (e.g. *The Triumph of the Crucified*, 22-25, 29-30, 58-62).

View 2: A Thousand Years of Peace

John Lennon sang about it: “Imagine all the people, living life in peace”. A wonderful vision. We all dream of a better world. Unfortunately, John Lennon excluded God from his “Land of Milk and Honey”. His dream was a secular and God-less millennium: no hell beneath us, above us only sky.

The vision never materialized. As the momentum of the hippie peace movement diminished, John and Yoko settled down in New York. One day the dream changed into a nightmare, when he was shot to death by a deranged fan in front of his apartment, an event that shook the world.

Christianity has had its millennial dreamers as well. Some of these people simply thought that God was at the very brink of ushering in the millennium. Others assigned to themselves a role of more importance: they were God’s chosen tools to establish his kingdom on earth, by force if necessary. Here is what happened once upon a time in Europe.

The New Jerusalem Is in Münster

In 1533 radical Anabaptists took over the city of Münster in Germany. Jan Matthys, a baker from Haarlem in the Netherlands, and later Jan van Leiden, also from the Netherlands, became king over the new society. Jan Matthys believed that the New Jerusalem was about to be set up in Münster.

Tales traveled throughout Europe that a reign of terror and immorality had followed the Anabaptist take-over. These tales may have been exaggerated; rumors tend to grow as they travel. Nevertheless, the situation was deemed so alarming that Lutherans and Catholics united and together quenched this outburst of millennial enthusiasm – an unusual feat in Reformation Europe, where Protestants and Catholics normally fought each other. By 1535 the city was taken and the Anabaptist kingdom came to a ruthless end. The conquerors re-installed a less heavenly-minded government and peace was restored.

This example shows premillennialism at its worst, of course. Apparently, this is where zealots for the end times found their inspiration in earlier days, before dispensationalism arose. I do not intend to discredit all premillennialists by association; rather, it illustrates once more how easily eschatology can go wrong.

A Respectable Ancestry

In contrast to what you may think by now, historic premillennialism actually boasts a respectable ancestry. It goes back to the earliest days of Christianity and because of its age is called *historic* premillennialism. A number of the church fathers, the leaders of the church in its early centuries, held premillennial views. Justin Martyr, an early defender of the Christian faith (AD 110-165), writes:

But I and others, who are right-minded Christians on all points, are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged, [as] the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and others declare.¹

It is interesting to see that Justin Martyr expects a fairly literal fulfillment of the prophets he refers to. Not all historic premillennialists read prophecy this way, and they rarely do it with the excessive rigidity and consistency of dispensationalism. Even Justin Martyr is still far removed from being a dispensationalist; his rebuilt Jerusalem is inhabited by all believers from both Testaments during the millennium, not by Jews only. It is also worth noting that not all early Christians were of the same opinion; again Justin Martyr:

I admitted to you formerly, that I and many others are of this opinion, and [believe] that such will take place, as you assuredly are aware; but, on the other hand, I signified to you that many who belong to the pure and pious faith, and are true Christians, think otherwise.²

This shows that premillennialism was never the universal view of the early church, as dispensationalists have sometimes maintained.³ There were others, who did not believe in a millennial kingdom on earth and were presumably forerunners of the other views.

It may well be that premillennialism was the dominant view in the early church, however. If so, than its dominance came to an end by the time of Augustine (AD 354-430), one of the most influential church fathers. He rejected the literal interpretation of Revelation 20 and instead adopted an amillennial view. Augustine's formulation of this view quickly became the standard of the church. It was so influential that after Augustine premillennialism ceased to play a role of significance, at least in the official church.⁴

At the time of the reformation, premillennialism resurfaced, but debacles like Münster didn't help its acceptance in the church at large. The memory of Münster continued to haunt premillennialists for quite a while. In the nineteenth century, however, it was back in force and enjoyed great popularity. It was during this time that it produced the prophetic meltingpot we have talked about, out of which dispensationalism arose.

In the twentieth century, historic premillennialism has matured into a more moderate view. It counts some of the best evangelical scholars among its ranks. What do they believe?

The Scenario

Historic premillennialists believe in the millennium, of course, which is referred to in Revelation 20. The thousand years mentioned there are interpreted as a period during which Christ will reign over the earth after his return. George Ladd claims that "this is the natural reading of Revelation 20:1-6."⁵ This belief in a literal millennial reign on earth is something

¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, chapter 80.

² Ibid.

³ Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 374.

⁴ There is ample evidence that it went 'underground' and that on the popular level, premillennial and apocalyptic speculation thrived during the Middle Ages; see Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 49-50 and Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, *passim*.

⁵ George Eldon Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism", In: *The Meaning of the Millennium*, ed. Clouse, 17.

historic premillennialism has in common with dispensationalism. In comparison to that of its cousin, the premillennial scheme looks a lot simpler. Here is an outline of its scenario:

- (1) Premillennialists generally believe that there will be a period of apostasy, tribulation and the rule of Antichrist preceding the second coming.
- (2) Many (but not all) premillennialists believe that either shortly before or at the second coming, ethnic Israel will be converted.
- (3) At the second coming, the dead saints will be resurrected and the living saints raptured.
- (4) Satan will be bound and Christ will establish his thousand-year kingdom on earth.
- (5) At the end of the thousand years, Satan will be loosed for a final rebellion.
- (6) The rebellion will be followed by the general resurrection and the last judgment, followed by the new heavens and the new earth.

Historic premillennialists tend to have a method of interpretation that is partly literal, partly nonliteral. We all know the idyllic picture of the lion and the lamb lying down together, while every man sits under his own fig tree for a thousand years. Such descriptions cannot be found in Revelation 20, but are derived from the Old Testament and frequently interpreted as descriptions of the earthly rule of Christ. Different from dispensationalism, however, they are not reserved for Israel only. Old Testament prophecy does find fulfillment in the church.¹

In fact, many historic premillennialists make no strong distinction between Israel and the church. They acknowledge that the separation between Jew and Gentile has been abolished in the New Testament. According to George Ladd:

I do not see how it is possible to avoid the conclusion that the New Testament applies Old Testament prophecies to the New Testament church and in so doing identifies the church as spiritual Israel. I have come to this conclusion not because I read it in books or found it in some theological system, but from my own inductive study of the inspired Word of God.²

At the same time, many think that Israel is in some way still special and that Old Testament prophecy still has a special application to physical Israel.

A majority of premillennialists has accepted the already-and-not-yet understanding of the kingdom. George Ladd has actually been one of the most ardent evangelical promoters of this originally amillennial model.

Critique: Is This Millennium for Real?

For many readers, the millennium may be such an ingrained doctrine of the Christian faith that they may be surprised there are those who reject it. However, there are several difficulties with the premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20, as opponents of premillennialism point out.

¹ It remains unclear how this ‘mixed’ interpretation (literal, non-literal, Israel and/or the church) would work; Ladd admits as much: “We cannot know how the Old Testament prophecies will be fulfilled”; *ibid.*, 28-29.

² *Ibid.*, 23.

A serious problem is that the whole premillennial view leans heavily on one single passage. George Ladd, a well-known premillennial scholar, admits that this is a weak point:

The strongest objection to millennialism is that this truth is found in only one passage of Scripture - Revelation 20 (...) It is a fact that most of the New Testament writings say nothing about a millennium (...) There is, however, one passage in Paul which may refer to an interim kingdom if not a millennium.¹

This passage is 1 Corinthians 15:23-26, but it can just as easily be understood in a post- or amillennial sense.² The whole basis for millennialism, therefore, is a single passage, that happens to be one of the hardest and most debated in the whole Bible.

Dispensational premillennialists may object that Old Testament prophecy, because it has to be literally fulfilled, presupposes some such period as the millennium: when else is the lion going to lie with the lamb? That might be true, *if* prophecy has to be literally fulfilled. Even then it can be argued that the lion and the lamb describe conditions on the new earth instead of in the millennium; they are part of a picture of renewed creation in its final state. After all, the future bliss of Old Testament prophecy is going to last forever, not just for a thousand years; a millennial fulfillment would consequently not be a literal fulfillment at all! Therefore the only 'hard' evidence remains Revelation 20.

Not only is there just this one passage, it is one that is notoriously difficult. No consensus has been reached about its correct interpretation. Here are a few of the problems:

- Revelation 20 does not speak of a kingdom or realm. We may be so familiar with the concept of a millennial kingdom that we overlook this. It merely states that a group of people will reign with Christ for a thousand years. Is this over or on the earth, or is it in heaven? The latter is definitely possible; the passage does not mention the location of the reign, nor of the thrones John sees.
- What is the meaning of the number one thousand? Elsewhere in the Bible, a thousand never means exactly one thousand. It is often used figuratively, especially in Revelation, where numbers are used symbolically throughout the book. This problem is not so serious; one could easily argue that the exact duration doesn't really matter. The number may simply refer to a long period of time.
- Seeing that much in Revelation is communicated through symbols, the question poses itself whether the thousand years could be a symbol as well, representing something different from a literal kingdom phase between the present age and the final state.
- A literal millennium would be a major addition to salvation history. How come something of such importance is introduced only at the very end of the Bible, out of the blue, and without corroborating evidence?
- What is the purpose of this additional age and the devastating release of Satan at its end? We could venture some guesses, but the fact is that the Bible doesn't tell us.

¹ Ibid., 38.

² The reign mentioned in 1 Cor. 15:25 may be the millennium (so premillennialists), but it could also refer to Christ's reign in the present age. For a postmillennial interpretation see Bahnsen and Gentry, *House Divided*, 214-216. For an amillennial interpretation see Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 182-184.

- Last but not least, premillennialism has to introduce a double resurrection of the dead to make the millennium fit. This is nowhere clearly taught in the Bible until Revelation 20. On the contrary: the Bible seems to indicate that there is only one resurrection of the dead, more or less simultaneous with the second coming and the last judgment (the New Testament scenario of the end is remarkably simple: everything circles around the return of Christ and a small number of closely related events). Belief in a millennium forces us to impose a one-thousand-year time gap on texts such as:

Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and [a thousand years later] those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment. (John 5:28-29 RSV)

And I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and [a thousand years later] the wicked. (Acts 24:15 NIV)

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then [a thousand years later] the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up. (2 Pet. 3:10 RSV)

It certainly does not look like this is what the authors of these verses had in mind. So although the premillennial interpretation may appear to be “the natural reading of Revelation 20:1-6”,¹ it is not without problems. It does not fit too well with the eschatology of the New Testament as a whole. In chapter 5 we will explore the amillennial understanding of Revelation 20 as a possible alternative to millennialism.

So What About It?

This has been a short chapter; premillennialism is not a complicated system. How do we evaluate it? At its best, it makes good theology; it is certainly orthodox Christianity. Personally, I am not convinced by it, but I respect those who believe otherwise.

The surprising fact is, premillennialism and amillennialism aren’t necessarily all that different. After George Ladd explains his understanding of how the Old Testament is interpreted by the New, he says:

 | The alert reader will say, ‘This sounds like amillennialism.’ And so it does.²

When he responds to an article by Anthony Hoekema, an amillennialist, he says:

 | I am in agreement with practically all that Hoekema has written with the exception of his exegesis of Revelation 20.³

Here, historic premillennialism and amillennialism are separated by a thin line.

¹ George Eldon Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism”, In: *The Meaning of the Millennium*, ed. Clouse, 17.

² *Ibid.*, 27.

³ Anthony A. Hoekema, “Amillennialism”, In: *The Meaning of the Millennium*, ed. Clouse, 189.

View 3: Not in a Million Years?

Postmillennialism is a system that sounds so good, you almost wish it were true. However, the question is not whether it sounds good, but whether it is correct. It is the latter question that will decide whether we accept postmillennialism or not; it is therefore the question that we must deal with in this chapter.

We will see there are really two forms of postmillennialism: the *traditional* postmillennial view, and the recent revival of this view in the form of *reconstructionism*, or *dominion theology*. We will discuss both, but first we will deal with the question of origin.

The Origin of Postmillennialism

Where did postmillennialism come from? The modern form of this system, postmillennialism as we know it, was developed by Reformed theologians, especially by the Puritans, in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The Great Awakening that took place around this time suggested that the last days would be marked by revival and boosted feelings that the millennium was drawing near. Jonathan Edwards, leader of the awakening, was also postmillennialism's best-known proponent – which means this eschatological system has a respectable ancestry as well. Scientific progress likewise suggested that a golden age of humanity lay just around the corner. Postmillennialism reached its heyday in the nineteenth century. At that time it became the dominant eschatology, at least among American Christians.

Reconstructionists have argued that postmillennialism goes much further back. “From the earliest centuries to the 18th century, the doctrine that the kingdom of God would triumph on earth has been taught by many Christians.”¹ A number of church fathers and others expected the gospel to spread worldwide and bring an end to idolatry in the Roman Empire and beyond. The gospel would thus triumph in the world.

This early strand of optimism concerning the victory of the gospel definitely existed. It may be questioned whether this can truly be called postmillennialism. It was not a very developed or systematic view. A measure of eschatological optimism does not automatically make one a postmillennialist. We should not confuse optimism with postmillennialism. We can believe that the gospel will be successfully preached throughout the world, overcoming all false religions and ideologies, even leading to a certain level of cultural transformation – and still not be postmillennialists. Only when we believe in a future ‘Golden Age’, an era different in essence from the present age, in which Christianity will dominate the earth, do we become true postmillennialists.

