

Entrust Church History The Eschatology of the Early Church – Part 1 4/21/22

INTRO:

- Roughly 25% of the inspired text concerns itself with eschatology.
- Does it matter what view one holds of Scripture, as it concerns such a significant portion of Scripture?

2 Timothy 2:15 Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.

1 Timothy 4:16 Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.

Titus 1:9 holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.

- When we look at the doctrinal views of any writer, we need to ask, “How does this view square with Scripture?”
- We do that b/c Scripture is the word of God. God is the highest authority. Therefore, God’s word is highest in authority.
- And we apply that as we look at history. We have great respect for the men who remained faithful, but, like us, they were flawed men.
- Though the views of the early church are not absolute in doctrinal matters, they can be insightful as to how these early generations understood apostolic teaching.
- **Philip Schaff (1819–1893):** The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age [before the Council of Nicaea in AD 325] is the prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, that is the belief of a visible reign of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for a thousand years, before the general resurrection and judgment. It was indeed not the doctrine of the church embodied in any creed or form of devotion, but a widely current opinion of distinguished teachers, such as Barnabas, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Methodius, and Lactantius....

## I. Review of Terms

Revelation 20:1–6 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. <sup>2</sup> And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; <sup>3</sup> and he threw him into the abyss, and shut *it* and sealed *it* over him, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time. <sup>4</sup> Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I *saw* the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. <sup>5</sup> The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. <sup>6</sup> Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.

*Note:* The following definitions come from Grenz, Guretzki, and Nordling’s *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*. These definitions will provide the foundation for the subsequent material regarding the Millennium.

### a. Amillennialism

“The belief that the thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20 do not represent a specific period of time between Christ’s first and second comings. Many Amillennialists believe instead that the millennium refers to the heavenly reign of Christ and the departed saints during the Church Age. Amillennialists usually understand Revelation 20 to mean that the return of Christ will occur at the end of history and that the church presently lives in the final era of history” (p. 9).

### b. Premillennialism

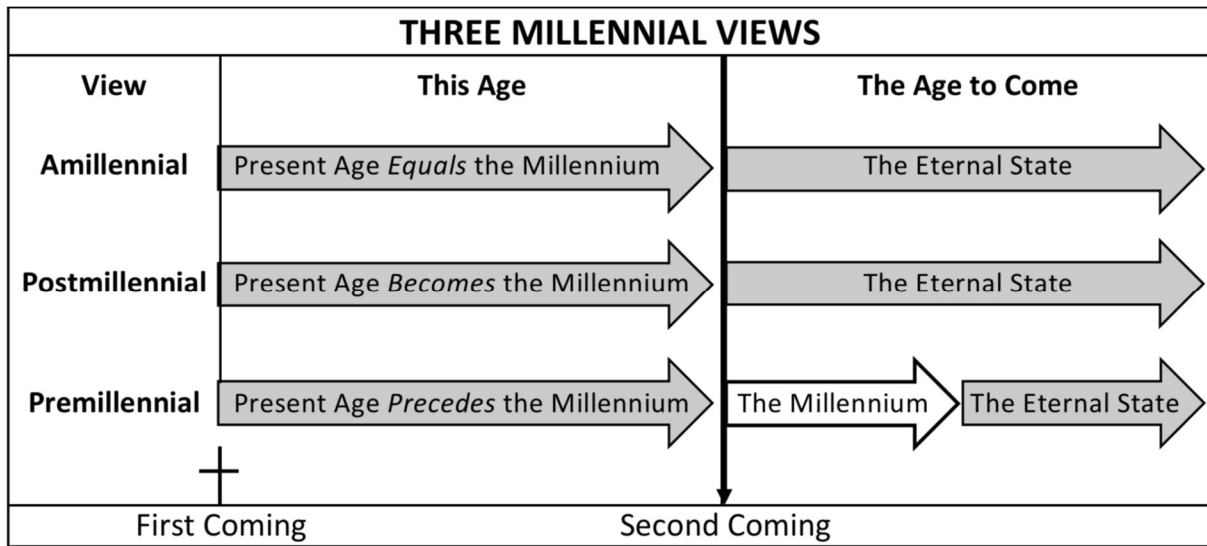
“The view that the millennium follows the return of Christ, which therefore makes his return ‘premillennial.’ In the teaching of some premillennialists the millennium will begin supernaturally and cataclysmically, preceded by signs of apostasy, worldwide preaching of the gospel, war, famine, earthquakes, the coming of the antichrist and the great tribulation. Jesus will then return and rule on the earth with his saints for one thousand years, during which time peace will reign, the natural world will no longer be cursed and evil will be suppressed. After a final rebellion, God will crush evil forever; judge the resurrected, nonbelieving dead; and establish heaven [the New Earth] and hell [the Lake of Fire]” (p. 94).

