

Millennial Views

(Excerpt from "The Lamb, the Woman, and the Dragon" by Albertus Pieters)

The Millenarian Interpretation:

The outstanding feature of this interpretation is that the thousand years are taken to mean a literal period of time of precisely the indicated length, to follow the Second Advent of our Lord. During this period He will set up a visible earthly kingdom, with a capital, where His personal residence will be - usually placed at Jerusalem - and where He will discharge all the functions of a supreme political executive, either directly or through His appointed officers. This will include the making of laws, the setting up of courts of law, levying taxes, maintaining an army and navy and a police force, building and repairing roads and bridges, regulating commerce, industry, education and agriculture, supervising and safeguarding the public health, etc., etc. In short, anything that a good government may be supposed to do. He will be primarily and personally the King of Israel, reassembled in Palestine and reconstituted a nation. Herein will be fulfilled the promise of the angel to Mary, Luke 1.32-33. His dominion will, however at the same time extend to all nations of the world, which will exist as vassal states to the kingdom of the Jews.

During these thousand years there will be a state of great prosperity and happiness over the entire globe. The knowledge and profession of the true religion will be universal, so that all false religions will disappear. There will still, to be sure, remain sin in the human heart, but all of its outward manifestations will be sternly and promptly suppressed. The laws of Moses will again come into force, and the Levitical sacrifices will be offered. Death will not be unknown, but longevity will be very great, so that, if a person dies at one hundred years of age, it will awaken surprise that he died so young. (Isaiah 65.20) Conditions in the animal world will be literally as described in Isaiah 11.6-9. The curse will be removed from nature, so that the fertility and beauty of the earth will be beyond anything the world has ever experienced. War will be no more, as prophesied by the prophet Micah. (4.3)

Millenarians differ more or less among themselves as to the details, but they all agree on the general picture, as above. It is a very alluring prospect. There is nothing (except, perhaps, sex) more fearfully abused than government. Indispensable to human life and welfare, it has commonly been made an instrument of injustice and cruelty. That before the end, for at least one thousand years, the world should see a period of perfect peace and righteousness, under a government of unimpeachable integrity, justice, benevolence, and wisdom, is something we would all like to believe. If it can be supported from the Holy Scriptures, let us take it to our hearts with delight: if not, it remains a beautiful piece of "wishful thinking."

In this system, chapter nineteen is interpreted as a presentation of the Parousia, or Second Advent, and since the twentieth chapter is the description of the millennial reign of the returned Savior, the closest possible connection is maintained between the two chapters - a very good feature. The binding of Satan is, of course, recognized to be figurative, and symbolizes his being put under complete restraint. The "nations" whom he must deceive no more, are understood to be all men everywhere. That he can deceive them no more does not mean the cessation of all moral evil, for there are other sources of sin, especially the depraved human heart, but the great incitement to every form of wickedness which emanates directly from the Prince of Darkness will be unknown. The "first resurrection" is not a symbol but is understood as an actual resurrection of the body and is interpreted as the resurrection of all true believers, as prophesied in 1 Thessalonians 4.16. The "second resurrection," not mentioned in the chapter by that name, but implied in the designation "first resurrection," is the one spoken of in Revelation 20.13, and is limited to the wicked dead. The reigning of the saints with Christ is on earth and is an actual participation in the discharge of political functions: probably holding office as judges in the courts which Christ

will set up for the administration of justice. If it is asked how those with resurrected bodies can thus associate freely with men in the flesh, the millenarians have an answer that is hard to refute, namely, that this is what Jesus did during the forty days between His resurrection and ascension; and that, since our bodies are to be on the model of His, (Phil 3.21) there is no reason why the risen saints should not do the same.

Attractive as this whole scheme is, it is, in my judgment, and not in mine only, but in that of the vast majority of believing Bible students of all the ages, entirely untenable for the following reasons:

1. Because it takes the thousand years and the resurrection literally. That we must look upon the vision of the Apocalypse, not as literal information of something that is to come to pass, but as symbolical pictures, meaning something else than they say, is the principle upon which all our exposition has proceeded, and we cannot abandon it here. Granting that there may be an exception (as we shall find there is, in the prophecy of the last judgment) we must nevertheless give our preference to a symbolical interpretation if there is one that fits.