Still, there were these early forms of nascent postmillennialism in the church and we are therefore not dealing with something completely novel here.

¹ DeMar and Leithart, *The Reduction of Christianity*, 243.

Its Decline

I mentioned that in the nineteenth century postmillennialism became the dominant view in America. However, towards the end of that century it fell out of favor with evangelical believers. Secularization and the rise of liberal theology had a lot to do with this. It didn't look like a Christianized world was anywhere near in sight; in fact, what was happening looked more like apostasy. Dispensationalism seemed to provide a more realistic estimate of where the world was heading.

In the twentieth century postmillennialism continued its decline. Two devastating world wars didn't exactly help its case for optimism. It even came to the point that dispensational authors could say:

Only utopian enthusiasts and weak-minded theoreticians without a sense of reality can still defend faith in progress with conviction today.¹

Postmillennialism is no longer an issue in theology. World War II brought about the demise of this system.²

To be sure, this statement wasn't quite true even at the time of writing, in 1958. Two well-known postmillennial books were published shortly before that year (Roderick Campbell's *Israel and the New Covenant* was first published in 1954, and Loraine Boettner's *The Millennium* in 1957). Postmillennialism experienced a serious decline the last century, that much is true, but it never came to the point of extinction.

Its Come-Back

The tide has turned remarkably in recent years. Postmillennialism seems to experience a revival of sorts in the form of reconstructionism, or dominion theology, at least in North-America. If it appeared dead in 1958, it certainly doesn't appear so today.

What is happening is much like the proverbial pendulum that moves from one extreme to the other. Dispensational pessimism has been the norm for about a century now in America. The belief has been that the end is near, that things will go from bad to worse, that Antichrist is probably already among us. By now the pendulum has completed its swing and has turned around again. We see optimism returning, and it is dispensationalism that is suffering a measure of decline. There are renewed calls to be involved in the reformation of society, something that was self-explanatory for Christians in the nineteenth century, but all but disappeared in the course of the twentieth. Reconstructionists have been the most vocal about this and link their call with a postmillennial view of the future. It remains a minority view, but one that cannot be ignored.

The Postmillennial Scenario

We have been talking about postmillennialism for two pages now, but what is it? What does this view actually stand for? Loraine Boettner, a 'traditional' postmillennialist, defines postmillennialism as

¹ Sauer, *Gott, Menschheit und Ewigkeit*, 155.

² Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 386.

that view of the last things which holds that the Kingdom of God is now being extended in the world through the preaching of the Gospel and the saving work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of individuals, that the world eventually is to be Christianized, and that the return of Christ is to occur at the close of a long period of righteousness and peace commonly called the 'Millennium'. It should be added that on postmillennial principles the second coming of Christ will be followed immediately by the general resurrection, the general judgment, and the introduction of heaven and hell in their fullness.¹

Traditional Postmillennialism

This is what the future looks like according to traditional postmillennialism:

(1) The kingdom of God is being extended in the world today, through the preaching of the gospel and the activity of the Spirit in and through the church. The end result will be a largely Christian world.

(2) This will lead to a long period of righteousness and peace, which is often called the millennium. The influence of sin and evil will not be completely absent, but it will be greatly diminished. Surprisingly, when Loraine Boettner interprets Revelation 20,² he does *not* identify the millennium mentioned there with this period of peace. His interpretation is quite similar to the amillennial interpretation that we will discuss in the next chapter. Other postmillennialists do identify the 'golden age' with the thousand years in Revelation 20, although none would take the number one thousand as a literal number.

(3) There may be a final rebellion towards the end of this millennium. Postmillennialists differ on this point. David Chilton is one who believes in a final rebellion at the end of the millennium.³ Loraine Boettner does not believe in this apostasy. He calls Revelation 20:7-10 a recapitulation of the last battle described in 19:11-21. This battle does not occur at the second coming, but is fought and decided within history.⁴

(4) Whether there is a final rebellion or not, Christ will return at the end of this period.

(5) The second coming will be followed by the general resurrection, the last judgment, and the beginning of the new heavens and the new earth.

The Improved Version

Reconstructionists have tried to enlarge on this, particularly by adding explanations as to *how* the Christianized world will come about.

A theological belief called *theonomy* plays a crucial role in this process. Reconstructionists are convinced that the Mosaic law of the Old Testament is still valid (except for the parts the New Testament explicitly abolishes, which it does with the ceremonial laws) and is binding on all people and governments. After all, God's ethical standards do not change, reconstructionists argue, and therefore God cannot have changed his mind about the ethical

¹ Boettner, *The Millennium*, 14.

² *Ibid.*, 395-408.

³ Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, 200-201.

⁴ Boettner, *The Millennium*, 74 and 401-408.

instruction he gave in the Old Testament. Biblical law is the instrument through which dominion is achieved.

This is the improved version of the postmillennial scenario according to Gary North:¹

(1) People are saved through grace.

(2) They “respond (...) to God’s dominion assignment”,² to subdue the earth and exercise dominion.

(3) They begin to use biblical law to subdue their own lives and their environment (obedience leads to dominion).

(4) God will bless those who do so. “*Satan’s kingdom is progressively decapitalized*”,³ as money flows from unbelievers to believers.

(5) They begin to live in every sphere of life in accordance with God’s law.

(6) They will rise to prominence, like Joseph and Daniel did.

(7) “The law of God is imposed progressively across the face of each society which had declared commitment to Christ.”⁴

(8) The nations become jealous and will imitate the Christian approach for the sake of the blessing it brings.

(9) The Jews become jealous as well and convert to Christ. It has to be noted that reconstructionism does not see a special position or role for Israel beyond this future conversion.

(10) This will lead to even more conversions among the Gentiles, and, through obedience, more blessing.

(11) The kingdom of God is now worldwide. “The curse will then be lifted progressively by God.”⁵

(12) At some point, Satan will initiate the final rebellion. This rebellion will be crushed immediately by the second coming. Then follow the last judgment and the new heavens and the new earth.

The Three Stages of the Kingdom

The belief in ongoing progress points to an important underlying assumption of the reconstructionist model. This assumption is that there are three stages in the coming of the kingdom:

(1) The kingdom was established *definitively* in Christ’s earthly ministry.

¹ North, *Unconditional Surrender*, 306-307 and 336-344.

² *Ibid.*, 306.

³ *Ibid.*, 338. Emphasis his.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 341.

(2) The kingdom is being established *progressively* throughout the present era.

(3) The kingdom will be established *finally* in the second coming.¹

Reconstructionists believe like amillennialists and historic premillennialists that the kingdom was inaugurated in the first coming of Christ, and will be consummated at his second coming (the already-and-not-yet view of the kingdom). The difference is in the second stage. Amillennialists see the kingdom intruding into the present age, while that age continues to be evil. The reconstructionist model implies a transformation of the present age into more and more conformity with the kingdom of God. The ‘already’ aspect of the age to come increases progressively at the expense of the ‘not yet’ aspect and the present evil age. The ‘already’ grows until there is not all that much ‘not yet’ left to be accomplished at the return of Christ. Reconstructionists believe that, apart from temporary setbacks, things will get better and better.

The Gospel Victory Theme

To put it in other words: God’s victory will manifest itself to a large extent on this side of the second coming, according to reconstructionists. They differ sharply with dispensationalists here. Dispensationalists only expect significant visible victory at the second coming, reconstructionists expect it before Jesus comes back, in the present age. They make much of the “Gospel Victory Theme”:

One particular theme - the Gospel Victory Theme – is quite dominant in the entire prophetic Scriptures; its omission in much modern eschatology is to be lamented.²

It cannot be denied that this theme is present in the Bible. It is relatively foreign to much of premillennialism, with its more future-oriented eschatology. The amillennial system leaves more room for it in theory, but it has not given as much place or attention to it as it probably should have. Reconstructionism has made plenty of place for it. It believes that the victory of God must be manifested not just eschatologically, by direct divine intervention, but also in history. God will triumph in eternity as well as in history, and likewise will the believer.

The Curse Will Be Lifted

A number of reconstructionists apply this model of progress even to the removal of the adamic curse. Gary North: “The curse will then be lifted progressively by God. One result is longer life spans for man.”³ It will be normal for people to become at least a hundred years old!

Isaiah 65:17-25 is a key passage for this belief. The prophet describes a period in which there will be no more premature death. Peace and prosperity prevail. However, death and sin are apparently still present in Isaiah’s vision. Gary North therefore argues that this must refer to a period before the final state. David Chilton does the same, saying that “it is clearly a statement about *this* age, *before* the end of the world, and shows what future generations can

¹ DeMar and Leithart, *The Reduction of Christianity*, 160-170; Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, 24, 73 and 78.

² Bahnsen and Gentry, *House Divided*, 140.

³ North, *Unconditional Surrender*, 341.

expect as the gospel permeates the world, restores the earth to Paradise, and brings to fruition the goals of the Kingdom.”¹ Gary DeMar and Peter Leithart agree; Isaiah 65 is not the new heaven and earth of the eternal state, but: “We believe that Isaiah 65:17-25 describes what the world will look like as the gospel message is faithfully preached and acted upon.”²

Preterism: Prophecy Has Mostly Been Fulfilled

One more aspect of reconstructionism needs to be introduced. Its interpretation of prophecy tends towards preterism, which means interpreting prophecies as fulfilled in the past. Even many prophecies that traditionally have been understood as references to the second coming are explained as already fulfilled.

Kenneth Gentry asserts that preterism is not essential for reconstructionism, and that it has only recently begun to play a significant role in reconstructionism.³ It helps the reconstructionist cause, however, since it eliminates eschatological pessimism. Subjects like the coming apostasy, Antichrist and the great tribulation can conveniently be assigned to the past. This opens the way for belief in ongoing progress. Let’s take a closer look at what preterism says.

Days of Distress

There is one particular event that is crucial to the preterist view of prophecy. This event was perhaps the greatest tragedy ever to befall any nation. The greatest fury of the tragedy fell on its capital. This city suffered a fierce and long siege. Famine became rampant. Soon, death was everywhere. People searched the sewer system and the cattle dung hills for anything edible – anything. One mother was found eating her own son.

Those that tried to escape the city and were captured by roaming gangs were cut open to see if they had swallowed any gold, to smuggle it out. In one night as many as 2,000 people could be killed this way. Those trying to smuggle goods into the city that were captured by the besieging army were crucified. After a while, the soldiers ran out of room and out of wood for the crosses.

It was a time of complete depravity. No human kindness or restraint remained. Robbers went house to house to snatch other people’s food, torturing them if necessary to make them disclose any food they might have hidden. When the city was finally taken, most of those still alive were put to the sword when the victorious soldiers went mad. It was such a tribulation as had not been from the beginning of creation until then, just as Jesus predicted. It seemed like the end of the world.

The occasion? It all happened in AD 70, when the Roman legions besieged and conquered Jerusalem.

¹ Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, 204. Emphasis his.

² DeMar and Leithart, *The Reduction of Christianity*, 116.

³ Bahnsen and Gentry, *House Divided*, 258.

The Last Days Ended in AD 70

Many reconstructionists claim that this event in AD 70 was a major fulfillment of prophecy, involving much more than just the Olivet Discourse. With it, the last days came to an end. As David Chilton says:

The Last Days is a Biblical expression for the period between Christ's Advent and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70: the 'last days' of Israel.¹

He believes that we are dealing with a forty-year period that ended with the fall of Jerusalem. That event was "the end of the age".² The end of the age is therefore not the second coming, but the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and with it, of the old system. It was followed by the age to come; this is the age of the new covenant, just as the old age is the age of the old covenant.³

The 'age to come' refers to the era of the new covenant provisions set forth in the book of Hebrews (...) The Old Covenant ended with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The new covenant began with the ministry of Jesus. The 40 year period between Jesus' ministry and Jerusalem's destruction was an overlap period of the two covenants [the last days]. The 'age to come' is the new age just on the other side of the end of the Jewish dispensation that had its significance in old covenant structures. Many Bible students do not understand 'age,' sometimes translated 'world,' in this way.⁴

And not without reason, as we will see in the critique of reconstructionism below.

Critique: Traditional Postmillennialism

First, a few words on the postmillennial view in general. Our evaluation of it will largely depend on three things: whether we can accept a postmillennial reading of Revelation 20, on the way we read Old Testament prophecy, and on whether we can share its optimism regarding the victory of the gospel in the present era.

- It is not easy to exclude a postmillennial reading of Revelation 20. Amillennialism sees in the millennium a symbol of the whole church age or of major portions of it, in postmillennialism it symbolizes a specific part of the church age, that part which follows the victory of the church. I prefer the amillennial view, but the interpretation of Revelation 20 is too problematic to be decisive. However, if this were all the evidence, it would be a bit meager to support such a major addition (an entire age) to salvation history.
- More weight can be given to Old Testament prophecy, although the question of its interpretation is difficult and needs more space than can be given it here. Must blessings promised in the Old Testament be literally fulfilled within history? Will there be a great outpouring of the Spirit, a far-reaching transformation of the world, a time of great spiritual and material well-being, all before Jesus returns? Or do

¹ Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, 225. Emphasis his.

² Ibid., 88.

³ Ibid., 119.