- There are over 2000 references to Israel in Scripture and not one of them means anything except for Israel (including Rom 9:6 and Gal 6:16)
- It's highly significant that Israel and Jews still exist.
- However, you will not find Moabites, Canaanites, or Edomites?
- Amills hold that many of the prophecies concerning Israel in the OT are not literally for Israel, but spiritual (or allegorically) fulfilled by the church today.
- There have been a number of OT prophecies concerning the future fulfilled:
  - Messiah born of a virgin – and he literally was (Isa 7:14)
  - Messiah born in Bethlehem – and he literally was (Mic 5:2)
  - Messiah giving sight to the blind and healing to quadriplegics – and he literally did (Isa 35)
  - Messiah crucified as a wrath-bearing substitutionary sacrifice and risen from the dead – and he literally was and did (Isa 53)
- So, why would we approach the rest of the OT prophetic passages concerning Israel any different than a plain sense, literal reading, especially since the established precedence for OT prophetic fulfillment is a plain sense reading?
  - Passages like:

Ezekiel 37:10-14 So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they came to life and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. 11 Then He said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off.' 12 "Therefore prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel. 13 "Then you will know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people. 14 "I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken and done it," declares the Lord.' "
- c. Postmillennialism (aka "optimistic amillennialism")

“The view that Christ’s second coming will follow the millennium; that is, his return is postmillennial. Postmillennialists assert that the millennium will come by the spiritual and moral influence of Christian preaching and teaching in the world. This will result in increased conversions, a more important role of the church in the world, earthly prosperity, the resolution of social ills and a general adoption of Christian values. Evil will diminish until the time of Christ’s second coming, which will mark as well the resurrection of the dead and the last judgment” (p. 93).

[[ But, post and amills are similar in that they say that the kingdom as identified in the OT and promised to Israel will not happen in the way promised to Israel, but in a spiritual manner to others; to the church .. ]]



❖ At the 2007 Shepherds’ Conference, John MacArthur addressed the issue<sup>1</sup> of Premillennialism versus Amillennialism (and Postmillennialism) by asking a series of questions:

- Were the Old Testament saints Amillennialists?
- Were the Jews of the Intertestamental Period Amillennialists?
- Was Jesus an Amillennialist?
- Were the Apostles (after Pentecost) Amillennialists?

❖ As he concluded his message, he also asked the question, “Were the leaders of the early church Amillennialists?”

<sup>1</sup> Message available here: <https://www.gracechurch.org/sermons/332>

- Again, the answer given was “No.”
- Premillennialism is the predominant view of presented in early patristic literature. In describing the Ante-Nicene age, historian Philip Schaff observes:

“The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age is the prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, that is the belief of a visible reign of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for a thousand years, before the general resurrection and judgment. It was indeed not the doctrine of the church embodied in any creed or form of devotion, but a widely current opinion of distinguished teachers, such as Barnabas, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Methodius, and Lactantius.”

