

WHAT DOES
the FUTURE
HOLD?

EXPLORING VARIOUS VIEWS ON THE END TIMES

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Introduction

Prophecy at a Fever Pitch

The end of the world is near! Or so it seems. Take May 17, 2008, for example. In the course of a mere twenty-four hours, the network and cable news programs announced in rapid-fire fashion that the death toll from the cyclone that hit Myanmar (which only now is recovering from the earlier tsunami) numbered upwards of fifty thousand people; the earthquake that rocked China has already crushed the lives of thousands; a terrorist bomb killed eighty in India (which is but an echo of Al Qaeda's attacks in Iraq); Israel plans to bomb Iran before it nukes Palestine; the war in Iraq with its cost in lives and treasure has brought President Bush's favorable ratings to an all-time low of 20 percent (this while the price of gas surpasses four dollars a gallon); cancer, aids, hunger, heart attacks, strokes, violence, drugs, along with the economy, the weather, and the environmental crisis are all out of control! Besides these news briefs, it is obvious that the American middle class is shrinking; the dollar is plummeting; the oil companies are making a killing; the U.S. military is stretched too thin; the 2008 national election has polarized the country

along racial lines; and evangelical Christianity is giving way to an amorphous, emergent church that, ironically, finds its heroes in the early Fathers of church tradition!

All hell seems to be breaking loose! The signs of the times hailing the return of Christ and the end of the world as we know it have never been more intense. Like labor pangs, they are unleashing their fury on planet Earth. Or so it appears.

Not surprisingly, prophecy is at a fever pitch. May 2008 witnessed the sixtieth anniversary of the rebirth of the State of Israel. Indeed, that event in 1948 stirred up interest in end-time prophecy as little before it had done. For many, Jesus's prediction—"this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened" (Matt. 24:34; Mark 13:30; Luke 21:32)—referred to the generation that dawned with the return of Jews to Palestine in 1948. Never mind that the date of Christ's return kept being revised from 1978 to 1988 to 1998 to 2008! Still, the conviction stands that the end is nearer than ever.

The regathering of Israel as a nation has inspired a proliferation of prophecy books, films, and conferences, especially works by Hal Lindsey (particularly his *Late Great Planet Earth*) and the *Left Behind* series. These publications alone have sold millions and millions of copies, thereby inspiring a whole generation of prophecy buffs who feverishly attempt to match contemporary events with biblical predictions about the end times. Pursuing this angle toward Revelation, the last book in the Bible, these interpreters equate Red China with the "kings from the East" (Rev. 16:12–16), the European Common Market with the "ten horns" of the beast (13:1–10), the mark of the beast (666) of Revelation 13 with everything from credit cards to the Internet, and the Antichrist with a parade of prominent people, including Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Henry Kissinger, and Mikhail Gorbachev. This intense fascination with Revelation by the doomsayers shows no sign of decreasing in the twenty-first century.

But Christianity does not have a monopoly on predicting the end of the world: Nostradamus (who died in 1566) forecast that the millennium (Latin for one thousand years of peace and bliss on earth) would arrive in 2026. Michael Drosnin's *Bible Code I* and *II* predicted that World War III would occur in 2006. The Mayans prophesy that the end of the world will be in 2012. Zoroastrianism, which has its roots in Persian (Iranian) soil, expects at any time the end-time holy war to break out. According to Islamic extremists like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, president of Iran, this battle will be between faithful Muslims on the one hand and infidels (Jews, Christians, and all others) on the other hand.

For their part, many Hasidic Jews expect the Messiah to come and destroy the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, replacing it with the end-time holy temple predicted in Ezekiel 40–48. Indeed, when the late prime minister of Israel, Ariel Sharon, stepped onto the Temple Mount early in his term of office, many of his compatriots thought that the time of the end-time temple was drawing near. So did Palestinians, which is why they began the Second Intifada. The Melanesia cargo cults also eagerly await their Messiah to transfer to them all European goods and thereby topple colonial rule. And so the prophecies go.

But not so fast! Is the world really coming to an end? Or is the preceding apocalyptic portrait of life as we know it today somehow distorted? If so, what other explanations might there be for the dire shape of our planet? To put it another way: is the world getting worse or is it possible that the present situation is but the proverbial storm before the blissful calm that will soon wash over us all, in history no less? These questions broach the subject of millenarianism, the belief that a period of utopia (one thousand years?) will one day be known in the world. At that time righteousness will replace sin; healing will overtake sickness; peace will conquer war; life will swallow up death; or, as Isaiah the prophet eloquently expressed it:

“Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. . . . Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them. Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,” says the LORD.