2. Because it rests upon the view that the nineteenth chapter portrays the Second Advent. This is essential to the millenarian exposition and has already been discussed.

3. Because, in this interpretation, the “first resurrection,” as interpreted by millenarians, is extended to all believers who died before the Second Advent. This also is essential to their system, but it is hopelessly in conflict with the text, which speaks only of those who had been faithful during the conflict with the Beast. This binds the present passage very closely to that in chapter thirteen. No one has a right to find here the resurrection of any but believers who endured and triumphed in that particular conflict. Since millenarians believe that the Beast is a personal Antichrist of the last days, they must, if they are to be consistent, and faithful to the plain sense of the prophecy they interpret literally, confine this “first resurrection” to the martyrs and confessors of the last fateful three and a half years. But this would be fatal to their scheme, for “the rest of the dead” must then include all other believers as well as the wicked. This would leave but an inconsiderable handful to reign with Christ during the thousand years and would be inconsistent with St. Paul’s prophecy in 1 Thessalonians 4.16-17. Some, seeing this, speak of the “first resurrection” having two stages, seven years apart, those raised at the beginning of the seven years being all believers then dead, and those at the end of the period being the martyred “tribulation saints”: but this is too plainly a subterfuge. Our passage, Revelation 20.4-5, speaks of something that happens at the same time as the binding of Satan, thus *after* the Parousia, and then says: “this is the first resurrection.” Under the millenarian scheme it is the second, not the first: the first took place seven years before.

4. Because this interpretation reads into the twentieth chapter of Revelation an immense amount of material that does not belong there. Millenarians cannot find, and do not pretend to find, their entire program here. They find it chiefly in the Old Testament prophecies, the fulfillment of which they assign to this period of a thousand years. By what right? Not a whisper in the twentieth chapter, not a hint, however obscure, links this period with the great promises of a good time coming which we find in the utterances of the prophets. To accept the Darbyite notion that the clock of prophecy stopped ticking at the death of Christ, leaves us orphans, so far as any share in the prophecies is concerned. Instead of being “fellow-heirs” with the Jews of all this prophetic inheritance, as St. Paul says we are, (Eph. 3.6) we are heirs to nothing.

One has only to enumerate the chief points of the millenarian expectation to see how alien the whole thing is to the twentieth chapter of Revelation. When they tell us of Christ’s personal return, of the “capture” of the saints, of the resurrection of all believers, of Christ’s personal residence in Jerusalem, of the restoration of Law and

sacrifices, of the return of the Jews to Palestine, of the rebuilding of the temple, of the renewal of nature during the millennium, of the age of universal peace, etc., etc., they introduce a whole series of ideas which, whatever their basis in the scripture elsewhere, are conspicuous by their absence here. Whatever we may think of the author of the Apocalypse', he was certainly no Scofield millenarian, or he could never have kept still about these things.

5. Because their scheme leaves an immense number of the dead unaccounted for. The believers who are raised at the return of Christ, (even if we allow them to speak of two stages of the first resurrection) belong to the "Bride of Christ," and do not include the Old Testament saints. The "second resurrection" described in Revelation 20.13 is, they say, limited to the wicked dead. Where, then, do the Old Testament believers come in, and the believers who die during the millennium? There surely will be death during that time, for death and hell are not cast into the lake of fire until the war with Gog and Magog. (Rev 20.14) Moreover, Isaiah 65.20, (believed by them to refer to millennial conditions) contemplates the death, not only of the sinner, but of others contrasted with him. When are such believers to be raised? This difficulty has led some millenarians to conjecture an unnamed resurrection of the just at the close of the last conflict, the one with Gog and Magog, but this is wholly a work of the imagination, and would give us three resurrections, not two.

6. Because this interpretation is bound up with an entirely untenable and unacceptable view of the last judgment. This will be discussed in detail in our next chapter.