Masselink, *Why Thousand Years?* 26-27 (AMIL)

“The Chiliastic conception immediately found acceptance in the Christian church. ... The Apostolic history shows us that many of the old church fathers were leaning toward this view. So for example Corinthes, who is thought to have been a contemporary of the Apostle John, believed that Christ would have an earthly reign lasting a thousand years with His seat in Jerusalem. Papias in the middle of the second century holds the same view. Likewise Justin Martyr (about 150 A.D.) says that the majority of the Christians at his time were looking forward to an earthly kingdom, but he adds that there were also good Christians who had other opinions. Irenaeus (latter part of 2<sup>nd</sup> century) believed that after the destruction of the Roman Empire, Christ would return and would literally bind Satan” (pp. 26–27).

Alger, *The Destiny of the Soul* (AMIL)

“Almost all the early Fathers believingly looked for a millennium, a reign of Christ on earth with his saints for a thousand years. Daille has shown that this belief was generally held, though with great diversities of conception as to the form and features of the doctrine. It was a Jewish notion which crept among the Christians of the first century and has been transmitted even to the present day. Some supposed the millennium would precede the destruction of the world, others that it would follow that terrible event, after a general renovation. None but the faithful would have part in it; and at its close they would pass up to heaven. Irenaeus quotes a tradition, delivered by Papias, that ‘in the millennium each vine will bear ten thousand branches, each branch ten thousand twigs, each twig ten thousand clusters, each cluster ten thousand grapes, each grape yielding a hogshead of wine; and if any one plucks a grape its neighbors will cry, Take me: I am better!’ This, of course, was a metaphor to show what the plenty and the joy of those times would be. According to the heretics Cerinthus and Maricon, the millennium was to consist in an abundance of all sorts of sensual riches and delights. Many of the orthodox Fathers held the same view, but less grossly; while others made its splendors and its pleasures mental and moral. Origen attacked the whole doctrine with vehemence and cogency. His admirers continued the warfare after him, and the belief in this celestial Cocaigne [*sic*] suffered much damage and sank into comparative neglect. The subject rose into importance again at the approaching close of the first chiliad of Christianity, but soon died away as the excitement of that ominous epoch passed with equal disappointment to the hopes and the fears of believers. A galvanized controversy has been carried on about it again in the present century. . . . The doctrine itself is a Jewish-Christian figment supported only by a shadowy basis of fancy.” (pp. 403–404).

Grenz, *The Millennial Maze* (AMIL)

“In the vicinity of Ephesus, the location of the seven churches addressed by the book of Revelation (now western Turkey), a millenarian tradition developed that shares certain features with modern premillennialism. This tradition focused on the material blessings that will accompany the future rule of Christ over the renewed physical earth following the resurrection at the end of this age” (p. 38).

- The majority of early church fathers held premillennial views
  - Papias (c. 60–130)

Matthison, *Postmillennialism* (POSTMIL)

“Fragments of his writings can be found only in the documents of other church fathers, but from these we can determine fairly accurately what he believed. These fragments indicate that Papias held to an early form of premillennialism or chiliasm. He looked forward to the fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies following the return of Christ. He, was, however, prone to extremes in his interpretations. His descriptions of the Millennium so abound with crass, exaggerated literalism that Eusebius later referred to his version of millenarianism as ‘bizarre’ (*Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.11)” (pp. 25–26).

Grenz, *The Millennial Maze* (AMIL)

“The church father Papias, for example, a contemporary of Polycarp of Smyrna who tradition claims was a disciple of John, set forth as a teaching derived from apostolic times ‘that there will be a certain period of a thousand years after the resurrection from the dead when the kingdom of Christ must be set up in a material order on this earth’ [as cited by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39]. Papias poured into this thousand-year period mentioned in the book of Revelation certain features of the expectations for the messianic era articulated by Isaiah and other Old Testament prophets: ‘all the animals, feeding only on the produce of the earth, shall live in peaceful harmony together, and in perfect subjection to man’” (p. 39).

- Papias reported that the apostles spoke of a 1000-year literal reign of Christ on Earth after the resurrection of the dead.