⁴ DeMar and Leithart, *The Reduction of Christianity*, 124.

these prophecies have a limited and more spiritual fulfillment in the church age, and a more physical and complete fulfillment in the age to come, as amillennialists and premillennialists believe? It could be argued that the views are not that far apart; they simply differ in how much fulfillment they expect before the second coming. Will it be in the already-not-yet form of pre- and amillennialism, or progressively increasing as in postmillennialism? How much of the ‘good stuff’ can we expect on this side of the second coming? The answer to such questions is far from easy,¹ and is obviously linked with the next point.

- Postmillennialism definitely has a point with its Gospel Victory Theme. Its optimism can be considered an improvement to the dispensational inclination towards pessimism regarding the present age. However, it seems to me that postmillennialism expects too much. There is also a theme of eschatological pessimism in the Bible. The last days are characterized by wicked people and persecution, the man of lawlessness will come, it is a time of great conflict (the eschatological war in the Old Testament prophets) etc. Preterism offers a way out by placing much of this in the past, but if we avoid excessive preterism, we have to conclude that the present age continues to be characterized by sin and evil. The Bible promises no heaven on earth, no paradise restored, until Jesus comes back.

It is for reasons like these that I, despite a measure of sympathy for postmillennialism, nevertheless remain unconvinced by it. The critique that follows below focuses on reconstructionism, since it is more complex than traditional postmillennialism.

Critique: Theonomy

Like the interpretation of Old Testament prophecy, theonomy is a topic that requires much more space than I can devote to it here. It is also one I am less familiar with, since it is not directly an eschatological issue. However, here are a few thoughts:

- I wonder if theonomy sets up a ‘canon within the canon’, that is, makes part of the Bible more important and authoritative than others. When it comes to living the Christian life in all areas of society, should this not be done according to the whole word of God (rightly interpreted), rather than especially according to Old Testament law? I don’t think the New Testament accords a special role or position to the Mosaic law over and above the rest of Scripture. In principle, neither do reconstructionists, but in practice they tend to overemphasize ‘biblical law’.
- More important, I would argue strongly that the New Testament teaches that believers are *not* under the law, since they have died to it.² I would add: to all of it, not just to a part, like the ceremonial laws. We now live a new life by the Spirit, who writes God’s standard on our hearts.

¹ In fact, I consider this last question the most difficult one in the field of eschatology: how much kingdom of God, how much fulfillment can we expect during the church age? I suspect the question cannot be answered on the basis of the Bible; apparently, God did not want to reveal this to us.

² Rom. 7:4; Gal. 2:29-20; 3:1-5:1.

- This does not imply a condoning of moral anarchy or licentiousness. The absolute, eternal standard of God (rather than the Mosaic formulation of it) still applies for all people, including Christians. In this sense we are not without law. The Mosaic law was a reflection of this eternal standard for a specific time and situation. The law is not identical with this standard, but is relevant and useful in as far as it reflects it. Because it does so only imperfectly and incompletely, however, we need the fuller light of the New Testament to understand it correctly. The law continues to be the word of God, but not in the direct way it was for the people of Israel under the old covenant.
- We face enormous difficulties in applying specific Old Testament laws to the present time. First of all, we have to deal with the cultural distance between the text and us. Second, many laws are concessions to man's weakness or limited first steps, and therefore *less* than God's actual standard.¹ Third, even if we decide a commandment is valid for today, the question still is if it should be the object of state legislation. After all, it may not be within the realm and responsibility of the state. It can also be a church issue or even belong to an individual's area of responsibility, for which he is accountable to God alone. Much interpretive skill and caution is required and it is likely that future activists claiming to act in the name of reconstructionism would lack these. A fundamentalist abuse of the law is a real danger and could cause great harm.
- The theonomic argument that God's ethical standard doesn't change and therefore the Old Testament law cannot be revoked or abolished, suffers from simplicity. Of course God's standard does not change, but another major interpretative principle in biblical theology is progressive revelation: light, clarity and detail increase as revelation progresses. The law has been superseded by a better and clearer revelation of God's standard: Christ.
- Finally, it would never work to cover all of life in a law code; life is too complex. Nor would this be what God desires; his goal for us is responsibility and maturity in relationship. The first point is probably even more true for society as it is for the individual. The idea that the Bible or the Old Testament law would provide us with a 'biblical blueprint' for law and government is at best a gross exaggeration.

Critique: Progressive Coming of the Kingdom

Reconstructionism makes for an arousing and stimulating account of Christian progress. Is the kingdom of God really coming progressively to the extent reconstructionists expect? Is so much eschatological optimism (for the present age) biblically justified?

In my general critique of postmillennialism, I have already argued that biblical eschatology also has a darker side. Besides, the view of the kingdom as progressive may be true in a limited sense, but this progress does not go as far as reconstructionism expects. In chapter 6, I will argue for a different model of the kingdom.

¹ This applies for instance to Ex. 21:24, "an eye for an eye", and Deut. 24:1, "certificate of divorce". What represented a major step forward more than 3000 years ago does not necessarily do so today.

In my opinion, Gary North's scenario of progress is too simplistic. In addition to the two weaknesses just mentioned, it also suffers from an overdose of extrapolation. Imagine I plant a tree in my garden that turns out to grow fifty centimeters in the first year and again in the second years. Would I be justified to say that three hundred years from now I will have a tree in my garden that is $0.5 \times 300 = 150$ meters high? That be would highly unlikely; I would be misusing the principle of extrapolation. It is safe to use it for the next few steps, like the height of my tree three years down the road. It will probably measure six or seven feet by then (if it doesn't die in the mean time!). The more I extend my extrapolation, the less reliable my prediction becomes. In real life, curves have a tendency to level off and stop increasing. My tree will not grow all the way into heaven. It may become a nice tree, but it will not turn into a skyscraper.

This illustrates the error of extrapolation Gary North makes. His scenario takes the indications that the Bible gives of progress and victory; it adds the effect the gospel has on the life of individuals and society; it extends these far beyond the reliability zone of extrapolation. Take Joseph and Daniel for instance (North's scenario point 6); are they the standard of what most Christians will one day experience? It happened twice, does that mean it will happen to millions of people? Notice, too, that the careers of Joseph and Daniel never led to world domination for the Jews. These two men were simply salt and light in a dark world, and as such were used by God to bring about his purposes. How far can this be taken?

The reconstructionist model foresees an ever increasing flow of blessing and conversions. Does the Bible foresee that too? Reconstructionists say yes, the other views say no. There will be victory and progress in this age, but no near-perfect world of millennial bliss.

Critique: Progressive Lifting of the Curse

As we have seen, a number of reconstructionists believe in a progressive lifting of the curse and support this by pointing to Isaiah 65. Gary North is convinced that this interpretation of the passage is right and makes for a decisive blow against amillennialism: "It should be clear why it is that this detailed and obviously literal prophecy, above all other passages in the Bible, poses the greatest problems for amillennialists, who deny the coming of any period of literal worldwide blessings in response to the worldwide success of the gospel. It is also clear why they have taken the safe approach: they seldom mention Isaiah 65:17-25 and never devote so much as a paragraph to explain it."¹

The fact of the matter is that this passage is a problem for any system of eschatology. Isaiah identifies the era he is describing as the "new heavens" and the "new earth" in verse 17, something Gary North ignores here. The problem then becomes this: How can it be that people still die on this new earth?

This is equally problematic for pre-, post- and amillennialists. Should we reinterpret what "new earth" means here? Or should we split off verse 17 from the rest, and make verse 18-25 a description of the millennium, as the *Scofield Reference Bible* does (not very convincing, since it has every appearance of belonging together)? Or should we opt for a non-literal interpretation?

¹ North, *Unconditional Surrender*, 145-146.

Amillennialist Anthony Hoekema discussed this passage in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*¹ (which proves that it is not true that amillennialists “never devote so much as a paragraph to explain it”, as Gary North just claimed). I find Hoekema’s interpretation quite convincing. He holds that Isaiah is indeed describing the new heavens and earth or the final state. He does so in terms of the covenant blessings, which included long life, and a reversal of the curse. It is an attempt to paint a picture of the indescribable future. Isaiah tries to express how good it will be, in terms his audience could relate to, and his description falls short of the real thing.

If this interpretation is correct, there is no evidence for a progressive lifting of the curse.

Critique: Prophecy Has Mostly Been Fulfilled

So what about preterism and the claim that the last days came to a close with the destruction of the temple?

A certain amount of preterism is inescapable. Some prophecies have indeed been fulfilled. Mark 13, for instance, deals for the most part with the destruction of Jerusalem; that part of it had been fulfilled by AD 70. But reconstructionism takes preterism to an extreme. Many reconstructionists believe that much of Revelation also describes the fall of Jerusalem. They identify this as the great tribulation. David Chilton takes 2 Thessalonians 1 and makes even that a reference to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70:²

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you. (2 Thess. 1:6-10 NIV)

He believes this was fulfilled in AD 70, because “you” obviously refers to the Thessalonians, who therefore had to be still around when this happened.³ But how else should Paul have spoken when he had no idea when it was going to take place? When Christ returns he will “pay back trouble” to whoever will be troubling the church at that time. Since his return also brings the last judgment, he will trouble all others ‘troublers’ as well – including those who troubled the Thessalonians! Paul’s words here have traditionally been taken as a reference to the second coming – and rightly so! Preterism should not be taken to such extremes.

Most Bible students have understood the phrase ‘the age to come’ as something eschatological and still future (even if it is already present in part). Jesus promised to those who left home or brothers or sisters or mother of father or children or fields for him that they would receive a hundred times as much in this present age – “and in the age to come, eternal

¹ Anthony A. Hoekema, “Amillennialism”, In: *The Meaning of the Millennium*, ed. Clouse, 174-176.

² Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, 119-120.

³ Notice that in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 Paul includes himself among those alive at the coming of the Lord and the rapture. On Chilton’s logic, we must conclude either that Paul was wrong, or that this passage does not describe the second coming and the resurrection of the dead.

life” (Mk. 10:30). This doesn’t refer to the period after AD 70, yet it is typical for the way the phrase is used in the New Testament.

Otherwise, one would also have to wonder what Jesus meant when he said: “I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt. 28:20); not a whole lot, apparently, unless the phrase suddenly takes a different meaning here.

The destruction of Jerusalem was not as important as reconstructionism makes it to be. The new age was inaugurated in Christ’s death and resurrection, not in AD 70, when Jerusalem fell. The old covenant came to an end at the same time, not forty years later. The fall of Jerusalem was merely the finishing touch, and a sign of God’s wrath on those who reject Christ, his judgment on an unrepentant generation. It is therefore surprising to read in David Chilton’s book:

The early Church looked forward to the coming of the new age. They knew that, with the visible end of the Old Covenant system, the Church would be revealed as the new, true Temple; and the work Christ came to perform would be accomplished.

The Apostles and first-generation Christians knew they were living in the last days of the Old Covenant age. They looked forward anxiously to its consummation and the full ushering in of the new era.¹

We have to ask here, don’t Paul’s letters (written before AD 70) treat the church as already being the new temple? Wasn’t Christ’s work accomplished by Pentecost? Sure enough the church looked (and still looks) forward to the coming of the new age and the full ushering in of the new era, but that didn’t happen in AD 70. *Nothing* changed for the church in that year, except that its views were confirmed by the events. It simply continued to enjoy the benefits of the new covenant and to anxiously look forward to the age to come.

Critique: A Different Hope?

There is yet another problem in the reconstructionist model. It places the second coming in the distant future, because of the time it will take for the church to achieve dominion:

What we are engaged in is the long-term extension of the kingdom. And by long-term, we mean long-term: century after century of building, block by block. Dominion does not come overnight. There is no instant dominion. Dominion comes over a period of decades and centuries, through self-sacrificing service and obedience.²

The result: the Christian hope loses part of its eschatological and futuristic nature. We are now looking forward to events in the course of history, rather than to The Event at the end of it. I admit that we can focus on the second coming too much and neglect our present responsibility – but we can also focus on it too little. The New Testament gives the return of Christ a central place in the future expectations of individual believers. The second coming of Christ is the essence of the Christian hope.

Christians have traditionally believed that Christ might return within their lifetime (and then again, he might not). Not so in reconstructionism. The second coming is far away, because the gradual transformation of the present age will obviously take a lot of time.

¹ Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, 119.

² DeMar and Leithart, *The Reduction of Christianity*, 67.

915 Generations to Go!

How much time are we thinking about according to postmillennialists and reconstructionists? Charles Hodge (1797-1878), who was a postmillennialist and a systematic theologian at Princeton University, referred to one theory that claimed that this period could last 365,000 years, “but he remained cautious”¹. David Chilton offers the following calculation for the amount of time that is still left for history:

Consider the promise in the law: ‘Know therefore that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness *to a thousandth generation* with those who love Him and keep His commandments’ (Deut. 7:9). The God of the Covenant told His people that He would bless them to the thousandth generation of their descendants. That promise was made (in round figures) about 3,400 years ago. If we figure the Biblical generation at about 40 years, a thousand generations is *forty thousand* years. We've got 36,600 years to go before this promise is fulfilled!²

If anyone objects by saying that the number 1000 is usually not meant literally in the Bible, Chilton will agree; it is used symbolically for a vast number, usually much more than a thousand!³ He continues:

God promises that He will bless His people for one thousand generations. By the analogy of Scripture, then, this means that a figure of forty thousand years is a bare *minimum*. This world has tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of years of increasing godliness ahead of it, before the second coming of Christ.⁴

(I think God was simply trying to say that there is *no end* to his lovingkindness. A thousand generations means a very long time (forever). It is not implied that when a thousand generations have gone by he will stop blessing, and he certainly wasn't giving a time indication for the second coming in this passage.)