Isaiah 65:17, 20–25

Actually the hope for the millennium is nothing new. In biblical literature, the eager anticipation of the coming kingdom of God is a theme that dominates both Old and New Testaments, a vision that has sustained the church throughout the centuries. And today when we cut through the fog of war, depression/recession, and sickness, isn’t that really what we long for too—the arrival of the millennium? This book answers that question with an emphatic yes!

The premillennial school emphasizes the not-yet aspect of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is already here to some extent (in connection with the first coming of Christ) but not yet in its fullness (this awaits the future second coming of Christ). It reads Revelation literally, with bulldog determination. Thus premillennialists would say, “Thy kingdom come.”

The postmillennial school of thought emphasizes the already aspect of end-time prophecy (though some in this camp

allow for the not-yet aspect of a future return of Christ). The first coming of Christ brought the kingdom in its fullness, which heralded the gospel of the new covenant in the millennium. And in the judgment of Jerusalem in AD 70, Christ came again. This view also reads Revelation literally, at least to a certain degree. Thus they would say, “Thy kingdom came.”

The amillennialist school of thought balances the two other views: the kingdom already came but is not yet fully triumphant. These two time frames correspond to the first and second comings of Christ—the first in history and the second at the end of history. Thus this view sees both the kingdom and tribulation as present spiritual realities, based on its allegorical hermeneutic. Therefore, amillennialists would say, “Thy kingdom came and thy kingdom come.”

A fourth view of the millennium—the skeptical interpretation—came on strong in the early twentieth century. It debunks any idea that the kingdom of God is coming or that it is the solution to the world’s problems. Obviously, in orientation such a perspective is anti-Christian yet it has many followers today.

Forming bookends to the four chapters on premillennial, postmillennial, amillennial, and skeptical schools of interpretation, the opening chapter will provide a summary of the importance of end-time prophecy to the Bible, along with a brief history of millenarianism in the church, while the last chapter will offer sound principles for interpreting prophetic/apocalyptic literature in the Bible. The key biblical text on the millennium is Revelation 20:1–6. The interpretation of these verses will occupy us throughout the ensuing chapters:

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.

Revelation 20:1–6

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A Brief History of Prophecy

How the Church Has Viewed the End of the World

The pope celebrated Mass on New Year's Eve, which was to usher in the end of history. Crowds thronged the square of St. Peter's Basilica. Thousands gathered in Jerusalem awaiting Jesus's return. And in Europe, myriads awaiting the final tick of the clock of history donated land, homes, and goods to the poor in acts of contrition.

At last the clock in St. Peter's Basilica struck twelve—and nothing happened. No return of Christ, no end of history, no fire from heaven.

Was the preceding alarm about the end of the world¹ written recently? No. Actually it was a failed prediction that the world was about to end before the clock struck AD 1000. Interestingly enough, predictions about the end of the world in AD 999 remind one of similar forecasts in 1999, fueled by Y2K panic (that at midnight on December 31, 1999, millions of computers throughout the world would crash, setting the stage for a coming world government prophesied in Revelation).

This chapter looks at the phenomenon of biblical prophecy and how the church has understood that dynamic throughout its history. We begin with a not-so-good example of how to interpret biblical prophecy—William Miller’s two predictions about the date of the return of Christ. These failed predictions stem from not grasping the already/not-yet aspects of biblical prophecy.

“The Great Disappointment”

Perhaps the most famous failed predictions about the end of the world were the dates William Miller set for the return of Christ. A Baptist minister, William Miller (1782–1849) founded Seventh Day Adventism and predicted that Jesus would return in about 1843. Miller’s theory for coming to such a conclusion was quite elaborate, but central to it was his interpretation of two verses in the book of Daniel, which he tied together to calculate the Lord’s return—Daniel 8:14, “And he said to him, ‘For two thousand and three hundred evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary shall be restored’” (KJV); and Daniel 9:24, “Seventy weeks of years are decreed concerning your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most Holy place” (KJV). Miller’s basic reasoning can be outlined as follows:

1. The sanctuary cleansing mentioned in Daniel 8:14 referred to the return of Christ, which would eradicate all evil on the earth.
2. A prophetic day equaled one year, so one could correctly calculate the numbers in the passages as 2,300 years and 490 years (seventy times seven).
3. Using Bishop Ussher’s popular Old Testament chronology, the 2,300-year period began with the return of the Jews to Jerusalem to rebuild the city in 457 BC (Christ’s

crucifixion, AD 33, marked the end of Daniel's seventy weeks. Moving back 490 years from AD 33, one comes to the year 457 BC).