**Eusebius (c. 275–339) regarding Papias:** “Papias, who is now mentioned by us, affirms that he received the sayings of the apostles from those who accompanied them, and he moreover asserts that he heard in person Aristion and the presbyter John. Accordingly he mentions them frequently by name, and in his writings gives their traditions. . . . Amongst these he says that there will be a millennium after the resurrection from the dead, when the personal reign of Christ will be established on this earth.”

- Justin Martyr (c. 100–165)

**Justin Martyr:** “And Trypho [the Israelite] to this replied, ‘I remarked to you sir, that you are very anxious to be safe in all respects, since you cling to the Scriptures. But tell me, do you really admit that this place, Jerusalem, shall be rebuilt; and do you expect your people to be gathered together, and made joyful with Christ and the patriarchs, and the prophets, both the men of our nation, and other proselytes who joined them before your Christ came? . . . . 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.**” (*Dialogue with Trypho*, chap. 80)

- Irenaeus (c. 130–202)

Matthison, *Postmillennialism* (POSTMIL)

“The eschatology of Justin received its most developed second-century exposition in the writings of Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons. According to Irenaeus, the end of the present age will be marked by a three-year reign of the Antichrist, who will desecrate the temple in Jerusalem. His reign will be cut short by the return of Christ, who will cast him into the lake of fire. At this point, Christ will inaugurate the millennial age. When the Millennium is over, there will be a general resurrection, the final judgment, and the inauguration of the eternal state (*Against Heresies*, 5.30.4)” (p. 27).

**Irenaeus:** “But when this Antichrist shall have devastated all things in this world, he will reign for three years and six months, and sit in the temple at Jerusalem; and then the Lord will come from heaven in the clouds, in the glory of the Father, sending this man and those who follow him into the lake of fire; but bringing in for the righteous the times of the kingdom, that is, the rest, the hallowed seventh day; and restoring to Abraham the promised inheritance, in which kingdom the Lord declared, that ‘many coming from the east and from the west should sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.’” (*Against Heresies*, 5.30.4)

- Tertullian (c. 160–220)

**Tertullian:** “In the Revelation of John, again, the order of these times is spread out to view, [noting] that, after the casting of the devil into the bottomless pit for a while, the blessed prerogative of the first resurrection may be ordained from the thrones; and then again, after the consignment of him [the devil] to the fire, that the judgment of the final and universal resurrection may be determined out of the books.” (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, chap. 25)

[Elsewhere, Tertullian notes] “that a kingdom is promised to us upon the earth, although before heaven, only in another state of existence; inasmuch as it will be after the resurrection for a thousand years.” (*Against Marcion*, 3.25)

- Lactantius (c. 240–320)

**Lactantius:** “Therefore peace being made, and every evil suppressed, that righteous King and Conqueror will institute a great judgment on the earth respecting the living and the dead, and will deliver all the nations into subjection to the righteous who are alive, and will raise the righteous dead to eternal life, and will Himself reign with them on the earth, and will build the holy city, and this kingdom of the righteous shall be for a thousand years. (*The Epitome of the Divine Institutes*, chp. 72)

➤ Additional Notes:

- John Chrysostom on the future salvation of the Jews

**John Chrysostom (349–407):** [Regarding the fact] that they [the Jews] shall believe and be saved, he [Paul] brings Isaiah to witness, who cries aloud and says, There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob.” (Isaiah 59:20.) ... If then this has been promised, but has never yet happened in their case, nor have they ever enjoyed the remission of sins by baptism, certainly it will come to pass.