Wayne House and Thomas Ice quote David Chilton as even having said: “It may require a million years.”⁵

Is it right to put the second coming in such a distant future? We don't want to fall into the other extreme of any-minute imminence, but we do need to affirm the potential nearness of the second coming. Paul apparently thought it might happen during his lifetime, according to 1 Thessalonians 4:15 (“we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord”). Some modern theologians have even thought that Paul was wrong in Thessalonians. He expected it during his life and later had to change his theology when it didn't come. This is an unnecessary conclusion, but it does show that Paul didn't think in terms of a long time lapse when it came to the second coming; his writings give no indication that thousands, perhaps millions, of years have to go by before Christ returns.

¹ Ibid., 259.

² Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, 221. Emphasis his.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. Emphasis his.

⁵ House and Ice, *Dominion Theology*, 231.

Therefore, with Paul, let's await "our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (Tit. 2:13, RSV). It is the second coming we look forward to, not one kind of millennium or another.

In Conclusion

A lot of controversy has surrounded the recent awakening of postmillennialism.¹ Hal Lindsey's *The Road to Holocaust*, for instance, seems to blame reconstructionists in advance for their share in enabling a future holocaust of the Jews; a rather farfetched accusation.² I definitely see reasons for criticism. It may be that the real problem with dominion theology is not dominion theology, however. It may be the theological ignorance of many charismatics and other evangelicals who either resist dominion theology as from the devil himself, or embrace it as the latest revelation from heaven. Reconstructionism deserves a more balanced evaluation than this.

Excursus: David Chilton, Paradise Restored

We are now ready for a closer look at David Chilton's book, *Paradise Restored*. This book can be considered *The Late Great Planet Earth* of reconstructionism. It is a popular approach to eschatology, likewise aiming at a broad audience.

Gary North, the publisher of this book, apparently thinks it is very good. He speaks about it in exaggerated terms in his epilogue to the book:

You have in your hand a literary miracle.

Chilton has established the terms of the debate over eschatology for the next hundred years, at the very least.

David Chilton's *Paradise Restored* and *The Days of Vengeance* are by far the most eloquent application of this theological perspective in the field of eschatology. I doubt that they will be exceeded in style, brilliance, and relevance during my lifetime (if ever).

What should be an inspiration to any dedicated Christian layman is the knowledge that another layman with a bachelor's degree in history and only one year of seminary wrote two of the most important works in eschatology in the history of the church – perhaps *the* most important.³

It is hard to believe your eyes when you read this. Especially since the book isn't all that great. It revels in the excessive preterism I have criticized above. A second, even more serious problem is the unique method of interpretation used in the book, especially in tracing the Paradise theme throughout the Bible.⁴ My critique will focus on this aspect.

In Chilton's method, the interpreter takes a concept and then looks for biblical associations that can be made with it. Take the woman at the well, for instance (this is David Chilton's first example in the book).⁵ Jesus offers her water. What is associated with water? The

¹ Representative for this is House and Ice, *Dominion Theology*.

² See Bahnsen and Gentry, *House Divided*, 377-379.

³ Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, 327, 331, 339, 340 respectively. Emphasis his.

⁴ *Ibid.*, chapter 2-7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18-20.

book lists a number of Old Testament Scriptures with water in it.

I don't deny that the Bible makes reference to earlier concepts or events in its imagery. Sometimes a relationship may rightly be suspected. Isaiah speaks of water in the wilderness, and this may well have to do with Jesus' offer of living water in the Gospel of John. However, Chilton also mentions the crossing of the Jordan by Joshua, the waters of the Flood, a well where God spoke to Isaac, and many others. It brings up all sorts of uses, without discrimination.

Thus, when the Bible speaks of *water*, we are supposed to have in our minds a vast host of associative concepts, a complex of Biblical images that affects our thinking about water. To put it differently, water is supposed to be something like a 'buzz-word,' a term that calls up many associations and connotations. When we read the word *water* we should be reminded of God's saving acts and revelations by water throughout Scripture.¹

This way we are bound to read something into the text. There is too much freedom here; which association is valid? There is some validity to the idea in principle, but in practice, it is little better than allegorization. A few examples from Chilton's book.

- Eden was on a mountain, so God chooses mountains as sites for redemptive acts and revelations: Moriah, the ark on the mountains of Ararat, Horeb, Carmel, the mountain of the Sermon on the Mount, the mountain of transfiguration, the city on a hill, Mount Zion, etc. This leads to the conclusion that "in redemption God is calling us to return to Eden."²
- The minerals mentioned in Genesis 2 are intended "to connect in our minds the Garden Eden with precious stones and minerals (...) In fact, the ground seems to have been fairly littered with sparkling gems of all sorts"³ (the latter is a dubious assertion based on Ezekiel 28:13). The high priest had to wear two onyx stones with the names of the twelve tribes on it, according to Exodus. These were stones of memorial, the text says. Onyx is also mentioned in Genesis 2, so the memorial is for remembrance of the garden, according to the book.⁴ (In reality, they were for remembrance of the twelve tribes before God, not a memory of paradise.)
- Manna is said to have the color of bdellium (Numbers 11:7 in some translations), a substance also mentioned in Genesis 2:12. Again a reference to the garden!⁵ The priests are to wear linen, a light material. This was to avoid sweating, a symbol of the curse, "to show the removal of the Curse in salvation."⁶ The twelve springs of Elim symbolize the tribes of Israel, and the 70 palm trees the 70 nations of the world.⁷

As inventive as some of this may be, at this point we have degenerated into plain

¹ Ibid., 20. Emphasis his.

² Ibid., 31-32. The conclusion is in fact correct, the reasoning, however, is nonsense. It only serves to prove that one can associate anything with anything.

³ Ibid., 32-33.

⁴ Ibid., 33.

⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁶ Ibid., 44.

⁷ Ibid., 46.

allegorization¹, far removed from sound interpretation. Not all of what the book says is bad. Paradise is a pattern for the world to come in prophecy. Some associations are valid, but the book keeps seeing them where it is unlikely they ever resided in the mind of the biblical author. It makes arbitrary connections; where is the end of it?

It is good to know that this is not typical for reconstructionism. This method of interpretation has been criticized even from within the reconstructionist camp. The method apparently originated with James Jordan.² Greg Bahnsen says of him that he “no longer identifies himself as being a Reconstructionist. Because of Jordan’s departure from standard Reformed hermeneutics (the historical, grammatical, Biblico-theological method) for the eccentric and imaginative approach of ‘interpretative maximalism,’ other Reconstructionists would be hesitant to acknowledge him as adhering to the underlying, crucial convictions of Reconstructionism any longer.”³ Bahnsen has criticized David Chilton’s *Days of Vengeance*, a commentary on Revelation, for the same flaw.⁴

I think there are better books on eschatology than this one. Gary North’s boast about it proves hollow and empty, a lot of wind but no rain. It fails to deliver the promised goods.

SUMMARY OF CRITICISM

Since postmillennialism is not a well-known view and since the critique of it has been fairly extensive, I will summarize the latter here.

(1) Postmillennialism proposes a millennium before the second coming, a period of great peace, prosperity and righteousness. It is hard to find evidence for such a period in New Testament eschatology.

(2) In reconstructionism, progress is expected in part on the basis of a rather simplistic reasoning. God will bless the righteous and curse the wicked. The number of the righteous will increase through the progress of the gospel; this means blessing will increase and things will get better and better.

(3) Where amillennialism puts the emphasis on the *intrusive* nature of the kingdom, reconstructionism has an eschatology of *progression*. The ‘already’ aspect of the kingdom progressively increases, until even the Adamic curse is partially lifted – a questionable extrapolation.

(4) Postmillennialists have rightly recognized the victory theme in the Bible, but take this theme too far for this side of the second coming. There is also room for eschatological pessimism in the Bible. Not everything will get better. There may well be an intensification of the conflict between good and evil. This is often ignored or explained away by reconstructionists.

(5) Contrary to what some reconstructionists think, to be optimistic about the progress and influence of the gospel in this age does not necessarily turn someone into a postmillennialist.

¹ Interpreting the Bible as if it were an allegory, as if there were a second level of meaning behind the text.

² Ibid., 332-333, 335.

³ Bahnsen and Gentry, *House Divided*, 70.

⁴ House and Ice, *Dominion Theology*, 309.

(6) Reconstructionism depends on theonomy, belief in the abiding validity of Old Testament law for all nations, as the instrument to bring about reconstruction and lead the church to dominion – a controversial and questionable view of the Mosaic law.

(7) The second coming is placed in the distant future; Christian hope partially changes its meaning.

(8) Reconstructionism has displayed a tendency to excessive preterism. It applies many passages that have traditionally been understood as dealing with the second coming to the period around AD 70.

(9) At least some reconstructionists re-interpret the age to come as the era of the new covenant, and the last days as the period between AD 30 and 70. The end of the age has already come in the destruction of Jerusalem. The significance of this event is exaggerated in this view.

(10) Some reconstructionists use an unacceptable method of interpretation based on associations between scripture verses. This method easily degenerates into allegorization and is unacceptable even to many other reconstructionists.

To balance this critique, it must be emphasized that both postmillennialism and reconstructionism are definitely orthodox Christianity with, as stated before, a respectable history. I should also add that North and Chilton do not personify the reconstructionist movement. The reason I have quoted them often is that they, more than other reconstructionists, seek to address a broad audience. They are somewhat on the edge of reconstructionism, however, and there are definitely less extreme representatives of this view.

Since postmillennialism has recognized elements of the biblical message that are often overlooked in other views, it would be to our disadvantage to ignore or reject this view instead of interacting with it.

Someone asked me if the evangelical tendency to pessimism can be overcome without postmillennialism – does the church need a dose of postmillennialism? This is quite possible; perhaps this movement is part of God's toolbox to move the church away from the overly defensive position it has taken in the twentieth century!¹

¹ I owe this insight to Roderich Nolte.

View 4: The Millennium Is Now!

One way to get attention is to be loud – even if loudness is no guarantee for the quality of what is being shouted. More quiet and modest people, who think before they speak, are often overlooked. Amillennialists are members of this second group. They have good answers, but they don't often get heard. They haven't exactly shouted their message from the rooftops and they are not very prevalent on Christian television either. The result is that amillennialism is relatively unknown among evangelicals. This chapter will introduce you to this fourth and final view of the end times.

The Origin of Amillennialism

The origin of amillennialism is usually traced to Augustine, whom we already met in a previous chapter. This church father, who lived from AD 354 until 430, was the first to present a fully developed amillennial interpretation of Revelation 20. Since not everyone before Augustine believed in a literal millennium¹, he is not, strictly speaking, the first amillennialist. Rather, Augustine was the first to give a clear, systematic statement of the alternative to the premillennial view.

Many details of his interpretation are no longer followed today, but the general idea of understanding the thousand year in a symbolic way caught on. This view quickly became dominant in the church, as we saw in chapter 3, and continued as such for centuries. It was, in fact, the dominant view of the church on the millennium for more than a thousand years (a full millennium!). Those who held to other views were a minority and were often frowned upon by the rest of the church – understandably, considering the anarchist tendencies of these medieval millennialists.²

When the Reformation came, reformers like Luther and Calvin re-affirmed the amillennial system of eschatology. However, movements such as the Anabaptists and the Puritans paved the way for a less unified eschatology. They tended to be either pre- or postmillennial. At first, postmillennialism became dominant, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world. Just over a century ago, dispensationalism took over. Amillennialism quietly survived during this time as the view of a still significant section of the church, but it did not make any major impact.

We have already hinted at why that would be. Amillennialism is not prone to sensationalism. It is a sober view. The sensational appeal of the other views is largely missing in amillennialism. Amillennialists haven't done much to popularize their view. There is no such thing as an amillennial equivalent of *The Late Great Planet Earth*.³ They don't 'scream' loud enough and therefore go largely unnoticed.

¹ See the quotation from Justin Martyr in chapter 3.

² As documented in Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*.

³ That is, a book with equal popular appeal. There are of course attempts to present a popular-level but nondispensational introduction to eschatology which take an amillennial position. A remarkable example is *The Return* by Barry Chant and Winkey Pratney; less convincing is John E. Hosier's *The End Times*.

Yet, its biblical foundation is well thought-through. Properly understood, it gives a powerful basis for a Christian lifestyle, including evangelism and social involvement, in today's world. It is worthy of careful consideration. It may not look all that exciting at first view. But beneath its gray and unappealing skin it may hide the most radical view of all.

The Scenario of Amillennialism

The amillennial outline of the future is even simpler than that of historic premillennialism. The genius of this system is its perspective on the present age and its simplicity, not the provision of an elaborate scenario of the end times.

(1) The kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil develop side by side during the present age. Most amillennialists expect an intensified confrontation towards the end.