4. Two thousand, three hundred years forward from 457 BC was AD 1843. Miller predicted that Christ would return "about" 1843. But at the beginning of 1843, Miller specifically calculated the second advent would occur between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844. (1. Daniel 9:24 AD 33 [Christ's death] minus 490 years equals 457 BC; 2. The Daniel 8:14 figure is 2,300 years minus 457 years equals 1843.)

Although initially Miller was reluctant to make his prediction too public, he and his followers (the Millerites) eventually set a date for the return of Christ at March 21, 1844. As that date approached, apparently many did not plant their crops that spring while others closed their stores or gave away their goods in anticipation of the event. Reportedly, a number of Millerites clothed themselves in white robes and awaited the end of the world on the hillsides of the Northeast.

When Christ failed to return on March 21, 1844, Miller and his devotees reset the date for the end of the world at October 22, 1844. When Christ did not return then, the "Great Disappointment" ensued. Some abandoned the notion of a second coming. Others went on to hold tighter yet to an imminent return of Christ. This group became the Jehovah's Witnesses, which predicted that Christ would return in 1914. Still others reinterpreted the nonevent by arguing that Christ did indeed return, but it was in heaven, where he cleansed the heavenly sanctuary. This "sanctuary doctrine" became the hallmark of the Seventh-day Adventist movement, which exists today.

Understanding End-Time Events

But how can we today avoid such prophecy gone awry? How should we interpret the Bible in the matter of end-time events?

We do well to start by understanding the importance of biblical prophecy in general and the kingdom of God in particular. These topics provide our next two points.

The Importance of Biblical Prophecy

While not all prophecy in the Bible deals with the future (some, perhaps much of it, is God's Word for the prophet's present day), a good portion of biblical prophecy is predictive. Note the following statistics.

THE BIBLE AND PREDICTIONS

Amount of predictive matter in the Bible: 8,352 verses, out of its total of 31,124

Proportion that is predictive: 27 percent; Old Testament: 28.5 percent; New Testament: 21.5 percent

Books with the most predictive material:

Old Testament

Ezekiel: 821 verses

Jeremiah: 812 verses

Isaiah: 754 verses

New Testament

Matthew: 278 verses

Revelation: 256 verses

Luke: 250 verses

Books most highly predictive according to the proportion of verses involving forecasts of the future:

Old Testament

Zephaniah: 89 percent predictive

Obadiah: 81 percent predictive

Nahum: 74 percent predictive

New Testament

Revelation: 63 percent predictive

Hebrews: 45 percent predictive

2 Peter: 41 percent predictive

Books with the most predictions in symbolical form: Revelation, 24; Daniel, 20²

NEAR AND FAR FULFILLMENTS

The careful reader of the above will recognize that often biblical predictions have two types of fulfillment: a near and a far fulfillment. The near fulfillment happened not long after the prophet’s prophecy. The far fulfillment came to fruition long after the death of the prophet, or it still has to be fulfilled. Three examples will show this near/far–fulfillment dynamic to be the case for biblical prophecy—two from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. Scholars often label this dynamic “the already/not-yet” aspect of predictive prophecy.³

Isaiah 7:10–16

Near Fulfillment—Isaiah 7:10–16	Far Fulfillment— Matthew 1:21
Unnamed son of King Ahaz	Jesus

In the near fulfillment Isaiah spoke of God’s deliverance from the Syrian/Israelite coalition against Judah in 732 BC. By then the child born of King Ahaz and the young woman (whoever she may have been in the king’s harem) would have been three years old (assuming Isaiah’s prophecy was uttered in 735 BC). And when Jews in the southern kingdom saw or heard about the child, they proclaimed the son to be “Immanuel,” because his presence was proof that God kept his promise to Ahaz to protect his kingdom from Syria and northern Israel.

But what of Matthew 1:21? The far-fulfillment perspective sees a partial fulfillment of Isaiah 7:10–16 in God’s deliverance of Judah from the Syro-Ephraimite (Israelite) coalition but believes the final, complete fulfillment of the Immanuel

prophecy is rightly to be equated with Jesus, as Matthew well notes.