The Augustinian Interpretation:

The distinguishing feature of this interpretation is that the binding of Satan in this chapter is identified with that mentioned in Mark 3.27. Since that took place at the first coming of Christ, this binding and imprisonment in Revelation twenty must also be referred to that point in history, and the thousand years are understood to symbolize the entire period between the first and second advents. This view, with variations in detail, is accepted by many modern scholars for whose expositions, on the whole, one cannot help having the greatest respect. It is accepted, with others, by Morris, Lenski, Warfield, Masselink, and, with an important modification, by Wm. Milligan. They take the twentieth chapter to be a new beginning, unrelated in any very close connection, to the nineteenth.

This is in accordance with the "recapitulation" principle of expounding the book, according to which each of the several visions - usually considered to be seven in number - goes over the same ground, each beginning with the first coming of Christ and extending to the second. This is well stated and defended by Morris. There is truth in it. The visions cannot be held to any rigid chronological order. Sometimes a series of events is presented in summary, to the very end; and then one or more features of the series are selected for more detailed development. Yet there is also a forward movement of the thought as a whole; and in the present case the mention of the martyrs and confessors as having fought their good fight and received their reward before the thousand years begin, seems to me decisive against this interpretation. To start the thousand years with the birth of Christ, is to leave this feature of the symbolism without any meaning.

The weakness of this view also becomes apparent when its advocates attempt to explain the details. To St. Augustine the "first resurrection" is regeneration, whereby men spiritually dead are made spiritually alive; to Warfield it is the blessed "intermediate state" of all true believers in heaven before the resurrection of the body. The former interpretation is excluded by the fact that those who share in this "first resurrection" have already been faithful unto death. To William Milligan the "first resurrection" is, as with Augustine, the beginning of the Christian life here on earth. That those who have part in the first resurrection reign with Christ is an ideal description of their spiritual victory. They reign over sin. With all the imperfections that cling to them, yet "already

they live a resurrection and ascended life, for it is a life hid with Christ in God.” He differs from Augustine, however, in his view of the thousand years.

“They are not a figure for the whole Christian era, now extending to neatly nineteen hundred years. ...They embody an idea, and that idea, whether applied to the subjugation of Satan, or to the triumph of the saints, is the idea of completeness, or perfection. Satan is bound for a thousand years; that is, he *is* completely bound.”

Then he goes on to say that the “little while” during which Satan is loosed, “is the historical period of the Christian dispensation” He is bound with respect to believers but loosed with respect to the rest of the world. At this point Warfield agrees, followed therein by Masselink. That Satan is bound, says Warfield, means simply that he cannot harm the saints who have gone to their rest.

“There is, indeed, no literal binding of Satan to be thought of at all. What happens, happens not to Satan but to the saints, and is only represented as happening to Satan for the purposes of the symbolical picture.”

Against the views both of Milligan and of Warfield the objection is crushing that it is expressly said that the binding takes place “that he should deceive the nations no more.” It is possible to understand this as excluding the saints, for this word “nations” may legitimately be translated “Gentiles” or “heathen,” or it may include the living saints, as being also men in the flesh, but by no possibility can this *exclude* unbelievers and apply only to saints, much less to saints already in glory. Symbolism must not be narrowly construed, but such extension as this would make it absolutely arbitrary.

To Lenski the binding is as Augustine has it, restraint put upon Satan through the incarnation and the work of Christ upon earth, and he gains encouragement to hold this view from the fact that, after chapter twelve, Satan, being cast out of heaven, seems to disappear from the story as an active agent. He is said to “give his power” to the Beast. Thus the commentator infers that the devil is in prison and cannot act directly. He seems to have overlooked 16.13, where the Dragon is active, along with the Beast and the False Prophet, showing that although the latter two appear to the eyes of men and play their part on the stage of human history, the Dragon is the inspiring and efficient force all the time.