(2) Amillennialists differ in their estimation of Israel's future. Some expect a large-scale end-time conversion of the nation, others don't. For most amillennialists, Israel as a nation does not have a place in the interpretation of prophecy apart from the church. All people who don't believe are lost, whether Jew or Gentile. All who believe, whether Jew or Gentile, will be saved; together these form the eschatological people of God. Jerusalem and the Middle East are therefore not the focus of prophecy or of end-time events. Here, amillennialism differs sharply from popular prophetic interpretation.

(3) "*The Second Coming of Christ will be a single event.*"¹ This event encompasses the general resurrection (of both believers and unbelievers) and the rapture, both of which will be simultaneous with the single coming of Christ.

(4) The second coming is followed by the last judgment, after which the eternal or final state is ushered in.

Two remarks are in place here. First, an addition to point (1). The modern amillennial model sees the kingdom and the age to come as intrusive: both are part of a reality that is breaking into the old age. It does not replace it or gradually defuse its evil essence. In this it differs from the postmillennial view, which sees the kingdom as a progressive and transforming presence. Amillennialism has a realistic view of the abiding presence of evil in the world, and is optimistic regarding the progress of God's purpose in spite of this.

Second, a word of clarification regarding point (2). This amillennial view of Israel (which overlaps with the postmillennial view) is a result of underlying principles of interpretation. Amillennialists seek to consistently interpret the Old Testament in the light of the New. In this, they differ radically from the dispensational credo of consistent literalism. The fact that Jesus has come must change the way we understand the Old Testament. Jesus reorganized the people of God on the basis of faith in him, not along ethnic or national lines. For this reason, so amillennialists, the church is the renewed people of God², the true or spiritual Israel. She is

¹ Anthony A. Hoekema, "Amillennialism", In: *The Meaning of the Millennium*, ed. Clouse, 182. Emphasis his.

² There are aspects of both continuity and discontinuity in this. For all the discontinuity between Old and New Testament, however, this community is not a new or different people, but stands in clear continuity with the Old Testament people of God (the believing part of Israel), as the one people of God of all ages. In the past, amillennialists have often stressed the aspects of discontinuity between Israel and the church, which has led some of their opponents to coin the term *replacement theology*. This term is an adequate description of *some* forms of amillennialism (and postmillennialism) only.

therefore at the heart of history and experiences the fulfillment of the promise. God may well have a plan for ethnic Israel (openness to this possibility has been growing among amillennialists), but if so, this is not seen in terms of a prophetic scenario, but more as “a continuing attitude of divine favor for the Jewish people”¹.

I Thought the Millennium Was Future?

Vital to amillennialism is its view of the millennium. The pivotal passage in the debate over the millennium is Revelation 20:1-6 (NIV):

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. 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.

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 for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. 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.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part 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.

It may not be clear how amillennialists can ‘ignore’ this passage in their system. How can it possibly be said that the millennium is now? For this reason, it is crucial to take a closer look at this passage and explain how amillennialists understand it.

In the amillennial view, the millennium has a symbolical meaning. It tells us something about the present age and stretches from Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection to the second coming (or shortly before). Amillennialists feel compelled to adopt such a nonliteral interpretation of this passage for a number of reasons:

- The nature of Revelation. It is a highly symbolic book. The dragon, the beast and the lamb, for instance, each symbolize something quite different from actual animals. They are representations of present and spiritual realities (if we reject an exclusively futurist understanding of the beast). So why would the thousand years refer to a literal period some time in the future?
- The structure of Revelation. It is not a chronological book and it does not describe things from the beginning to the end in their proper order. It is a little like a history book of, let’s say, the Middle Ages. Chapter 1 of such a work may discuss the development of the nobility throughout the Middle Ages. Chapter 2 goes back to the beginning and deals with the religious trends and events. Chapter 3 describes the development of commerce, once again throughout the whole period. In a similar way, Revelation looks at the same time period from a number of different perspectives and is therefore recapitulative: the various sections run parallel and repeat themselves, or at least show significant overlap.

Several times the book seems to reach the end of the story:

¹ Richard J. Mouw, “The Chosen People Puzzle”, *Christianity Today* 45.4 (March 5, 2001), 70-78.

- When the sixth seal is broken: “The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up (...) the great day of their wrath has come” (6:14, 17).
- At the seventh trumpet: “There will be no more delay! But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished” (10:6-7), and, “The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ’” (11:15). Notice how in 11:17 God is called “the One who is and who was”, *no longer* the One who is to come; he has already come at this point of the book.
- When the earth is harvested in 14:14-20. This is a picture of the final judgment.
- At the seventh bowl: “It is done!” (16:17), and: “Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found” (16:20). This describes the same earthquake as at the end of chapter 6.

After it reaches the climax, the book starts all over again, but each time looking at things from a different point of view. The seven trumpets in chapter 8-11, for instance, close with the end of the age, as noted. Then in chapter 12 verse 1 they are followed by the vision of the woman clothed with the sun, moon and stars, who is crying out in pain, about to give birth. This is Israel, bringing forth the Messiah. We have been taken back to the first coming of Christ.

Now notice that chapter 19 ends with an account of what could be interpreted as the second coming and the end of the age, following the pattern of chapter 11 and 12. It is therefore possible that in Revelation 20:1 we return to the beginning of the story once again, that is, to the first coming of Christ. Or it could be that the vision in 20:1-6 in some other way includes or recapitulates the whole church age. In both cases, the millennium is not something still to come. It has already begun, at the first coming of Christ, and is a symbolic description of the entire Christian era.

- The reason for the number one thousand. It is probably intended as a deliberate contrast to the three and a half years or forty-two months, the duration of the beast’s reign of terror. This number reminds us of the severe but relatively short persecution of the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes around 168 BC, which lasted about this long. Evil rules for a short time only, whereas God’s saints rule for a thousand years. Numbers in Revelation tend to have symbolic meaning anyway. For these reasons, amillennialists tend to see neither number as literal. Just as there are numerous manifestations of the beast and repeated times of intensive persecution, so the reign of Christ manifests itself in the present age with fluctuating intensity as well.
- The location of the thrones in Revelation 20:4. Where are they? The passage never says these thrones (or the thousand-year reign) are on the earth, nor does it mention Palestine or earthly Jerusalem. Mostly every other throne Revelation mentions is in heaven, so why not these ones? By implication, the millennium would not be an earthly empire, but a heavenly rule.
- The identity of those reigning with Christ. It is difficult to know for certain if the Greek describes a single group, or if it refers to those beheaded and those who had

not worshiped the beast as two groups. More scholars tend to the first option, as reflected in various translations.¹ If this is correct, it is only those martyred who come to life here and reign with Christ (assuming beheading covers all other forms of execution as well; otherwise the group becomes even more select!). Other Christians are included among “the rest of the dead”, who are not raised until the very end. They do not participate in the millennium. If the text describes a literal resurrection in which not all saints participate, this causes great difficulties in light of 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17. There, all living and deceased saints are said to be present at the second coming.

- We could try to get around this, of course. Maybe the other saints are not mentioned, but are to be included as well; however, the weakness of this explanation is exactly that: this is not mentioned in the text. Besides, this still calls for an explanation as to why the text focuses on martyrs here, leaving out other believers; the next point offers one.
- The purpose of the passage. The entire book of Revelation serves first and foremost as a word of encouragement for Christians who go through persecution – not as a detailed map of the future (most interpreters who took the book as such became terribly lost, judging by the failure of their interpretations and predictions). Revelation 20 serves this same purpose: it seeks to be a word of encouragement. The last time we heard about these “souls”, as John calls them, was in Revelation 6:9. There, John saw “the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God” calling for vengeance. They received a white robe and a word of assurance. In chapter 20, they receive even more. Their defeat on earth, their seeming weakness and failure, is in appearance only. In reality, those who lose their life for Christ end up reigning with him in and from heaven. This is meant to embolden Christians to persevere in times of persecution.
- New Testament eschatology. The rest of the Bible presents us with one general resurrection, not two (one just before the millennium, and one at the end). The second coming of Christ seems to bring God’s purpose to completion and usher in the new heavens and the new earth. We have gone through the exercise of imposing thousand-year gaps on Bible verses in chapter 3, and it didn’t look too convincing. There is no place for a literal, earthly millennium in the scenario of the New Testament.
- The mixed state of the millennium. If the millennium is taken literally, two problems arise. First, there will be resurrected believers with their resurrection bodies during the millennium. At the same time there will still be ordinary, mortal people on earth. The resulting society will be a strange amalgam of incompatible beings. (Some dispensationalists have ‘solved’ this by proposing two Jerusalems: one on earth for Israel, and one in heaven or in the sky for the resurrected and glorified church.) Second, the millennium is not defined as either this present evil

¹ KJ, NKJ, RSV, NRSV, NIV see one group, AS and NASB translate as if two groups are intended. In dispensationalism, this is solved by identifying these people as tribulation saints, those who died during the seven-year reign of the beast; in this view, the verse has nothing to do with the church saints.

age, nor as the age to come. It remains unclear what its nature is or how it would fit into this scheme of the two ages.

These reasons lead amillennialists to interpret the millennium symbolically.

What Is the Millennium?

Now, if amillennialists are right, and the millennium isn't a literal time on earth, then what is it? There have been different opinions about this among amillennialists. I will present the one that sounds most convincing to me and that is probably held by a majority of modern amillennialists.

I have indicated above that Revelation 20 is a word of encouragement to persecuted Christians, for whom martyrdom was a very real possibility. It tells them that in losing their life they will gain a share in the present reign of Christ in heaven (and, in spite of appearances, Christ, not Satan, is reigning).

There is more to say, since we should also take the first three verses of chapter 20 into account. Whereas verse 4-6 tells us something about those Christians who have been martyred, verse 1-3 tells us something about Satan. We see an angel coming down from heaven who seizes Satan. Notice that it isn't God himself who comes down, and there is no life-or-death combat involved. It is easy. Satan is no match for God, who merely sends an angel to deal with him. The angel seizes him, binds him for a thousand years and casts him into the bottomless pit. This is "to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore" (20:3).

How can this be true? Isn't Satan alive and well on planet Earth? The amillennial answer is no, not at all. He is alive, but not at all well. His head has been crushed, figuratively speaking (Gen. 3:15). Since Calvary, Satan is no longer able to keep the nations in darkness. The light of Christ shines and he cannot prevent it from penetrating even the remotest corners of the earth, offering salvation to everyone. That is what it means that he cannot deceive the nations anymore.

Luke 10:18-19 gives the same truth in a different picture. The seventy-two disciples of Jesus return with great joy, because of the success of their mission. And what does Jesus say? "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you." And in John 12:31 he says: "Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out."

Hebrews 2:14 and Colossians 2:15 are even clearer: "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." Has Satan really been destroyed and disarmed? Well, in a sense, he has. In the same sense, he has been bound. The result is that

throughout the gospel age in which we now live the influence of Satan, though certainly not annihilated, is so curtailed that he cannot prevent the spread of the gospel to the

nations of the world. Because of the binding of Satan during this present age, the nations cannot conquer the church, but the church is conquering the nations.¹

The binding of Satan during this era, in other words, makes missions and evangelism possible.²

The peoples of the earth were in darkness for thousands of years before Christ arrived. Deceived by Satan, most succumbed to one form of idolatry or another. But now the gospel has been set loose in the world. Nation after nation is impacted by its transforming power, as individuals bend their knee and confess Jesus as Lord. This progress cannot be stopped. It will penetrate even the darkest and most resistant religious and ideological blocks. Satan will not be able to withstand the power of the gospel.

This is how many amillennialists understand the binding of Satan. It seems to me, however, that the context itself points into a somewhat different direction. It is in Revelation 20:7-10 that we get to see what it means when Satan deceives the nations: it is not so much that they live in idolatry, blind to the truth about God, but rather that they wage all-out war against the people of God. So perhaps we should understand all of this in an idealist sense, as a symbolic representation of general forces and principles.

In that case we are not dealing with a future military conflict, but with the spiritual battle that manifests itself again and again throughout the end times.³ Just as there is more than one representation of the Beast in history, there could be more than one (manifestation of the) ‘final battle’ and more than one ‘millennium’, that is, times in which a Beast does not reign, but the church lives in relative peace. This is how it worked when the Roman Empire tried to destroy the church; this ‘Beast’ was destroyed, Satan was ‘bound’ and no such attempt was made for a very long time. In other words, there may be times of intense persecution, but they are relatively short, and in the end, Satan is defeated – that is, prevented from continuing his all-out war on the saints..

Such a historical, repeated fulfillment may be all there is, for the Beast and for the millennium. This is often the way apocalyptic literature works – it *interprets* history and the forces at work within it, rather than that it *predicts* a scenario. This means that what is described happens *within* the course of history rather than at the end.

At any rate, we should not allow ourselves to be so ‘brainwashed’ by the repetition of one particular school of interpretation that we lose sight of the ambiguity and difficulty of the passage and become dogmatic about what Revelation 20 means. I don’t think God has fixed himself in Scripture as to how exactly the present world will end; he has left himself plenty of room to maneuver – and surprise us!

Whatever the true interpretation of Revelation 20, this discussion should make it clear that the passage is difficult enough to *not* make it a cornerstone or focal point of our eschatology.

¹ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 229.

² Anthony A. Hoekema, “Amillennialism,” In: *The Meaning of the Millennium*, ed. Clouse, 181.