Daniel 9:24–27: The (rather) near fulfillment of Daniel’s prophetic seventy weeks took place during the persecution of Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes from 171 to 164 BC. This ended when the Jewish freedom fighter Judas Maccabees delivered and cleansed the Jerusalem temple from its oppressors. The details of that fulfillment are summarized in chart form:

587–586 BC (beginning of Babylonian captivity) to 538 BC (Joshua the high priest)	605 BC (date of Jeremiah’s prophecy) to 171 BC (murder of the high priest Onias III)	171 BC (Antiochus Epiphanes’ persecution of the Jews) to 164 BC (the restoration of the temple)
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The far fulfillment of Daniel 9:24–27 will be the persecution of the people of God by the Antichrist, according to Revelation 6–18; at least that’s how many interpret its ultimate fulfillment.

The Olivet Discourse: Jesus’s discourse (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21; cf. with Revelation 6–18) records his predictions about his second coming in judgment, which is divided into a near view and a far view. The near fulfillment took place in the form of the Romans’ destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. This serves as the backdrop to the far fulfillment—the second coming of Christ at the end of history to judge the earth. Using Matthew 24 as a guide, we chart the already (near)/not yet (far) fulfillments of Jesus’s coming in judgment as follows:

The Already	The Not Yet
Partial fulfillment (Matt. 24:4–20; cf. Mark 13:5–23; Luke 21:8–24; Revelation 6)	Final fulfillment (Matt. 24:21–31; cf. Mark 13:24–27; Luke 21:25–36; Revelation 8–11; 15–18)
<i>Tribulation</i> (Matt. 24:8)	<i>Great tribulation</i> (Matt. 24:21, 29)

The Already	The Not Yet
<i>Messianic pretenders</i> (vv. 4–5)	<i>Messianic pretenders</i> (vv. 23–26)
<i>Wars</i> (vv. 6–7)	<i>Wars</i> (v. 28)
<i>Persecution</i> (vv. 9–10)	<i>Persecution</i> (v. 22)
<i>Apostasy</i> (vv. 11–12)	<i>Apostasy</i> (v. 24)
<i>Fall of Jerusalem</i> (vv. 15–20)	<i>Second coming of Christ</i> (vv. 30–31)

The upshot of the already(near)/not-yet(far) dynamic is that some of predictive prophecy has already been fulfilled while some has not. And history helps to sort out which is which. Ultimately this is where William Miller, and many like him, went wrong: they have not distinguished between what has been fulfilled and what has yet to be fulfilled. In other words, they do not seem to be aware of the already/not-yet phenomenon of biblical prophecy. Thus, for example, Miller failed to understand that much of Daniel 8–9 was already fulfilled in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes and Judas Maccabees (171–164 BC). Likewise, many interpreters fail to realize that a good portion of the Olivet Discourse was already fulfilled at the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in AD 70.

This near/far fulfillment dynamic is not the whole answer to the issue of biblical prophecy, but it does greatly clarify matters. This will become clear as we progress through this chapter and the book as a whole. So to restate our premise: failed interpretation of biblical prophecy stems in large part from not grasping the already/not-yet aspects of fulfilled prophecy.

The Kingdom of God

Considering the discussion above regarding predictive prophecy, we see an overarching theme that ties together the Old and New Testaments—the kingdom of God. Both Jew and Christian longed for the arrival of the kingdom of God; that is the millennium. Related to this are the terms *eschatology* and *apocalypticism*. We will explore these terms in

chapter 6, but for now we can say that the two are essentially synonymous. *Eschatology* refers to the end of time while *apocalypticism* is a specific genre, both biblical literature and contemporary nonbiblical material, that reveals the unfolding of the kingdom of God at the end of history. Undergirding all of this is the idea of “the last days” (Isa. 2:2; Micah 4:1; Acts 2:17; 2 Tim. 3:1; 2 Peter 3:3), “the last times” (1 Peter 1:20; Jude 18), or “the last hour” (1 John 2:18). To put it another way, the end time began with the first coming of Christ (the “already” aspect of eschatology), but the final fulfillment of the end of the world will not occur until the second coming of Christ (the “not-yet” aspect of eschatology). We now summarize how this is the case with the New Testament authors.⁴