- Ephraem of Nisibis (306–373) on the rapture of the church

“All the saints and elect of God are gathered together before the tribulation, which is to come, and are taken to the Lord, in order that they may not see at any time the confusion which overwhelms the world because of our sins.” (Pseudo-Ephraem, *On the Last Times* 2)

- James Stitzinger, “The Rapture in Twenty Centuries of Biblical Interpretation,” TMSJ 13/2 (Fall 2002), 155: A cursory examination of the early church fathers reveals that they were predominantly premillennialists or chiliasts. Clear examples in the writings of Barnabas (ca. 100-150), Papias (ca. 60-130), Justin Martyr (110-165), Irenaeus (120-202), Tertullian (145-220), Hippolytus (c. 185-236), Cyprian (200-250), and Lactantius (260-330) make this understanding impossible to challenge successfully.
- Beyond the witness of early church history, there are at least two other reasons why it’s preferable to hold to a Premillennial perspective:



A. **HERMENEUTICS** – Premillennialism results from a straightforward reading of the text, when it is applied consistently and in accordance with the progress of revelation

1. Based on the progress of revelation, Premillennialists emphasize “that the Old Testament be taken on its own terms and not reinterpreted in light of the New Testament” (John Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988), 67-85.)

Erickson, *Christian Theology*

Later revelation builds on earlier revelation, complementing and supplementing, rather than contradicting it (pp. 222-23).

John Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity”

Nondispensationalists begin with NT teaching as having priority and then go back to the OT. Dispensationalists often begin with the OT, but wherever they begin they demand that the OT be taken on its own terms rather than reinterpreted in the light of the NT. (p. 75)

2. Based on a straightforward reading of Scripture, consistently applied, Premillennialists are convinced that a literal hermeneutic leads to a premillennial eschatology.
  - a. It is important to understand what we mean by a “literal hermeneutic.”

Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics*

The term *literal* has been understood in at least two ways: (1) the clear, plain sense of a word or phrase as over against a figurative use, and (2) a system that views the text as providing the basis of the true interpretation. This twofold use of “literal” has resulted in a great deal of confusion. Removed from its proper hermeneutical discourse, the phrase “literal interpretation of the Bible” is often and erroneously taken (as by the secular media) in the first sense and is construed as devaluing any figurative understanding of biblical language.

Our attention will be focused on the second sense of “literal,” a system which, as conceived in the Protestant Reformation, promotes two important values:

1. A literal hermeneutic rests in the *right and responsibility* of the priesthood of the individual believer. The prerogatives of the priest as set forth in the Scriptures included his hearing the voice of God in the interpretation of divine revelation. This necessarily involved some means of testing the validity of that interpretation;
2. A literal hermeneutic places primary importance on the *historical* realm within which God’s original revelation was expressed. The historical realm provides both the context of the original expression and the particular stage in the progress of biblical revelation when the message was expressed. (p. 9)

Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith* (AMIL)

Now we must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist picture. That was the kind of a Messianic kingdom that the Jews of the time of Christ were looking for, on the basis of a literal interpretation of the Old testament promises (p. 38).

Masselink, *Why Thousand Years* (AMIL)

If all prophecy must be interpreted in a literal way, the Chiliastic views are correct; but if it can be proved that these prophecies have a spiritual meaning, then Chiliasm must be rejected (p. 31).

- c. In all of this, the authorial intent of the message (along with the understanding of the message by the original audience) is critical to the literal hermeneutic.

Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics*

When we speak of verbal communication, we have in mind not simply the transmission of information through the symbols of language, but especially the sharing of meaning between an author and a reader. Biblical hermeneutics involves studying the way that information is conveyed from the author (in *what* he says, *how* he chooses to say it, and *why*) so that the reader (who brings his own background and assumptions and biases to the situation) will understand what the author intended to communicate. (pp. 9–10)

- Of primary concern to the Premillennialist, then, is what the OT prophet intended to communicate, and how his message was understood by the original recipients of that message.
- How would the original hearers of verses like these have interpreted them? How did the apostles interpret such promises (cf. Acts 1:6; Rom. 11:26)?

**Ezekiel 37:25–28** – “They will live on the land that I gave to Jacob My servant, in which your fathers lived; and they will live on it, they, and their sons and their sons’ sons, forever; and David My servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will place them and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever. My dwelling place also will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be My people. And the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forever.”

**Jeremiah 31:35–36** – Thus says the LORD, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar; the LORD of hosts is His name: “If this fixed order departs from before Me,” declares the LORD, “Then the offspring of Israel also will cease from being a nation before Me forever.”

