

Amillennialism and The “Future” Kingdom of God

Compiled by Aaron Orendorff

A common misunderstanding about amillennialism is that “covenant theologians regard the kingdom of God as a wholly invisible and wholly present reality with no future, earthly fulfillment.” It is argued that because amillennialists have no place in their eschatological scheme for Jesus reigning upon a earthly throne in Jerusalem, they therefore by necessity have no place for an earthly, consummated kingdom. Far to the contrary, the amillennial position on the nature of God’s kingdom is that it is both a present and future reality — *i.e.*, that it is both already-and-not-yet, inaugurated but not consummated — and that both these present and future elements of the kingdom include spiritual as well as earthly dimensions. This fulfillment, however, will not take place during a future millennial period but rather at the end of the age when Christ returns and heaven and earth are renewed. To say that because amillennialists do not affirm Christ’s earthly reign “from a throne in Jerusalem” then they cannot affirm an earthly future for God’s kingdom is to confuse a particular (premillennial) understanding of what Christ’s reign will look like with the broader category of God’s kingdom. Such an assertion would be similar to an amillennialist saying that because premillennialists do not affirm that Satan is currently bound so they cannot affirm the current, spiritual presence of God’s kingdom.

The follow excerpts conclusively show that the above position is *the* amillennial position.

Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*

It should be clear from the preceding that the kingdom of God is a present reality, though it is not yet consummated . . . The point that Ladd, Ridderbos and Hoekema all make is that biblical data indicates that the kingdom has both present and future elements. New Testament writers set forth a distinct tension between the present inauguration of that kingdom (the “already,” “this age”) and its future consummation (the “not yet,” and the “age to come”) . . .

The prospect of a future kingdom demonstrates that Christ's fulfillment of these Old Testament promises is typological of a more glorious and final kingdom yet to come . . . Christ's return is not the inauguration of a halfway step on the road to consummation called a "millennium." Christ's return is the consummation (112-13).

Bruce Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*

In the age to come, God is expected through Messiah to exercise his kingly power for the salvation of the righteous and the judgment of the wicked, as prophesied in the Old Testament. In this twofold way the mediatory kingdom and the universal kingdom become co-extensive. The kingdom of God and the age to come are co-relative terms in the sense that they refer to the same eschatological situation from different perspectives (165).

[Quoting Ladd] "The mystery of the Kingdom is the coming of the Kingdom into history in advance of its apocalyptic manifestation. It is, in short, 'fulfillment without consummation.'"

After this mystery kingdom reaches full maturity, Messiah will appear in the eschatological power that Israel had expected. At that appearing, only the righteous will inherit the kingdom of God. In other words, through parables Jesus taught his disciples about a realized kingdom and an eschatological kingdom. In the realized kingdom God reigns through his Son with spiritual power, inviting men and women to enter it; in the eschatological kingdom, at the resurrection of the dead, he reigns with irresistible power, saving his elect and damning Satan's realm. In that end, the mediatory kingdom of God becomes the universal kingdom of God the King will manifest himself as the King that he is . . . The New Testament does not teach an intermediate kingdom between two future coming of Jesus (166).

. . . there has always been an already-and-not-yet aspect of the kingdom. The portrait of God's kingdom on the bread canvas of the Bible depicts the realization of Israel's physical king in the Old Testament as a picture of the true kingdom to come (168).

There is a greater land [in addition to a greater “seed, law, and king”], which is both present and not-yet . . . the land promise will be consummated in the future new heaven and new earth (168).

One day the people of God will sit down at the messianic banquet, which inaugurates the new age, the consummated kingdom of God (393; emphasis added).

Christ’s victory leaves the church in anticipation of the time when he will make fully manifest in the temporal realm the righteousness and peace that is already the spiritual reality begun in his earthly ministry (Matt. 2:2; 4:23; 9:35; 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 16:16; 23:3; John 18:37) and continues today in the church (Matt. 24:14; Rom. 14:16-17; 1 Cor. 4:19-20; Col. 4:11). When Christ returns in glory peace will reign. The kingdom of God will finally be established universally as the prophets foretell and as Christ and his apostles proclaim (Mic. 4:1-5; Mal. 4; 1 Cor. 15:50-58; Rev. 11:15) (404).

Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*

But Jesus, by his kingdom of heaven parables in Matthew 13, revealed that the kingdom of God, which was from the perspective of the Old Testament “an undivided unit,” would unfold itself in two stages. The second stage — the eschatological phase — of the kingdom of God, Jesus taught, would indeed come as Daniel had prophesied, manifesting itself with the return of the Son of Man in power and great glory (Matt. 25:31-46). But before it came in power, Jesus taught by these “mystery” parables, the kingdom had come first in grace, also in his own person (see Matt. 13:37), coming gradually, coming largely in the internal, invisible sphere of the spiritual life, and tolerating imperfections in its subjects and even resistance from the world system and the kingdom of Satan (538-39).

Clearly, with the coming of Jesus to the nation of Israel the kingdom or rule of God had broken into history and into the lives of his generation in his own person. And yet Jesus also spoke of the kingdom of God as something future as well, which awaited his

coming (*παρουσία*, *parousia*) in glory when the full manifestation of his power would make actual the divine rule throughout the world (992-91).