The kingdom of God is a major theme in the Bible. Its origin is the Old Testament, where the emphasis falls on God’s kingship. God is king of Israel (Exod. 15:18; Num. 23:21; Deut. 33:5; Isa. 43:15) and of all the earth (2 Kings 19:15; Ps. 29:10; 99:1–4; Isa. 6:5; Jer. 46:18). Juxtaposed with the concept of God’s *present* reign as king are references to a day when God will *become* king over his people (Isa. 24:23; 33:22; 52:7; Zeph. 3:15; Zech. 14:9). This emphasis on God’s kingship continues throughout Judaism and takes on special significance in Jewish apocalypticism with its anticipation of the age to come/kingdom of God, which abandoned any hope for present history. Only at the end of the age will the kingdom of God come.

The kingdom of God assumes center stage throughout the New Testament, especially in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). And that is where we will put our attention for the moment. In the Synoptic Gospels alone, the term “the kingdom of God” occurs more than one hundred times (in Matthew only is “kingdom of heaven” a synonym for “kingdom of God”). The term that best describes the dynamic of the kingdom of God in the three Gospels, “inaugurated eschatology,” is a concept commonly connected

with the twentieth-century Swiss theologian Oscar Cullmann. Like others before him, Cullmann understood that the Jewish notion of the two ages formed an important background for understanding the message of Jesus. According to Judaism, history is divided into two periods: this age of sin and the age to come (the kingdom of God). For Jews the advent of the Messiah will effect the shift from the former to the latter age. In other words, Judaism viewed the two ages as consecutive.

According to Cullmann, Jesus Christ announced that the end of time, the kingdom of God, had arrived *in* history (see Mark 1:15 and parallels, especially Luke 4:43; 6:20; 7:28; 8:1, 10; 9:2, 11, 27, 60, 62; 10:9, 11; 11:20; 13:18, 20; 16:16; 17:20–21; 18:16–17, 24–25, 29). Yet other passages suggest that, although the age to come had *already* dawned, it was *not yet* complete. It awaited the second coming for its full realization (Luke 13:28–29; 14:15; 19:11; 21:31; 22:16, 18; 23:51; Acts 1:6), hence the term “inaugurated” eschatology. Such a view is pervasive in the New Testament beyond the Gospels (see, for example, Acts 2:17–21; 3:18, 24; 1 Cor. 15:24; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2; 1 John 2:18). So according to inaugurated eschatology, the two ages are simultaneous: the age to come exists in the midst of this present age. Therefore Christians live in between the two ages until the parousia (second coming of Christ).

The preceding data in the Synoptics regarding the already/not-yet aspects of the kingdom of God can be broken down as follows: Mark, perhaps the first Gospel to be written, records Jesus’s programmatic statement in 1:15: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” (KJV). Then the Gospel, along with Luke and Matthew, goes on to demonstrate that Jesus’s miracles, teachings, death, and resurrection inaugurated the kingdom of God. Yet it is also clear from Matthew, Mark, and Luke that the final manifestation of the kingdom has not yet happened. We may draw on Luke as an example of the other two Synoptics. Thus the third Gospel

indicates that the kingdom was present in Jesus (Luke 7:28; 8:10; 10:9–11; 11:20; 16:16; 17:20–21), but it also awaited the return of Christ for its completion (Luke 6:20–26; 11:2; 12:49–50, 51–53; 13:24–30; 21:25–28; 22:15–18, 30). The same dual aspect of the kingdom pertains to Luke’s second volume, Acts. The kingdom was present in Jesus’s ministry and, now, through his disciples (Acts 1:3; 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23–31); but it will not be completed until Christ comes again (Acts 1:6; 14:22).

A Summary of Millenarianism in Church History

It’s time now for us to take a step back and get the big picture of eschatology and apocalypticism—in short, millenarianism—by seeing what church history has to say about the subject. A couple of healthy things result when we do that. First, we get a sense of security from examining the eschatology of the church because we discover that this is a topic that has been discussed and debated by Christians for more than two thousand years and will probably be discussed and debated for many more years to come. Thus we don’t need to panic when we meet someone on the street holding a sign saying, “The end of the world is near!” It doesn’t look like God’s good earth is going anywhere too fast (though I could be wrong on that). So we can relax a little bit when thinking about the issues.

