

Eschatology: Introduction

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A brief summary of Chapter 1 in the book entitled,
[Biblical Eschatology](#) (2nd ed., Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018),
by Jonathan Menn

The word “eschatology” comes from two Greek words, *eschatos* (“farthest” or “last”) and *logos* (“word,” “instruction,” “teaching”).¹ Eschatology, therefore, has been defined as: “the word concerning, or the study of, what is ultimate or last, that is, what is final in the program of God”²; or “the doctrine of the last things.”³

Eschatology in the Context of the Overall Biblical Story

The Overall Biblical Story

The basic biblical story may be summarized as follows: God created a beautiful world and human beings to live joyful, fulfilled lives in fellowship with him. Through our sin we lost that fellowship and brought evil and death into the world. By means of a grand plan which involved calling Abraham and the nation of Israel, he prepared the way for his own coming to earth in the person of Jesus Christ to bring forgiveness of sin and to restore fellowship with him. He is coming again to utterly destroy sin and death without destroying us. And he will renew the earth to be even more glorious than when it was first created. His goal is to live in a perfect, holy, loving, familial relationship with humanity, in a perfect environment, in which all relationships have been restored to perfection.

Stanley Grenz summarizes the role of eschatology vis-à-vis the overall biblical storyline: “Within the context of Christian doctrine the topic of eschatology provides an overarching vision of the faith. It seeks to set forth what is the ultimate goal toward which God’s work in the world is directed, how that work will be consummated and in what manner that goal is already in the process of being realized. . . . John’s vision [in Revelation] forms the climax to a long history of

¹ BDAG, “*eschatos*,” 397; “*logos*,” 598–99.

² Grenz, *Millennial Maze*, 16.

³ Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 1.

prophetic promise that stretches back to the Garden of Eden.”⁴

Individual Versus Corporate Eschatology

There are two main types or foci of eschatology: “individual eschatology” (i.e., what happens to individuals after death), and “corporate eschatology” (i.e., God’s overall plan for human beings and creation as a whole, and how that plan is consummated). This book deals primarily with corporate eschatology rather than individual eschatology, although there is some overlap between them.

Major Hermeneutical Issues

The basic questions that people have to wrestle with as they try to understand what the Bible says about eschatology include: Do the second coming of Christ, the resurrection and judgment of all humanity, and the inauguration of the eternal kingdom, occur as aspects of one great event, or are they separated by a temporary messianic kingdom that lasts a thousand years? Are we able to predict when any of the “end-time” events will occur by paying attention to the events transpiring in the Middle East, or other geopolitical occurrences? What is the role of the church in all of this?

The major positions regarding eschatology differ over two main issues:

1. *The nature of the “thousand years” (Rev 20:2-7):* Is the “thousand years” a discrete period of time distinct from the rest of history, or not? and What does it look like? (i.e., Is it a “golden age” on earth that can be experienced in the flesh, or can it be apprehended only by faith?); and,
2. *The timing of the “thousand years”:* Is the “thousand years” a past, present, or future period of time? and Does it occur before or after Christ comes again?

The different answers to the main eschatological issues tend to be based on different answers to three hermeneutical issues:

- (1) the role of the NT in interpreting the OT;
- (2) how to interpret the Bible’s symbolic language; and
- (3) the relationship between Israel and the church.

Brief Definitions of Major Eschatological Terms

“On the simplest level . . . there are two basic schemes of prophecy:

⁴ Grenz, *Millennial Maze*, 16, 28; see also Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 1.

Premillennialism Versus Non-Premillennialism.”⁵ In other words, the primary issue is whether Christ’s second coming (*parousia*) precedes (premillennialism) or follows (non-premillennialism) the “thousand years” of Rev 20:2-7. Two main camps hold that the *parousia* will precede the “thousand years”: historic premillennialism and dispensational premillennialism. Three main camps hold that Christ’s second coming will come after the “thousand years”: postmillennialism, amillennialism, and preterism.

Millennium

The term is from the Latin for “thousand years.”⁶ The term “thousand years” occurs only in Rev 20:2-7. All standard Bible translations of Revelation 20 use the term “thousand years.” However, many writers who discuss eschatology in general and Revelation 20 specifically employ the term “millennium.” One problem with doing that is that the term “millennium” is loaded with connotations of a “golden age,” which *may not at all be* what the term “thousand years” as used in Revelation 20 suggests. Don Garlington therefore observes, “It would be preferable not to speak of a ‘millennium’ at all in this sense, given the context-specific coloring of John’s ‘thousand years.’”⁷ Since the term is so popular, however, there is little chance that Garlington’s prudence will be followed.

Premillennialism.

Premillennialism is any belief that Christ will come *before* the “thousand years.” Premillennialists believe that at his coming Christ will institute a thousand-year reign (“golden age”) on the earth, after which he will institute the eternal state. In older writings, “premillennialism” is often called “chiliasm” from the Greek “*chilioi*” which means “thousand.” Premillennialists are divided into two main camps: historic premillennialists and dispensational premillennialists.

(1) *Historic Premillennialism.* Historic premillennialists believe that any doctrine of the millennium must be based on the NT and be consistent with Christ’s present reign. They believe that there will be two bodily resurrections separated by the “thousand years”: the resurrection of the righteous when Christ comes again and then the resurrection of the unrighteous after the thousand years. After that, the eternal state will be instituted.⁸

(2) *Dispensational Premillennialism.* Dispensational premillennialists hold that there is a radical distinction between Israel and the church and that all prophecies must be interpreted “literally”: prophetic promises to OT Israel must literally be fulfilled in the physical nation of Israel, not in the church. They view the millennium as the climax of God’s dealings with Israel. They

⁵ Waldron, “Structural Considerations,” n.p.