³ This is how Psalm 2, “The kings of the earth take their stand (...) against his Anointed One” (Ps. 2:2 NIV) is interpreted in Acts 4. There, “Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel (...) to conspire” against Jesus (Acts 4:27 NIV) – a kind of minor Armageddon.

The First Resurrection

We have looked at the amillennial explanation of the binding of Satan now, but what about the first resurrection and the “coming to life”? Amillennialists believe that this does not refer to a physical resurrection, but to a spiritual one. The coming to life refers to what is called the ‘intermediate state’ of believers, their condition between death and their final resurrection.¹ They will be in the presence of Christ and reign with Him.

It is interesting to notice what John says about death. Just as there is a first resurrection and by implication a second resurrection, likewise there is an implied first death and an explicitly mentioned second death (20:14). Both the first resurrection and the second death are spiritual; both the second resurrection and the first death are physical.

Critique: Revelation 20

There are at least three things in the amillennial interpretation of Revelation 20 that many people find difficult to accept.

- Since Revelation chapter 20 follows chapter 19, the millennium appears to follow the second coming and the destruction of the Beast. If there is recapitulation here, a moving back to an earlier point in history, the text does not make this very clear.
- The binding of Satan becomes a relative binding or limitation that is placed upon him. That he will not deceive the nations any more also has limited meaning; after all, there is still plenty of deception happening.²
- In amillennialism, the first resurrection is really no resurrection at all. The phrase “they came to life” at least suggests a more physical event.

A number of scholars and many other people reject amillennialism because of one or more of these three points. They consider them the weak spots in the amillennial interpretation. As I tried to point out in chapter 3, the premillennial understanding has its weak spots too.³ I personally find some form of amillennial interpretation more convincing, but I suppose that the debate about Revelation 20 is guaranteed to continue for a while yet!

Critique: Too Spiritual?

Amillennialism can be too spiritual in its interpretation. Everything becomes ‘spiritual’ and ‘heavenly’ and somewhat unreal. It loses sight of the very real fulfillment that prophecy will have in the final state. Also, amillennialism is at times too quiescent, too accepting of the status quo. It has often not been the powerful agent for missions and reform that it could have been.

¹ There are several different interpretations of this first resurrection among amillennialists.

² Even though in context, the deception mentioned is not general (*any* kind of deception), but quite specific, the deception leading to the Beast and Gog/Magog, in other words, the kind of deception that unites the nations in an all-out attack on the people of God.

³ For the difference between a- and postmillennialism, the exact interpretation of Revelation 20 is much less decisive, which is why postmillennialism is not mentioned in this section.

Fortunately, Anthony Hoekema is aware of the danger of over-spiritualizing and seeks to avoid it. He uses Isaiah 11:6-9 and 65:17-25 as examples. The first passage describes the wolf living with the lamb. The second passage deals with the new heavens and the new earth, but describes, surprisingly, how there will be no premature death in this new world. Here is his understanding of such passages:

It can easily be understood that if a person believes in a future earthly millennium, he will see that millennium described in these verses. Such an interpretation is, however, by no means the only possible one (...) Why may we not (...) understand the details found in these verses as descriptions of life on the new earth?¹

Anthony Hoekema thus points the way to how we can avoid over-spiritualization. Fulfillment is not only spiritual (for now), but also real (in the world to come). Prophecy will ultimately have a very real and quite literal fulfillment in the new earth, when there are no more wolves that kill lambs.

In Conclusion

It will not have escaped your notice that I have a clear preference for this eschatological view. It is carried by careful interpretation of Scripture. It makes eschatology utterly relevant for today. A lot of thinking has gone into it; it is a view that thinks before it speaks, even if it speaks only softly. Amillennialism may sound strange at first contact, but it makes a convincing case on further scrutiny.

¹ Anthony A. Hoekema, "Amillennialism", In: *The Meaning of the Millennium*, ed. Clouse, 174.

The reason the early Christians were so joyful was because they knew themselves to be living not so much in the last days, though that was true too, as in the first days – the opening days of God’s new creation.¹

Chapter 6

A New Eschatology

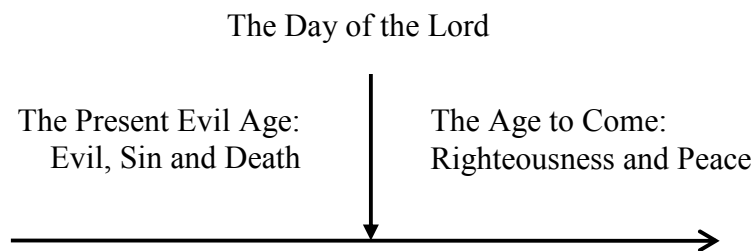
Christians have been divided about the millennium and the biblical view of the end from the very beginning. Is there any sign of progress, any hope that we can move closer together on these issues? The answer is yes. A new and deepening understanding of the kingdom of God has done much to diffuse some of the tension.

“The Kingdom is Near”

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus proclaimed a short and simple message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!” John the Baptist had preached the same thing. The question is, what did they mean with this phrase, “The kingdom of heaven”? Were they introducing a remarkable new revelation and concept? Stood everyone puzzled by the roadside, wondering what the new vocabulary might mean?

No, on the contrary; everyone knew exactly what they were talking about. The phrase “the kingdom of heaven” summed up everything the Jews of that time had been waiting for. It included the coming Messiah (meaning, the anointed king) and all the blessing and promise foretold by the Old Testament prophets. According to Jesus and John, this kingdom had finally arrived.

Fig. 4: The end time according to the Old Testament prophets



¹ Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 137.

The Old Testament Prophets

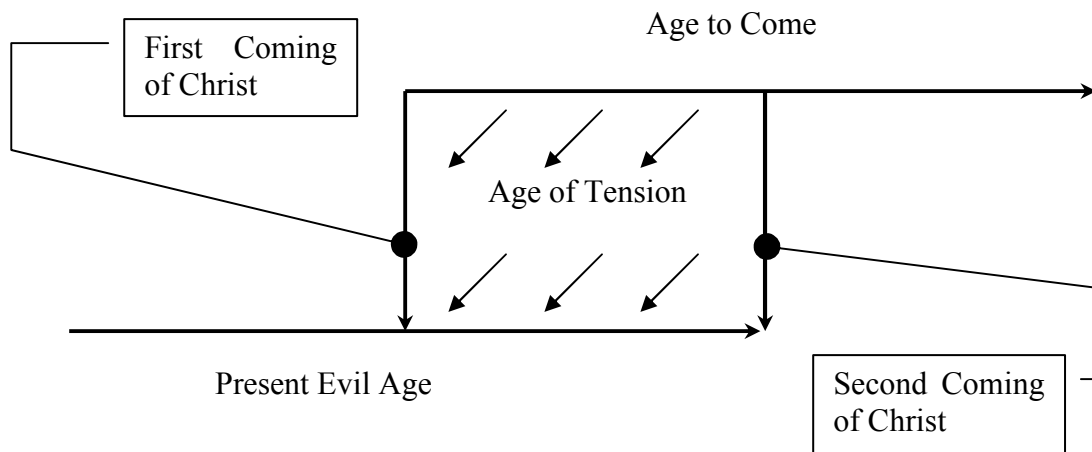
To fully understand this, we need to take a look at the eschatology of the Old Testament. What vision of the future did the prophets pronounce?

Central to their view was the coming day of the Lord. This would be a time of God's intervention in history, usually with an emphasis on judgment. Sometimes the prophets use this term in a limited, historical sense. In those cases it refers to something that has already happened.

For instance, the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC was the day of the Lord, and likewise were the destruction of Nineveh, the conquest of Babylon by the Persians, and several other events.

At other times they use the term in an eschatological sense. The day of the Lord then becomes the final and universal intervention of God in human history. He will bring a full end to the present evil age, characterized by sin, evil, poverty, disease, war, ignorance and death, and ruled by Satan. He will execute judgment on all nations. And he will usher in a new age, the age to come, which will be an era full of righteousness, peace, prosperity, restoration and long life (see Fig. 4). In short, the prophets expected a whole new world, ruled by the Messiah. In all their prophecies of blessing and restoration they strive to paint a picture of this coming age. You can imagine how eagerly the Jews waited for this, and how their hearts jumped when they heard Jesus and John proclaim its arrival.

Fig. 5: The end time according to the New Testament



Already and Not Yet

As Jesus' ministry unrolled, however, things did not turn out as anticipated by the Jews. Again and again Jesus departed from the popular expectation. Even John the Baptist became confused and expressed doubts when he asked, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Mt. 11:2). Jesus then pointed out the things that were happening

through his ministry: the blind could see, the lame walked, even the dead were raised. These were all signs that according to the prophets would accompany the coming of the new age. When driving out an evil spirit, Jesus identified this as a manifestation of the kingdom of God (Mt. 12:28). When Pharisees asked him when the kingdom would come, he answered that it was among them (Lk. 17:20-21). Clearly, the kingdom had arrived. In Jesus, it was powerfully breaking into the present evil age.

What baffled Jesus' contemporaries, however, was that it did not bring this age to an end. The radical break they anticipated and the final overthrow of evil did not happen. Instead, Jesus introduced a time of overlap, as indicated by the parables on the kingdom. For a time, until the final consummation, good and evil would exist and develop side by side.

In other words, the kingdom was rescheduled to come in two phases. It was inaugurated, set up, in the first coming of Jesus and his earthly ministry. It will be completed at his

second coming, when the present evil age will be brought to an end and the kingdom will be established in fullness. Until then, the two ages overlap and are in conflict with each other (see Fig. 5). Because of this, the time of overlap is also the age of tension. It is this time period that the New Testament identifies as the last days.

This model or understanding of the kingdom is usually referred to as the already-and-not-yet model. It explains much of our experience as Christians, and it explains how the New Testament sees the beginning fulfillment of the Old Testament promise. During the age of tension, we already experience many blessings of the age to come, but not yet in fullness. The promised restoration of creation begins in us, which is why Paul can call us a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). We receive full forgiveness. Old wounds are healed. There is deliverance from satanic oppression. There is also healing – but not always. People still die. We still sin, even as Christians. Persecution and spiritual warfare continue. The kingdom, God's rule, is a present reality and at the same time something still future. Much is already here; much more is still to come.

The Already-and-Not-Yet Model and the Four Views

Before we look at the far-reaching and utterly practical consequences this model has, we need to evaluate its relationship to the older eschatological systems.

This understanding of the kingdom is essentially amillennial. It was first put forward by Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949), an amillennialist.¹ It was adopted by historic premillennialists only later, when George Ladd made this view popular beyond the academic community. Fact is, the model fits an amillennial eschatology better than a premillennial one. It states that there is an overlap between this present evil age and the age to come, which is the period between the two advents of Christ. It ends with the second coming, which ushers in the age to come in its fullness.

So where does the millennium come in? It is absent in the diagram included above. Is it a second period of overlap, with this present age still lingering around in a more fully established age to come? Walter Kaiser tries to draw up a diagram of the two ages with the

¹ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 298-301

millennium included,¹ but it is unconvincing. Anthony Hoekema has made the following statement: “There is no indication in the gospels, in the book of Acts, or in the epistles that there will also be a third age in between the present age and the age to come. The representation of the New Testament writers is that when Jesus comes again he will usher in the new age.”² The already-and-not-yet understanding of the kingdom of God is essentially an amillennial view that doesn’t fit premillennialism quite as well, even though the two have merged with remarkable success.

Integrating the kingdom is even more difficult for the dispensational system. It requires extensive adjustments to make room for a partial presence of the kingdom now, which is actually what the progressive dispensationalists mentioned in chapter 2 and others are doing.

As discussed in chapter 4, postmillennialism holds to a view of the kingdom that is progressive. It uses a diagram similar to the amillennial one, except that the present evil age diminishes as the age to come increases. Both pre-and amillennialists object to this, of course, but even here the distance between the views has decreased.

Consequences and Implications

In spite of such compatibility difficulties, the view of the kingdom as already and not yet has brought the four millennial positions closer together. It has taken the focus away from a particular scenario of the future and turned it to a dynamic view of the present. This puts the emphasis where it should be. To sum up some further consequences of this model:

- Old Testament prophecy on the kingdom of God is being fulfilled now, be it in a limited way. We are tasting the powers of the age to come and experience the restoration and blessing of the kingdom. Old Testament prophecy is therefore utterly relevant for the church, both as a guide to present benefits and as a word of encouragement regarding what is still in store for us.
- Eschatology is intrusive. The age to come is breaking in: the future is now! This leads to a fierce power encounter between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. This may lead to manifestations of radical evil, severe persecution and intense spiritual warfare. It will also lead to very real demonstrations of God’s kingdom, his victory and his power to save and transform. This view is therefore much more dynamic than that of popular dispensationalism, which is basically counting the signs and waiting for the end to come.
- This also means, that the increase of evil we witness is not necessarily irreversible. Again and again, where evil lifts up its head, the kingdom of God manifests itself too, and evil is repressed. Examples are the renewal of North and West Europe through the Reformation, the abolition of slavery, the victory over Hitler and the fall of the communist block. Change is not a one-way street (down-hill only)! As Abraham Kuyper, a Dutch amillennial theologian and politician, remarked a hundred years (!) ago, when contemplating the signs of the time: “Either this second coming, therefore, is near at hand, and what we are witnessing are the death-

¹ Kaiser, *Back Toward the Future*, 118.

² Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 185.

throes of humanity; or a rejuvenation is still in store for us; but if so, that rejuvenation can come only through the old and yet ever new Gospel.”¹

- This intruding of the kingdom is a bit like rain. When it rains, water is coming down from heaven and things get wet. The land, however, doesn't turn into sea, no matter how long it continues to rain. Local flooding is the worst that can happen. This is similar to the way God's kingdom is intruding ('raining') into the present age. It influences things (makes them wet), but land remains land. If the rain stops for a while, things dry up and we need a new outpouring. Only with the second coming will land turn into ocean, so to say, when the present evil age becomes the age to come.
- We are called to an active role. There is no room for passive observers or mere readers of the signs here. The kingdom must be proclaimed and demonstrated. Most of the time, we are the agents God uses to accomplish this. We are therefore called upon to be a manifestation or demonstration of the kingdom in our world. Nowhere is this future reality more visible than in the church (at least, that is the way it should be).
- We live in a very eschatological age. The 'signs of the time' are God's warnings, calling for repentance. The accompanying plagues are the just consequence of the sin and transgression of humanity. At the same time, the signs are indicators of the great cosmic conflict between the two ages and the birth pangs of the new age. As such, they characterize the entire age of tension (not only its very end). They are therefore elusive and ambiguous (Chicken Little, be warned!). They do not reveal *how much time* is left, how near the end we are. Instead, they inform us in *what sort of time* we live. They proclaim that this world is coming to an end. They should instill us with a sense of urgency. They tell us that this world is not our home, and we should not cling to the things of this world. They are also intended to lead people to repentance. We are living in the last days (as did all generations of Christians before us) and this should greatly affect the way we live. It is perhaps premillennialism's greatest strength that it has kept this sense of urgency alive, more than the other views, even if it has done this by mistakenly claiming with full assurance and certainty that the end was near in an absolute, chronological sense.
- In a different sense, however, the end is near. Since we live in such an eschatological age, the end is always near, but not chronologically, measured in hours or years. The intrusive nature of the age to come means the future has come very close. In fact, it is already here. This explains how the end was near even in New Testament days (John's last hour). Again, the effect should be one of urgency. The future should control the way we live in the present.
- This view of the kingdom leads to realistic optimism. It allows us to maintain a healthy balance between realism and optimism. It cautions us that the presence of evil endures. At the same time it conveys optimism regarding the progress of God's purpose in the world and the measure of influence the kingdom of God can have even now.

¹ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 174.

Toward a New Eschatology

At this point the momentous practical significance of eschatology has become obvious. Its importance is not just academic or theological. It won't do to ignore it because it can be confusing or disruptive. The eschatological system we adopt influences the way we live. Our view of the future determines our view of the world and our role in it. It makes a real difference in our performance as Christians in the present.

I have argued in the beginning of this book that it is time for critical reflection and for a change in our understanding of the end times. Perhaps that change is already on its way.

Dispensational pessimism has been the norm for about a century now in evangelicalism. The belief has been that the end is near, that things will go from bad to worse, that Antichrist is probably already among us. Not exactly a climate that encourages involvement in social change. "You do not polish the brass on a sinking ship", became the battle cry of evangelicals in the twentieth century. Our society is lost, so it is no use trying to improve it. All we can do is save as many souls as possible before the ship goes down; our task is evangelism and nothing more.

This is the kind of pessimism that replaced the postmillennial optimism of the nineteenth century. By now the pendulum may have completed its swing and have turned around, particularly in America. A small but increasing number of evangelicals is abandoning the dispensational understanding of the end times with its gloomy forecasts for the near future. One reason for their change of heart is that the strategy of social retreat that we have followed throughout most of the twentieth century is clearly bankrupt. We are reaping sour fruits from abandoning society to unbelievers. Many are simply fed up with hiding away in their churches while secular humanism takes over. They are rediscovering social involvement and, with it, optimism. This is hardly surprising, considering the basically optimistic nature of American culture. It is more surprising that pessimism could ever carry the day, and that for a whole century!

This resurgence of optimism is to a large extent a spontaneous movement. It is a grassroots type of phenomenon, springing up independently in many places at the same time. Some reconstructionists like to claim credit for it, but their influence is by no means the only factor involved, although it is an important one. I already mentioned the general sense of discontent with our 'achievements' in the social sphere. Another important factor is the charismatic movement. Here is a large group of Christians that have tasted the goodness and the power of God. How can they be pessimists? They are by nature inclined to be optimistic about life. They easily capture a vision for what God can do in society, without necessarily knowing much about millenniums and eschatology. The philosophy that you don't polish the brass on a sinking ship doesn't have much appeal to them, nor to many others. This is not a matter of polishing brass! It is a matter of a sinking ship, and either we pump or we go under. People are realizing that we just might be able to save the ship, if we pump hard, or at least keep it floating till Jesus comes back.

The Still Great Planet Earth

The true doomsday prophet cannot be converted, of course. He continues to proclaim that the world will progressively grow worse and that the Lord is coming very soon now (quite possibly before the end of this year). Many of us have heard this too often, however. We

have begun to wonder why planet Earth is still turning circles more than thirty years after Hal Lindsey's obituary for her. We are beginning to see plenty of reasons to change our beliefs about the end times and some of us are already switching sides.

The question is, to what side will we switch? What will take the place of the popularized forms of dispensationalism that are so familiar to us? What will replace dispensational pessimism and the mentality of short-term thinking that so many of us have succumbed to?

Reconstructionism or some derivative of it not infrequently ends up being the replacement. It is the natural opposite of dispensationalism, and things have a tendency to go from one extreme to another. Reconstructionism is benefiting from this pendulum effect. However, this book has made it clear that reconstructionism is not the only alternative to dispensationalism. Nor is postmillennial optimism the only alternative to pessimism.

We have seen that both amillennialism and the already-and-not-yet model allow for optimism as well, an optimism that is both balanced and realistic. It is true that historically amillennialism has not emphasized this optimism much. It has kept a low profile and has often (not always) taken a neutral or even slightly pessimistic stance. However, it can easily match with a more positive outlook and provides a powerful foundation for reaching out, especially when combined with the fuller understanding of the kingdom of God.

Such realistic optimism provides a balance between the extremes of dispensational pessimism and postmillennial optimism.

A Basis for Action: Biblical Optimism

The intrusive understanding of eschatology forms the basis for such balanced optimism and is my proposal for a 'new eschatology' (although admittedly, it is not really new at all). The age to come is already breaking into history, although its coming in fullness is still future. This means that Christians are intruders, the specimen of a new creation in an old galaxy. We are salt and light in a dark and decaying world, called to do good works that will cause men to give glory to our Father who is in heaven (Mt. 5:13-16). We are to be Men (and Women) at Work, called to build in a broken world, restoring ancient ruins and repairing the devastations of many generations (Is. 58:12; 61:4). This way we demonstrate the presence of the kingdom.

This restoration will at best still be incomplete, but it will be real. The kingdom is already at work in our world, producing revival, reformation and social transformation. In prophetic imagery: these are the rivers in the desert that were promised by Isaiah. It is the river of life that flows out of God's sanctuary and brings transformation wherever it goes.

This new eschatology probably does not translate well into exciting end-time novels – it does make for exciting real-life stories, however.

Here are some of the ways we can write such stories and make a difference in our world, based on the already-and-not-yet understanding of the kingdom:

- Evangelism and missions. We are to preach the gospel to all creation, to every people group and to each individual. This is what transplants people from the old realm into the new. Jesus gave us a clear command to do this, and it is possible, because he is already reigning. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him (notice the perfect tense). This is a clear statement of the present reality of

the kingdom and the feasibility of completing the Great Commission. Signs and wonders that accompany the proclamation of the gospel are visible proof that the kingdom is present and thus support world evangelism. In addition to this, the amillennial position states that the millennium is now, which means Satan is bound from deceiving the nations and is therefore unable to stop or prevent the completion of the Great Commission (with the possible exception of short bouts of intense persecution).

- Revival and renewal. We are to work for the revival of the church. It is possible for new life to infuse churches that have grown cold. This is a dire need in the West, but also in much of the Middle East, where numerous churches are many centuries old and have been stagnant for almost equally long. They are a natural bridgehead in the heartland of Islam; just imagine what could happen in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Syria if they would revive! Stirrings of renewal are already taking place in some of these churches – let’s pray and work for more so that this desert may turn into pools of water.
- Transformation and reformation. We are called to do good deeds. This was part of God’s purpose in redeeming his church: Christ gave himself for us “to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds” (Tit. 2:14 RSV). We have been “created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10). Good deeds can be a wide variety of things; it really depends on how God leads us individually. They are not limited to evangelism, although that is number one (but then, good deeds often are evangelism anyway). Whatever they are, they are ready and waiting for us!

‘Good deeds’ is the yeast strategy of God’s kingdom. An accumulation of even small acts of charity will eventually have a clear impact on society. The early Christians picked unwanted babies off trash heaps and took care of them. What a statement of morality to their pagan neighbors! Such good deeds lead to social change and reform. Wherever Christianity has gone, cannibalism and headhunting have come to an end. Gary DeMar and Peter Leithart are right when they say: “The history of Western civilization is evidence that the gospel of Jesus Christ does make a difference both personally and culturally.”¹

The yeast strategy of good deeds is intended to be applied in all areas of life: church, family, education, business and commerce, government, the media, entertainment, arts, sports, medicine, science and technology. It is hardly necessary to say that Christians should be involved in all these areas, since they will be so anyway; how can they not be? What is necessary is that they do it as *Christians*, seeking to apply biblical principles in their place of influence. The Bible applies to all of life, so Christians working as Christians will affect every profession.

We are also called to stand for justice and take Amos’ words to heart when he says: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!” (Amos 5:24 RSV). Taking a stand for what is right, like Luther did when he took on the Roman-Catholic hierarchy of his time, brings reformation to our churches and

¹ DeMar and Leithart, *The Reduction of Christianity*, 272.

to every other area of life as well. Solzhenitsyn did this in the area of the arts (literature) when he exposed the horrors of the Gulag Archipelago. Christians in East Germany and Poland did this through peaceful protests, and brought down the communist regime. In Rumania governmental action against a reformed pastor ignited the protests that led to Ceaucescu's fall. These countries proved that Christians can make a difference in the social and political arena.

A Basis for Action: Biblical Realism

The kind of optimism explored above needs to be balanced by a sense of realism. We need to realistically acknowledge the limits that still exist as to what we can do in the present era. Our efforts will not lead to heaven on earth or Paradise restored, at least not until Jesus returns.

I sometimes wonder whether we aren't losing sight of this when I listen to what we sing. Our songs abound in military imagery and ideas of war, battle and conquest. Our songwriters have worked hard to express the Jericho-metaphor and the analogy of taking the land in song. There is certainly truth to this, but how far can we take it? What does it mean to take possession of the land? In my opinion, such language is valid when it describes the pursuit of God-given objectives. For example: the church pursuing evangelism and completion of the Great Commission; an individual seeking to fulfill his or her ministry; Christians attempting to bring a godly influence to a particular sphere of life. It is even conceivable that the end result of all this will be a largely 'christianized' world. The analogy of taking the land ceases to be valid, however, when it describes the pursuit of world domination by Christians, since this is not a 'land' that God has promised us for this side of the second coming (*contra* reconstructionism). Things are taken too far if we expect a complete 'take-over' before Jesus comes back.

The reason is that sin and evil will continue to be with us, and we need to be realistic about their continuing influence, including in our own lives. Even a christianized world would not be a paradise restored. We will continue to live in a fallen world. The final demise of Satan, the end of death and the removal of the effects of the Fall await the second coming. Until then, we will be living in an 'age of tension', caught between this present evil age and the age to come.

Dispensationalism says that things will grow worse and worse until finally Antichrist takes over. Reconstructionism says that things will get better and better until eventually millennial conditions prevail on the earth. Could it be that the truth is somewhere in between these two?

If yes, then realism combined with optimism provides the proper biblical basis for involvement in this world. It makes room for victory and optimism. We strike a healthy balance between resignation and utopia, between social retreat and a triumphant we-are-taking-over mentality. To paraphrase William Carey¹, the pioneer of modern-day missions: we will then have what it takes to expect great things from God and attempt great things for God.

¹ William Carey was probably a postmillennialist. However, his challenge is relevant for representatives of other eschatological persuasions as well.

A significant part of the church spent the twentieth century waiting for the second coming. Standing at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is high time we ask ourselves: what do we do if Jesus does not return in the next few decades?

We have to be able to think on two tracks simultaneously. On the one hand we need to ask, "If Jesus returns soon, am I ready?" On the other hand we need to ask, "If the second coming is still far away, how do I invest my life?"

ideology or religion that demands absolute control and devotion. In the end, this force always turns against the church and against humanity. It can be a major hindrance to God's central purpose in world history: taking the gospel to every nation. In the twentieth century national socialism and communism assumed this role, in the first century the Roman empire, in our time fundamentalist Islam seems to take it up.