Second, studying the various millennial interpretations held by the church throughout its history also is healthy because it instills in us a sense of humility. We learn that our particular eschatological theory is not the only “kid on the block.” Other views of the end times have been around a long time too. This realization will make us patient with others.

I will offer a brief overview of the church’s view of end-time prophecy by summarizing four broad historical periods: the Church Fathers (premillennial), the Medieval Church (amillennial), the Reformation Church (postmillennial), the

Modern Church (eclectic).⁵ We will see that in each period of the church the second coming of Christ and the millennium were viewed through the lens of the politics of the day and the sociological status of the church at the time. Then the bulk of this book will focus on the thinking of the various eschatological views in reference to how the New Testament/early church of the first century portrays the millennium, especially in Revelation 20.

The Church Fathers—Second to Fourth Centuries

Though there were exceptions to the rule (Dionysius in the third century and Eusebius in the fourth century), most of the Patristic (“fathers”) writers were premillennial in orientation. Papias (60–130), a bishop in Asia Minor, had personal contact with the disciples of Jesus, especially John. He stated that the Lord used to teach concerning the end times that Christ would return visibly, resurrect the dead, and set up a literal one-thousand-year, blissful rule on earth. Like many in his day, Papias called the millennium the “kingdom of Christ,” rather than the “kingdom of God.” This was so because the kingdom of Christ was thought to be his temporary reign on earth (Revelation 20), which would give way to the kingdom of God of the eternal state in the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21–22). According to Papias, this was what the apostle John meant in Revelation 20–22.

The Epistle of Barnabas (second century) maintained that the six days of creation are actually a period of six thousand years because a thousand years are like one day to God (2 Peter 3:8). Thus after six thousand years of world history, Christ will come a second time and establish the millennium—a thousand-year Sabbath rest on the earth. Hippolytus (170–236) took a similar tack concerning the millennium, also believing it will be a Sabbath rest.

Irenaeus (130–200), bishop of Lyons in Southern Gaul (modern-day France), was taught by Polycarp, the disciple of the apostle John. In his *Against Heresies*, book 5, chap-

ter 32, Irenaeus made a strong case for premillennialism. There he interprets Revelation 20 as predicting Christ's future, one-thousand-year rule on earth that restores paradise lost, resurrects the righteous, and bases its operation in Jerusalem (Rev. 20:1–6). After Christ's millennial reign, the final judgment will take place (vv. 7–15). For Irenaeus this literal, even crass, interpretation of the millennium was in the face of the Gnostics—those professing Christians who denied the humanity of Jesus's incarnation! But according to Irenaeus, not only was the incarnation real, so will be the millennium.

Justin Martyr (100–165, called a martyr because he witnessed to Christ by his life's blood), the great second-century apologist for the gospel, told Trypho, a Jewish critic of Christianity, that he believed in the second coming of Christ, which will bring about, "A resurrection of the dead and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned and enlarged."⁶

Tertullian (160–220), a leading theologian from North Africa, stressed that at his second coming Christ will set up his millennial kingdom in Jerusalem.

Other well-known premillennialists during the Patristic period included Methodius (260–311), Victorinus (d. 304), Commodianus (250s), and Lactantius (250–325). Even the heretic Montanus in about 170 predicted that Christ would soon return to Pepuza, a small town in Asia Minor, to set up his one-thousand-year rule on earth. Montanus's ascetic lifestyle and theological error (he thought he was the embodiment of the Holy Spirit!) managed to get him ousted by the church, but, still, his voice is further testimony to the premillennial interpretation that dominated the early Church Fathers.

Concluding the summary of the millenarianism of the Patristic period, I want to make two observations. First, the Church Fathers interpreted Revelation 20 literally because they essentially inherited that hermeneutic from their Jewish kinsmen. Jews at the time of Jesus and into the early Christian

centuries read their Old Testament rather straightforwardly. Even Jewish theologians longed for the Messiah to come and establish a literal, albeit temporary, kingdom in Jerusalem (see Isa. 40–66; cf. *1 Enoch* 93:3–17 [150 BC]; *4 Ezra* 7:26–44/12:31–34 [AD 70]; *Apocalypse of Baruch* 29:3–30:140 [AD 100]). Interestingly enough, when the church pretty much broke with its Jewish heritage in the fourth century, it stopped interpreting Revelation 20 literally. We will see why in the summary of the Medieval Church.