- There are significant hermeneutical and bibliological problems if these promises given to Israel will not actually be fulfilled to them. Nor is there a hermeneutical precedent of any other interpretive approach to OT prophecy.
- No NT writer ever says that an OT promise to Israel has been abrogated, nor should the NT be taken as normative unless explicitly stated.
- A spiritual approach to hermeneutics reduces objectivity while increasing possible interpretations (as evidenced in the citation below).
- Thus, the spiritualization of OT passages reduces hermeneutics to human creativity rather than Biblical authority.

Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* (PREMIL)

He [Walvoord] then goes on to observe that once spiritualization of prophecy is allowed it is very difficult to regulate. He is correct because, when an interpreter leaves literal interpretation, he also leaves the guidelines and restraints of history and grammar. There is truth to the idea that when one spiritualizes the Scriptures the interpreter becomes the final authority instead of Scripture itself (p. 110).

SUMMARY: Old Testament promises, taken at face-value (as they would have been understood by the original audience), lead to a Premillennial viewpoint. The New Testament does not annul the OT promises, but rather affirms them. The burden of proof, then, falls on the amillennialist – to demonstrate that what God promised is (in actuality) somehow different than what He will bring to pass.

Amillennialists will perhaps reply that they are interpreting the Old Testament in the way the NT authors interpreted it. But this becomes very difficult in light of the fact that the NT authors do not approach the Old Testament in a consistent way, nor do they give us normative instruction to spiritualize the OT.

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B. **HOPE** – Premillennialist concern: if the promises to Israel were such that they did not mean what the original audience understood them to mean, how can believers today be assured that the promises given to us mean what we understand them to mean?

- God's attributes, characterized by perfect truthfulness, make premillennialism the preferred choice (Titus 1:2; Rom 11:26-29)

AFTER ALL...

- Amillennialists, such as Hamilton (p. 38), admit that the Jews of the Old Testament expected a literal fulfillment of the millennial kingdom.
- Were they deceived in believing that the millennial land promises of the OT would be literally fulfilled?
- Furthermore, for God to fulfill promises, which appeared literal, in a spiritual manner calls into question the literal fulfillment of God's promises for the church (e.g. the resurrection, glorification, etc.).
  - Assuming the amill/post-mill hermeneutical approach to prophecy, since the promises to Israel are only fulfilled spiritually (not literally), will the promises of Christ's return and our bodily resurrection also merely be a spiritual fulfillment?
- Moreover, God proved His faithfulness by literally fulfilling prophecies concerning Christ's first coming (cf. Matt 2:5-6; John 7:42), why should His second coming be different?
- Thus, God's trustworthiness demands that people can take Him at His Word.

Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* (PREMIL)

A literal approach to the prophetic Scriptures leads one to believe that the promises made to Israel have not been fulfilled in the past and are not being fulfilled today. This mandates that they be fulfilled sometime in the future to national Israel (p. 101).

If the promises given in the Old Testament could not be taken at face value by those who received them, then what guarantee do we have when we take the New Testament promises at face value? Isn't it possible that New Testament prophecy (like Old Testament prophecy) doesn't really mean what it says? How much stock can I put in the literalness of 1 Corinthians 15; 2 Peter 3; or Revelation 21-22 *if it's possible that those prophecies were never intended as literal?*

### III. Summary

Based on the above study, the following syllogism can be established:

- A. IF HISTORY (from a survey of the early church fathers), HERMENEUTICS (from an understanding of the progression of revelation and a consistently applied literal approach), and HOPE (from a confidence in God's faithfulness to literally fulfilling His promises) leads to the Premillennial perspective ...
- B. IF Amillennialism was not held by the Old Testament writers, the Intertestamental Jews, Jesus Himself, the Apostles, or the early church fathers . . .
- C. THEN there must be other, outside influences which lead Bible scholars to reject premillennialism in favor of the Amillennialist and Postmillennialist position