Every form of this Augustine interpretation is open to the same decisive objection we have already brought against the millenarian exposition, that it makes the “first resurrection” to apply to all true believers; although in 20.4 those who partake in it are clearly stated, and are a small and definitely limited group. Let us keep our eye on that and demand an interpretation that shall reckon with it. Milligan says with respect to this, that those named include “all faithful ones, ...for in the eyes of St. John all the disciples of a martyred Lord are martyrs.” Warfield, quoting this, remarks that it is “beautifully said” Yes, it is beautifully said, but it doesn’t make sense. All Christians are in the conflict with the world, the flesh, and the devil; but do they therefore all suffer persecution and death under tyranny of the Beast? The vast majority of them die peacefully in their beds, attended with loving care, and mourned by their neighbors and friends. To call such people martyrs is to empty the word “martyr” of all meaning. Whatever the Beast means elsewhere, the word must mean here. If the persecuting world power, then only those who suffer persecution are intended; if the Roman Catholic church, then those who defied that church when it was a persecuting power; if the Antichrist of the last days, then those who triumph in that last dread period. It cannot in any case mean something that all believers experience.

The symbolism of numbers also, in this exposition, runs into utter confusion. Lenski believes, with Warfield, that the thousand years symbolize the entire Christian dispensation: yet when we turn back to his interpretation of

chapter twelve, we find that the three and a half years during which the Radiant Woman is in the wilderness symbolize exactly the same period! No doubt there is a symbolism of numbers in the Apocalypse. I could accept the three and a half years as representing the entire period named, or I could accept the thousand years in that sense, but I cannot understand a symbolism of numbers in which three and a half means precisely the same thing as one thousand; not even with Warfield's explanation that it is a brief period of three and a half years to the saints in affliction, and a long and peaceful period of a thousand years to those at rest, for to those in trouble time always seems to drag more slowly.

The Postmillennial Interpretation:

In the postmillennial interpretation, as given by Barnes, Carroll, and others, the thousand years are a real period of historical time, of that length, not yet begun. The binding of Satan means his being restrained in the exercise of his evil power, not so much by anything done to him directly as through the great success and universal acceptance of the gospel. The "first resurrection" is symbolical of the triumph of the principles for which the martyrs died, primarily those who suffered at the hands of the Papal power, for in this system the Beast is closely identified with the Roman Catholic Church. Some interpreters of this school make the "second resurrection" the general resurrection at the last day, but Carroll, feeling the force of the objection made by Alford, that if one resurrection is symbolic the other must be so too, finds the second resurrection in the revival of evil for a short time after the millennium, symbolized in the text by the conflict with Gog and Magog.

This exposition of the twentieth chapter of Revelation seems to me to have greater merit than either of those already discussed, as it deals more adequately with the various elements to be considered, and does not make the mistake of thinking that all believers can have part in the "first resurrection"; but it rests upon the postmillennial theory and the system of Continuous Historical interpretation, to both of which there seem to me to be fatal objections. It cannot be accepted by any but those who are already committed to those views. Its merits are, that it furnishes a symbolical, not a literal, interpretation, and that it does justice to the terms of the prophecy with regard to the restraint of Satan, the participants in the "first resurrection," the period of the thousand years, etc., in which the Augustinian interpretation notably fails.

The Preterist Interpretation:

This naturally places the beginning of the thousand years in the past, but it is not definite about the end of that period. As adherents of this view look upon the Beast as the pagan Roman persecuting power, they agree with the millenarians in preserving a close connection between this chapter and the preceding one. They emphasize the purpose for which Satan was imprisoned, "that he might deceive the nations no more" and the word "nations" is understood to mean the heathen nations, the "Gentiles," by a perfectly good and well-established meaning of the Greek word. This binding, therefore, means that the pagan power having been overthrown, in the Battle of Armageddon, in the nineteenth chapter, Satan was divinely restrained from re-establishing it. His other activities continue, but he can no longer "deceive the Gentiles" in that special point in which he did deceive them before, as compared with the Jews of the New Testament period, namely, idolatry. In other respects he abundantly incited the Jews also to sin, but in this respect, he deceived the Gentiles, not the Jews, and this is the point at which he is henceforth restrained.