⁶ *Mille* = “thousand”; *annus* = “year.” See Schnabel, *40 Questions*, 267.

⁷ Garlington, “Reigning,” n.p.

⁸ Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” 17–40.

hold that Christ will actually have two “second comings”: the first one, which they call the “pretribulational rapture,” is only “for” his church (i.e., the church will leave the earth and meet Christ in the air and then go back with him to heaven). Later, after the “great tribulation,” Christ will physically come with his church to the earth and set up a thousand-year kingdom in which Israel is dominant.⁹ They also believe that there will be three resurrections: the first for the righteous dead at the rapture; the second at the end of the tribulation for those saints who have died during the tribulation; and the third at the end of the millennium for the unbelievers.¹⁰ After that there will be a great rebellion which Christ will overcome. He will then institute the eternal state.

Postmillennialism.

Technically, any belief that Christ will come *after* the “thousand years” is postmillennial. As popularly used, however, postmillennialism is the belief that the “millennium” is a future, discrete period of unprecedented Christian influence in the world (a “golden age”), based on the work of the church and the Holy Spirit in the world, that gradually emerges before Christ’s return. Christ will then come again, receive the kingdom, and initiate the eternal state.¹¹

Amillennialism.

Amillennialists believe that the “thousand years” is a symbolic reference to the entire period between Christ’s resurrection until shortly before his return. That period will be characterized by the spread of the gospel but also by the spread of sin, i.e., there will be no “golden age” before Christ returns. Christ’s return will result in the general resurrection and judgment, and will usher in the eternal state.¹²

Preterism.

The term comes from the Latin “*praeter*” which means “past” or “beyond.”¹³ Preterism is divided into two main camps: “full preterism” and “partial preterism.” Full preterism holds that all significant events of prophecy, including the “millennium” and Christ’s second coming (which preterists see as a spiritual coming), took place in AD 70 when the Jewish temple was destroyed by the Romans. Partial preterism holds that most of the major eschatological events were fulfilled by AD 70, but that Christ will physically come again in the future and set up the eternal state.¹⁴

⁹ Boyd, “Dispensational Premillennial Analysis,” 4–13; Hoyt, “Dispensational Premillennialism,” 63–92.

¹⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1225.

¹¹ Boettner, “Postmillennialism,” 117–41.

¹² Hoekema, “Amillennialism,” 155–87.

¹³ See *HLD*, “*praeter*,” 1433–34; Gentry, *Dominion*, 159; Gentry, “Foundation,” 13.

¹⁴ Sproul, *Last Days*, 24–25.

Tribulation and Great Tribulation.

“Tribulation” refers to the persecution of believers. Based on their interpretation of Dan 9:24-27 dispensationalists and some others think that there will be a seven-year tribulation, primarily directed against the nation of Israel, just before the *parousia*. The “great tribulation” is thought to be a time of even more intense persecution in the last half of the tribulation. Most historic premillennialists, amillennialists, and postmillennialists, disagree with dispensationalist ideas concerning the specifics of any future tribulation. They see tribulation as one of the things that characterizes the entire period between Christ’s first and second comings, although the intensity of persecution may increase shortly before Christ returns. Preterists hold that the tribulation was a past event related to the siege and overthrow of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Pretribulationism, Midtribulationism, and Posttribulationism.

“Pretribulationism” is a distinctively dispensationalist idea. Pretribulationists believe that *before* the “tribulation” Christ will come part-way from heaven to earth to “rapture” (“take away” to heaven) the church. A variant of this is “midtribulationism” which believes that Christ will rapture the church in the middle of a seven-year tribulation (i.e., just before the “great tribulation”).¹⁵ Both pre- and mid-tribulationists believe that *after* the tribulation Christ will come *again*, this time all the way to earth, to set up a thousand-year kingdom. After that he will establish the eternal state. On the other hand, “posttribulationism” holds that Christ will return only once, *after* the church goes through tribulation. Posttribulationists believe that the rapture of living believers will take place along with the resurrection of the dead when Christ returns.

Pretribulationism must not be confused with premillennialism. All pretribulationists and midtribulationists (who are virtually all dispensationalists) are also premillennialists. However, not all premillennialists are pretribulationists. Most historic premillennialists are posttribulationists. By definition, all amillennialists, postmillennialists, and preterists also are posttribulationists.

Resources to Compare Different Eschatological Systems

One good way to see the strengths and weaknesses of different eschatological systems is by reading books in which a proponent of one view makes his case and then is critiqued by advocates of other views. Such books include: Robert Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977); Darrell Bock, Craig Blaising, Kenneth Gentry, and Robert

¹⁵ A variant of *this* is the “pre-wrath” rapture position which contends that the rapture will take place during the second half of the tribulation, after the “great tribulation” has begun, but before the “wrath of God” is poured out. This was first and classically set forth in Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990).

Strimple, *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999); Gleason Archer, Paul Feinberg, Douglas Moo, and Richard Reiter, *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulational?* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1984); Craig Blaising, Alan Hultberg, and Douglas Moo, *Three Views on the Rapture: Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010); Thomas Ice and Kenneth Gentry, *The Great Tribulation: Past or Future? Two Evangelicals Debate the Question* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999); and C. Marvin Pate, Kenneth Gentry, Sam Hamstra, and Robert Thomas, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

Books in which one author does a fair job of describing the different eschatological positions include: Millard Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology: A Study of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977); Stanley Grenz, *The Millennial Maze* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992); C. Marvin Pate, *Reading Revelation: A Comparison of Four Interpretive Translations of the Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009); and Steve Gregg, ed., *Revelation: Four Views: A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997).

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