What happened can definitely be characterized as 'apocalyptic'. It was apocalyptic, not in the sense that a prophetic scenario was fulfilled, but because an age came to an end: the twentieth century ended on September 11th. This is what apocalyptic language expresses, and the world seems to understand it better than many Christians. Apocalyptic language does not describe the physical destruction of the universe, but rather the end of a world order and its replacement by a new order; the twenty-first century has begun.

We should not exaggerate this. Life goes on. This is not the end of our civilization. As long as the international situation does not escalate, not that much may change. So far, the terror attacks came closer to home, they may increase in frequency, and we will find it difficult to get into an airplane without thinking about this. After all, there is this dark cloud on the horizon. We don't know how big it is and how much fundamentalist Islam will grow before – this much is certain – it is conquered. This is both disturbing and reassuring at the same time.

Maybe this is the answer to our prayers for the Moslem world – in a form we had not anticipated. The book of Revelation describes how, in response to the prayers of the saints, a censer filled with fire is thrown upon the earth; peals of thunder, rumblings, lightning and earthquake result (Rev. 8:3-5). Terrible plagues follow. Do we have the courage to keep praying?

A Sermon on Biblical Eschatology¹

Let me first briefly explain why *I* am standing here this morning to say something about the end times. Just over ten years ago I was a student at the University of the Nations in Hawaii, writing a thesis on this topic for my master's degree in biblical studies.

This means I was working on this research project just around the time of the Gulf war, 1990-1991. Saddam Hussein had marched into Kuwait, America was moving a large part of its military forces into the Gulf region, and the world was holding its breath. It was therefore a time like this one, in which many were turning to biblical prophecy wanting to know if the Bible had predicted all of this and how it would continue.

As I concerned myself with what Christians were saying about the events, I discovered that most of what I could find, in retrospect completely missed the mark. This wasn't the prelude to Armageddon after all; the war was over in a hundred hours.

The End-Time Scenarios Failed

I found an enormous distortion of perception, largely based on two common tendencies:

1. Something happens and we seek a matching Bible verse. This works as follows. After September 11th we read Isaiah 2 as a description of this event:

For the Lord of hosts has a day
against all that is proud and lofty,
against all that is lifted up and high (...)
against every high tower (...)
and the Lord alone will be exalted on that day. (Is. 2:12, 15, 17 NRSV)

We do not take into account that Isaiah's words concern his own time. He is dealing with what for him was the near future. For this reason, it cannot be a prediction that was fulfilled on the 11th of September. The text should cause us to be thoughtful anyway, but we cannot conclude that God is judging America on the basis of Isaiah 2. Perhaps the events carry a very different meaning. In what is God interested more:

- (a) opening the Moslem world for the gospel
- (b) punishing America for its sins
- (c) judging Islamic fundamentalism
- (d) liberating the Afghan people from the Taliban

Of course, this is a false either-or, but it illustrates that it is far from easy to interpret things that happen from a biblical perspective.

2. Something happens and we try to make it fit into a particular end-time scenario, into a sequence of events and developments supposedly predicted by the Bible. Anyone who has

¹ For this sermon, preached on October 7 2001, I had to press the very essentials of the topic into 30 minutes of time. This edited sermon text seems therefore a helpful summary of a biblical eschatology and a good conclusion to this book.

read end-time books knows what I am talking about. What is deemed of interest in every new development in the European Union, in the UN, in the USSR (sorry, I mean Russia), in Israel or in China is only whether it does or doesn't match this scenario.

From a Scenario (Linear and Rigid) to a Framework (Dynamic)

This is how most books on the end times function and I think it profits nothing. We are doing this wrong. Every scenario and almost every end-time book that is older than 15 years is already outdated, and for the rest this is a matter of time. All we have to do to prove this is trace the history of such scenarios – it can be an instructive experience to read older end-time books. The reason for this failure is that it has never been the purpose of the Bible to present us with such a scenario. The Bible is no crystal ball in which we can foresee the events of the future.

It is therefore of crucial importance that we move away from a scenario towards a framework approach.

A scenario is linear, rigid, determinist, and it has to be rewritten all the time. So far all attempts have been futile; they have only led to a distorted perception of reality. A scenario does not invite to active participation, since in most scenarios the end is imminent – we are living shortly before it happens.

In contrast, a framework is flexible and remains relevant as time and circumstances change. It enables us to understand the world and the forces at work in it, to respond to what we see, and to keep our focus on God's priorities.

What Does This Framework Look Like?

So what could such a framework look like? Let's start with the eschatology of the Old Testament prophets. They foresaw that God would intervene in history. They called this intervention the 'Day of the Lord'. God would put an end to sin, death, rebellion and everything else that is bad. A completely new and different age would begin. In their end-time prophecies the prophets attempt to paint a picture of this coming age. It is great. There are no wars, lion and lamb are grazing side by side, a righteous king, the Messiah, is ruling the entire world.

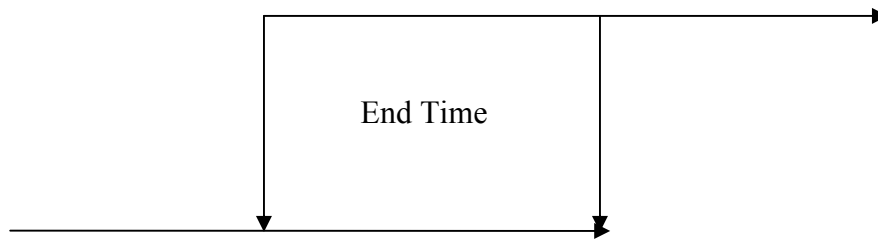
Then, four hundred years after the last Old Testament prophet, Jesus came. He claimed that with him the fulfillment of these prophecies began and that this new age of salvation was beginning now (two thousand years ago). There were indeed signs that pointed to the inauguration of this messianic age. People were healed of their diseases, the dead were raised, and so on. What caused Jesus' contemporaries great difficulty, however, was that he did not put an end to the present evil age. Sin, Satan and death continued to exist. A time of overlap began. The kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God existed side by side. The salvation and the rule of the Messiah had begun and at the same time were still future. They are not fully realized until the second coming of Christ (see Fig. 6).

By now many of you will be saying: "Ah yes, we know this model, this is how the New Testament presents the kingdom of God". It is, but at the same time it is also the biblical model for the end times. Using it enables us to explain a number of things about this concept.

1. The Last Days, the End Times, the “Last Hour”!

The entire time of overlap is called *time of the end* or *last days* by the Bible. For the early Christians it was clear that the latter had begun. John even calls his time, at the end of the first century, “the last hour” – an hour that has now lasted for more than 1900 years! The whole time period from Christ’s birth until his return is end time – the end of the old world order ruled by evil.

Fig. 6: A New Testament
model of the end times



2. Time of Tension: Conflict and Eschatological Battle

This model also explains why the last days are a time of tension. Two kingdoms face each other. Worldviews are clashing, raising claims that mutually exclude each other. This was true in the first century and it continues to be true today. The early Christians had to choose: who was “Dominus et Deus”, Lord and God, the emperor in Rome or this new king, Jesus? Christians claim that it is not the old gods of Greece, not the emperor in Rome, not Adolf Hitler in Berlin, not Kim Jong Il in North Korea, not fundamentalist Islam with its totalitarian demands, nor autonomous man, nor Mammon or Eros or Machiavelli – but Jesus Christ is Lord and God, “Dominus et Deus”, and no one else. Conflict thus becomes inevitable.

Of course it is not just visible world powers that oppose the reign of God, but especially spiritual powers; the battle is a spiritual one, between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. This is the eschatological battle, anticipated by the Old Testament prophets. It is for this reason that the end time is characterized by great turbulence. Very good and very bad things happen – a time of tension.

3. Signs of the Time: Not How Much Time, But What Kind of Time

This model changes our understanding of the signs of the time. After all, these have also been with us since 2000 years now. When Jesus spoke of wars and rumors of wars, he was referring to occurrences that his contemporaries would live to see. The sixties (and with that I mean the sixties of the first century) were an exceptionally turbulent time; the Roman Empire seemed poised to collapse. The end seemed very near. This means that the signs of the time do not offer a possibility to measure how much time is left or how far along we are.

So far every generation of Christians has thought that it was probably the last. I won’t say that this is not true. What I am claiming is that we cannot know. Every generation before us has been wrong; this should serve us as a warning.

The signs don't tell us how much time remains. Instead, they show us in what kind of time we are living. End time. Time of tension. The old world order is coming to an end. This leads to an urgent admonition: decide! get saved! Because you neither know how *much* nor how *little* time is left to you.

4. The Revelation: The Main Characters in the End-Time Drama

A few words about the book of Revelation. This, too, does not provide us with a scenario for the final years before Jesus' return. After all, John is sending this book in the first century to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. Why would he tell them in great detail what is to happen 2000 years later – and then call this “what must soon take place (1:1)?

No, Revelation shows these churches what will soon come upon them. The early Christians rejected the totalitarian demands of the Roman Empire and the emperor, “Dominus et Deus”. The result was a rough confrontation, in which Rome attempted to destroy the church.

In Revelation John is prophesying this time of persecution. He offers the church a look behind the curtain (which is why this book is a ‘revelation’). We discover what or who is really behind all this animosity (the dragon!) and what the true nature of Rome is (a beast and a harlot!). We also learn how the story will end.

Although much of this is shaped and colored by the situation of the first and second century, it still enables us to interpret and assess later periods as well. The same forces and players continue to act their part. This way, Revelation provides us with a framework that allows us to evaluate other centuries and further totalitarian systems. The book is relevant for the entire end time, not by foretelling it in detail, but by interpreting it.

Totalitarian systems, whether ideologies like communism and national socialism, or religions, correspond to what Revelation portrays as the beast. When the state procures too much power and turns against believers, it changes into the beast. Through such totalitarian systems the dragon is desperately trying to delay the progress of the gospel and destroy the church – to no avail.

5. What God Is Doing in These Last Days [2000 Years]

What is God doing in the last days? His priority for the end times is: the gospel for all nations. This does not mean that God never judges during the present time, but there is a clear priority. Judgment can wait, the gospel cannot. If world missions is the central goal and purpose of world history, then world missions also provides the framework to evaluate events in history.

For this reason, we should not occupy ourselves with searching for the Antichrist. Nor should we focus too much on Israel – a smaller purpose God is pursuing. If we want to understand the last days, we should turn our eyes upon the nations and see what God is doing among them. This is the chief purpose God has been pursuing ever since the beginning of creation: a people for his name from ever tribe and nation.

Once more a few verses out of the book of Isaiah. Again the prophet is describing his own time of crisis, not ours.

 | The city of chaos is broken down,
 | every house is shut up so that no one can enter.

There is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine;
all joy has reached its eventide;
the gladness of the earth is banished.
Desolation is left in the city,
the gates are battered into ruins.
For thus it shall be on the earth
and among the nations,
as when an olive tree is beaten,
as at the gleaning when the grape harvest is ended.
They lift up their voices, they sing for joy;
they shout from the west over the majesty of the LORD.
Therefore in the east give glory to the LORD;
in the coastlands of the sea glorify the name of the LORD, the God of Israel.
From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise,
of glory to the Righteous One. (Isaiah 24:10-16a NRSV)

That is what it is all about. Beyond the turmoil and through the turmoil and in spite of the turmoil this world is reached with the gospel.

When turbulence comes like on September 11, it is not a sign that the end is now immediately ahead of us. Nor does it mean that God has lost control. Rather, it shows that God is in the process of taking back control over his creation.

For this is the gospel of the kingdom: there is a new king, and every power and authority must submit to him. Because they are unwilling to do so, a power encounter takes place, in which the kingdom of God will prevail. There is a new king and God's goal for the end time is that this message is proclaimed and made visible in every corner of this earth. The Bible does not offer us a scenario or timetable for this, but authority, a look behind the curtain, a sense of reality (terrible things can still happen), optimism (excellent things will happen) and a dynamic vision of the future: *God's* future will become a reality.

To put it in different words, using the imagery of N.T. Wright, one of the foremost biblical scholars of our time: winter is over, spring has arrived. It is the beginning of March. Snow and ice start to melt – but not everywhere at the same time. Regularly, there are cold, icy nights. Especially during this transition time violent storms rage and new snow falls. I do not know how much ice will melt before Jesus comes back. I have no idea if this will happen soon or is still far away. In terms of this image, I don't know if he will appear as early as March or as late as June. But I do know that winter is over and summer is coming. The last days (of the old world order) are at the same time the first days (of the new creation), and God's vision for this world as described by the prophets of the Old Testament will become a reality.

One last remark in closing. I am convinced that the old scenarios do not equip us for the challenges of the twenty-first century. We were already ill equipped for the twentieth century. The church failed miserably in the Third Reich. That all other institutions in Germany also failed at this time is of little comfort. The church thought in a nationalist framework and was for the most part not able to recognize what was happening. In order to be equipped for the twenty-first century we urgently need to reconsider our eschatology.



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This manual is based on my master's thesis. In my opinion, it provides a good introduction to the different evangelical views on the end times. It is certainly better than most books on the topic. I hope it will help you to gain a better understanding of this subject; it is not as confusing as it looks.

I am making this material available free of charge. However, Franziska and I continue to “live by faith”, trusting God and our friends for the income we need; we do not receive a salary. So if you like this material and would like to make a donation to us, you can find the information you need at www.sbsgermany.de/wilrens. This is also where you can go to download this material.

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