The "first resurrection" and the reigning with Christ, in this view, just as in that of the post-millenarians, represent the triumph of the principles for which the martyrs gave their lives. Hence it is an actual resurrection in the picture, but this symbolizes the revival of those things for which they stood. Thus the "first resurrection" is strictly limited, as in the text, to those who remained faithful in the conflict with the Beast, understood to be the pagan persecuting power of the Roman Empire. The beginning of the thousand years must therefore be located at the point in history when paganism ceased to be a menace to the Christian church. If looked at from the standpoint of the Roman

Empire, this was at the accession of Constantine the Great. If the barbaric nations to the north are included in the view, it comes some centuries later, in the time of Charlemagne. This is of minor importance.

The thousand years are taken to mean a period of great length, but not necessarily a thousand times three hundred and sixty-five natural days, for the figure is symbolic, and means the whole time during which the Christian religion, as compared with paganism, enjoys uninterrupted triumph. This view has the great advantage of providing a suitable contrast between the three years and a half and the thousand. The former means the period during which Christianity had its bitter conflict with paganism, and the latter its time of triumph. The former is very brief as compared with the latter. Herein the interpretation has the support of history. At the end of the period there will be a revival of the conflict with paganism; whether formal and acknowledged pagan religion, or some form of opposition that is essentially the same as paganism, remains to be seen. Possibly the present godless opposition in Russia and the shameless proposal in Germany to restore the old gods may be the beginning of such a revival; but it is too early, and we are too near to these events, to speak confidently.

As for the “second resurrection,” Swete makes it the actual resurrection at the Last day, and brushes aside the objection of Alford, already noted, with the remark that “this is to interpret apocalyptic prophecy by methods of exegesis which are proper to ordinary narrative.” Here I am not satisfied with his exposition, which otherwise looks good to me. That objection of Alford's seems to me very weighty, and I like Carroll's plan of making both the first resurrection and the second to be symbolical, the former of the triumph of the gospel, and the latter of the revival of evil in the last days, the war with Gog and Magog.

This is all the more in place, because in Swete's interpretation the expression “the rest of the dead” does not stand in contrast with the “first resurrection,” as the text evidently intends it to do. If the second resurrection is the general resurrection of all men at the last day, the saints and martyrs have part in it, and it forms no antithesis to them. The meaning of both groups, those intended here as participating in the “first resurrection” and those called, by contrast, “the rest of the dead,” becomes intelligible if we transfer ourselves in thought to the days of the apostle John, and remember that he was thinking in terms of himself and the men of his generation. There were then, in the Roman Empire, in his eyes, and in those of his fellow Christians, just two classes of men, those siding with the Beast, and those standing out against him. In the course of time both classes passed away from the land of the living, and formed “the dead,” that is, not all the dead of all generations, but the dead of that time. Of them all, the martyrs and confessors would (symbolically) come to life again when the Christian religion triumphed: the rest would not have such a revival so long as that triumph lasted (the thousand years) but would likewise (symbolically) revive when the final conflict should come. This seems to me the best interpretation. So understood, neither the first resurrection nor the second has anything to do with the mass of mankind, or with the general resurrection at the last day. The section beginning with 20.11 is then a new vision, with an entirely independent meaning.

Allow me now to summarize this Preterist interpretation, which is the one I commend to the reader, and then to conclude with one or two quotations from expositors who hold it.

1. The Battle of Armageddon, in the nineteenth chapter, means the victory of Christianity over the Roman paganism, in the first three centuries of our era.
2. The binding of Satan is the divine restraint put upon the devil, so that he was unable any longer to “deceive the nations,” that is, to bring about a restoration of that paganism.
3. The “first resurrection” and the “reigning with Christ,” symbolize the triumph of Christianity, as if the ancient martyrs had come back to life and were in power.
4. The three and a half years stand for the period of struggle with paganism, and the thousand years for the

succeeding period of uninterrupted triumph of Christianity over it.

5. The “rest of the dead” are the rest of the dead in the generations of the struggle. These will revive, in the same symbolical manner as the martyrs, when the last conflict comes.

6. The war with Gog and Magog is a renewal, in some form or other, of the ancient conflict with paganism, either through missionary work in pagan countries, as at present, or through some movement in opposition to the gospel that is essentially or openly the same as the ancient heathenism.