Second, since the early Church Fathers believed that the second coming of Christ would bring on a literal millennial rule, they knew, obviously, that it had not yet happened. Instead, they were in a fight for their lives with the Roman Empire, which tried to stamp out Christianity as a rival religion to the worship of Caesar. Christians who confessed that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord could not be tolerated. So the political persecution of the day created the maligned status of the church, a situation that could hardly be confused with the millennium. Even more, the Patristics believed themselves to be in the throes of the tribulation that John predicted would fall on the church (Revelation 6–18). Apparently, as of that time, the concept of a secret rapture whereby Christ would whisk away the church to heaven before the end-time tribulation fell on the earth had not occurred to the early Church Fathers. That was an idea whose time had not yet come. To put it another way, the early Church Fathers focused on the not-yet side of eschatology.

The Medieval Church—Fifth to Fifteenth Centuries

The Medieval Church focused on the already and not-yet aspects of eschatology. That is, they believed the kingdom of God had already arrived at the first coming of Christ but that it was not yet complete; this awaited the second coming. The amillennial interpretation exchanged a future, literal one-thousand-year utopia on earth for a present, spiritual kingdom of God in the church. The *a* in amillennial means *no* literal

millennium! Through three individuals this view held firm control in the church for more than twelve centuries. They were Origen, Emperor Constantine, and above all Augustine.⁷

Origen (185–254) cast doubt on chiliasm (*chilias* is the Greek word for one thousand or millennium). To begin with, he advocated a spiritual/figurative interpretation of Scripture—the allegorical method. This new hermeneutic was much different from the literal reading of the Bible that Judaism bequeathed to Christianity. The allegorical, Platonic interpretation, combined with Origen’s low estimate of the material world, along with his view that history is cyclical not linear, prompted him to question the idea of a future kingdom of material prosperity and carnal happiness. Thus the seed was sown in Origen’s teaching that would bloom into full-blown amillennialism later in the church.

But none of this would have been possible without the Roman emperor Constantine (275–337). His Edict of Toleration in 313 led to the legalizing of Christianity, indeed in making Christianity the main religion of the empire. Others have written of Constantine on this point:

He gave the Lateran Palace to the bishop of Rome, legalized the giving of monetary gifts to churches, began the construction of church buildings, and supported clergy, single women, and widows from public funds. Thus, fewer Christians were inclined to regard Rome as a force of evil and the emperor as the Antichrist. Moreover, millennialists had predicted that Christ would return and end the persecution of the church, but this did not harmonize with the events that had transpired. The millennial hope had thrived while people were under the pressure of persecution, but now in the newly “Christianized” Roman world, official hostility was past and there was a lessened need for such endtime teaching. The time was ripe for a new eschatology to replace chiliasm.⁸

Augustine (354–430), like Origen and Tyconius before him (d. 390), put a spiritual spin on the millennium. In his *City*

of God, Augustine maintained that Revelation 20 is actually describing the present age into which the kingdom of God has entered through the church. The first resurrection is the conversion of the sinner and the second resurrection will be the return of Christ. The twelve tribes ruling the world is the present church, the new and true Israel. The binding of Satan began with the preaching of the gospel by the church. Thus Augustine did not speak of an Antichrist or a rule of evil. Rather, Christ reigns now through his church. One source encapsulates what we have been saying about Augustine's amillennialism:

Augustine spiritualized the millennium—hence he denied that there would be a literal reign of Christ on earth at some point in the future. Instead, during the present age the “city of God” exists alongside the “city of man,” that is, the world. There are two distinct societies of people: one will reign eternally with God and the other will suffer eternal punishment. The earthly city is that of Cain and the heavenly one is that of Abel. Now the city of God is the church, and its citizens are repentant and forgiven sinners. The citizens of the earthly city are destined to never-ending punishment with the devil. This godless city is the “beast coming out of the sea” (Rev. 13:1). When Christ came the first time, he placed Satan in chains. However, in spite of the devil's limited power, he is still able to seduce people. When he is set free at the end of the age, he will regain his full powers and launch a final persecution. The wicked nations, symbolized by Gog and Magog, will attack the city of God, but they will be defeated. The dead will be raised, all will be judged, and the unrighteous will be consigned to everlasting torment. The faithful will be given new bodies, both physical and spiritual, and they will enjoy endless happiness with God.⁹

Thus the kingdom of God rules in the church of Christ between his first and second comings, and the church—the city of God—would stand long after the Roman Empire fell.