Greijdanus says:

“A thousand years indicates a complete period of time. A thousand is also at present a symbolical number, that points to a perfect fullness. How long a time is represented by it, we cannot more closely determine. It indicates a period of considerable length, entirely sufficient for the purpose which God has in mind.

From the significance of this ‘binding and imprisonment of Satan it follows, that it began with the close of the period during which paganism attacked the Lord’s church, to destroy her from the earth, in the first centuries of our Christian era. During those first centuries, Satan repeatedly made the attempt to destroy Christianity, by causing the pagan world to throw itself upon, the church in terrible persecutions. But at last this was no longer possible. The persecution of Diocletian was the final persecution of the Lord’s church by the Roman world power. Presently Christianity came into power, and became the state religion, in the fourth century. Afterwards, through all the ages, there have been dreadful persecutions against the true servants of the Lord and the pure preaching of the gospel, both within Christendom and outside of it; but these were only partial persecutions, that afflicted the Lord’s believers in a particular country or district, Larger or smaller, not Christendom as a whole, the entire church of the Lord and His gospel throughout the whole world. Such a general persecution by the pagan power, threatening all Christendom, all the Lord’s believers and servants, His entire church on earth, took place only in the first centuries, through the Roman world empire.

With the breakdown of that pagan supremacy and with the victory of the gospel and Christendom over paganism In the fourth century, and in the Roman empire - no matter how partial that triumph was, and how much heathen corruption still reigned - the general persecution of the whole church of the Lord and of all gospel preaching throughout the world, came to an end, and this binding of Satan, with his imprisonment in the abyss, for a thousand years, began. And they shall come to an end when Satan again has opportunity to arouse the entire pagan power, the non-Christian peoples, entire nations, who in number far surpass the Christian nations, to undertake the annihilation of the gospel from the earth.”

The interpretation of H. B. Swete is as follows:

“If the 1,260 days symbolize the duration of the triumph of heathenism, the 1,000 years as clearly symbolize the duration of the triumph of Christianity. ...How short the age of persecution would be, when compared with the duration of a dominant Christianity, is shown by the adoption of a term of three and a half years in the one case and of a thousand years in the other. Blessed and holy indeed were those who by their brief resistance unto blood secured for the Church so long a continuance of peaceful service; they would live and reign with Christ as kings and priests in the hearts of all succeeding generations of Christians, while their work bore fruit in the subjection of the civilized world to the obedience of the faith. ...The question remains at what epoch the great chapter in history represented by the Thousand Years began. An obvious answer would be, with the conversion of Constantine, or of the Empire. ...But possibly the question, like many another raised by this Book, admits of no precise answer. ...That the age of Martyrs, however long it might last, would be followed by a far longer period of Christian supremacy, during which the faith for which the martyrs died would live and reign, is the essential teaching of the present vision.

It will be seen that of the four forms of interpretation we have studied, only one provides for an earthly reign of Christ, a millennium in the proper sense of the word. Another provides a sort of millennium, but not the kind contemplated by chiliasm as a historical system. The other two, the Augustinian and Preterist systems, look for no future period of special blessedness at all. Recently, those who take this view have begun to call themselves, or to be called "amillennialists." The prefix "a" here is from the Greek and means a denial of the existence of the thing to which it is prefixed, as "a-theist" means one who denies that there is a God. The word is not well compounded, as it uses a Greek prefix for a Latin word, but it is the term now in use, and we cannot help it. Because the term employed is new, there is danger that people will think the idea is recent also, but this is not the case. The Augustinian interpretation dates, of course, from St. Augustine, who died in A.D. 430, but even before that the millenarian conception was stoutly opposed, and those who rejected it were true "amillenarians." Thus this view is historically as old as chiliasm, and it has been far more prevalent in the church. For twelve hundred years there was scarcely any other view. Up to the time of Daniel Whitby, who died in 1726, there was no alternative to millenarianism but amillenarianism. All of the creeds of the Christian church, ancient or modern, Catholic or Protestant, are amillenarian, for chiliasm has not found recognition in any one of them. It is historically the standard form of the Christian faith in regard to the last things."