The Reformation and Its Influence—Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries

Amillennialism ruled the church's interpretation of Revelation throughout the Medieval period, but during the Protestant Reformation and beyond, a new view of the millennium would begin—postmillennialism. This approach emerged as interpreters became fascinated with the literal details of eschatology. With the outrage of Martin Luther (1483–1546) against the papacy of his day came a certain return to the literal reading of the Bible. This affected Luther's interpretation of Revelation, which the reformer used to equate the Antichrist with the pope and his beastly reign over the church and the world. So Luther's new hermeneutic of the future juggled the amillennial view (the kingdom of God reigns now in the true, reformed church) and the premillennial view (there is a literal Antichrist—the pope—who attacks Christ's church). When the Protestant Reformation began to sweep over Europe and beyond, many believed it had brought on the millennium, especially in the form of Puritanism.

Postmillenarianism came to full expression in the writings of Daniel Whitby (1638–1725), rector of St. Edmund's Church, Salisbury, who published the two-volume *Paraphrase and Commentary on the New Testament* in 1703. He held that the earth's population would be converted to Christ, the Jews restored to the Holy Land, the pope and Turks vanquished, and then the world would enjoy a thousand-year golden age of universal peace, happiness, and righteousness. At the close of this period, Christ would personally come to earth, and the last judgment would take place. Whitby's more optimistic outlook continued to be influential as his work was reprinted into the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁰

One of the most brilliant American philosophers and theologians of all time, Jonathan Edwards (1703–58), best-known to students of American literature as the author of the sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," also adopted postmillennialism. For three decades he kept a journal on

the book of Revelation in which he analyzed its contents, took notes from commentators, and recorded the signs of the times that he believed were leading to the millennium. He also set forth his millennial ideas in *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (1742) and the sermons of 1739 posthumously published in 1744 as *A History of the Work of Redemption*. These writings, which grew out of the revivals of the Great Awakening of the 1740s, painted a postmillennial vision on the landscape of the New World.

Edwards stated that the preaching of the gospel would achieve a golden age on earth. Edwards identified the fifth bowl judgment of Revelation with the eventual destruction of the papacy—the Antichrist—by the message of the Protestant Reformation. Edwards predicted this would happen in either 1866 or 2016. He thought the Great Awakening in America that he was experiencing was the prelude to the millennial kingdom. At that time heresy, infidelity, and superstition would be destroyed, along with Islam. The Jews would be converted and the heathen won to Christ. It would be a time of peace, immense learning, and holiness. At the end of the millennium, there would be a final, temporary rebellion against God, but Christ would crush the revolt when he returned at the end of history.¹¹

With hindsight one can see the reason postmillennialism arose when it did—the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were brimming with optimism and confidence. The triumph of the Protestant Reformation, the sense of “manifest destiny” that accompanied America’s great strides, the spiritual revivals that swept England and America, not to mention the hope of scientific progress that Darwinian evolution boasted, all produced an unbridled enthusiasm that gave birth to the postmillennial interpretation. Its motto was “Every day in every way, man is getting better and better.” This was the “already” aspect of eschatology. Such optimism, however, did not reign in the twentieth century: World War I,

the Liberal-Fundamentalist debate, the Great Depression, World War II, and the threat of nuclear annihilation ever since have dashed the hopes of any imminent utopia and, with it, postmillennialism.

*The Modern Church—Twentieth
and Twenty-first Centuries*

The modern church has witnessed the reemergence of the major millennial interpretations from the past, along with some new ones: premillennial, amillennial, postmillennial, skeptical, and eclectic. In chapters 2–6, I will develop these interpretations, along with their varying philosophies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These have left the modern interpreter in a millennial maze, with seemingly no escape from its confusion.

Conclusion

We have come a long way already in our study of end-time prophecy—from the Old Testament to the New Testament to the Patristic period to the Medieval Church to the Reformation era to today. And we have seen that there is a wrong way and a right way to interpret eschatology. Essentially, the wrong way to interpret biblical prophecy is to read anachronistically the current events of our day back into the Scripture. This approach runs the risk of obscuring what the sacred authors had to say for their day. The right way to understand end-time prophecy is to recognize the already/not-yet aspects of eschatology and the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God has already dawned with the first coming of Christ, but it is not yet complete. The latter aspect awaits the return of Christ. This dynamic will become the key to negotiating the confusion of millennial interpretations. To that topic we now turn.