Clearly, for Jesus the full and final manifestation of the kingdom of God lay in the future. In this tension between the “already” and the “not yet” we are faced with what has been referred to by biblical theologians as the New Testament paradigm — traceable to Jesus as its Originator — of “eschatological dualism,” that is to say, in one sense the kingdom of God has come; in another sense the kingdom of God is yet to come. What the Old Testament had not clearly distinguished chronologically but had represented more as a single though complex unit, Jesus now distinguishes by speaking of the kingdom’s arrival first in grace and later in judgment with cataclysmic power and great glory. This may be seen in Jesus’ kingdom of heaven parables. (994).

Graeme Goldsworthy, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*

The third way in which the kingdom comes in the NT [the first being in and through the original Jesus-event and the second being in and through his people] is the future or eschatological consummation.

The kingdom comes through the ministry of Jesus and the preaching of the gospel in all the world. It is both the reign and the realm of God for, although in the present age the locus of the kingdom in the world is diffuse, it is defined by the presence of Jesus at the right hand of the Father. It is both present and future until its consummation at Jesus’ return. It is also at least one possible theme by which biblical theology can be integrated. It is the focus of both creation and redemption: God’s plan of redemption is to bring in a new creation. The entire biblical story, despite its great diversity of forms and foci, is consistent in its emphasis on the reign of God over his people in the environment he creates for them. The kingdom depicted in Eden is lost to humankind at the beginning of the biblical account. The history of redemption begins immediately the kingdom is lost, and tells of the way the kingdom of God will finally be established as a new people of God in fellowship with him in a new

Eden, a new Jerusalem, a new heavens and a new earth (620).

Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*

Dispensationalists commonly say that we amillennialists spiritualize prophecies of this kind by understanding them as being fulfilled either in the church of this present age or in heaven in the age to come. I believe, however, that prophecies of this sort refer neither primarily to the church of this age nor to heaven, but to the new earth. The concept of the new earth is therefore of great importance for the proper approach to Old Testament prophecy. All too often, unfortunately, amillennial exegetes fail to keep biblical teaching on the new earth in mind when interpreting Old Testament prophecy. It is an impoverishment of the meaning of these passages to make them apply only to the church or to heaven. But it is also an impoverishment to make them refer to a thousand-year period preceding the final state. They must be understood as inspired descriptions of the glorious new earth God is preparing for his people (205-06).

Dispensationalists accuse us amillenarians of “spiritualizing” prophecies of this sort so as to miss their real meaning. John F. Walvoord, for example, says, “The many promises made to Israel are given one two treatments [by Amillennialists]. By the traditional Augustinian amillennialism, these promise are transferred by spiritualized interpretation to the church. The church today is the true Israel and inherits the promise which Israel lost in rejecting Christ. The other, more modern type of amillennialism hold that the promises of righteousness, peace and security are poetic pictures of heaven and fulfilled in heaven, not on earth.” On a later page, after quoting and referring to a number of prophetic passages about the future of the earth, Walvoord goes on to say, “By no theological alchemy should these and countless other references to earth as the sphere of Christ’ millennial reign be spiritualized to become the equivalent of heaven, the eternal sate, or the church as amillenarians have done.”

To the above we may reply that prophecies of this sort should not be

interpreted as referring either to the church of the present time or to heaven, if by heaven is meant a realm somewhere off in space, far away from earth. Prophecies of this nature should be understood as descriptions — in figurate language, to be sure — of the new earth which God will bring into existence after Christ comes again — a new earth which will last, not just for a thousand years, but forever . . . There will be a future fulfillment of these prophecies, not in the millennium, but on the new earth . . . It is, however, not correct to say that referring these prophecies to the new earth is to engage in a process of “spiritualization” (275-76).

Sam Storms, *The Kingdom of God: Already but Not Yet* — Parts 1 & 2

[Quoting Ladd] “As the messiahship of Christ involved two phases, a coming in humility to suffer and die, and a coming in power and glory to reign, so the kingdom is to be manifested in two realms: the present realm of righteousness or salvation when men may accept or reject the kingdom, and the future realm when the powers of the kingdom shall be manifested in visible glory. The former was inaugurated in insignificant beginnings without outward display, and those who accept it are to live intermingled with those who reject it until the consummation. Then the kingdom will be disclosed in a mighty manifestation of power and glory. God’s kingdom will come; and the ultimate state will witness the perfect realization of the will of God everywhere and forever.”

At the close of the old dispensation we are left with an as yet unfulfilled prophetic hope of God’s earthly rule over His people according to the promise given to the fathers. Since we have shown that the promised inheritance was neither forfeited nor fulfilled, what options are left?

[After dismissing the “figurative” or “heavenly/spiritual” fulfillment as “an impoverishment of the OT covenant promise”, Storms states] The land promise will yet be fulfilled, literally, earthly; but the question is “When”?

[The second of four answers Storms proposes reads] The promise of

God's earthly rule over His people has not changed, nor have believing Israelites been disinherited or displaced by the Church. The only change is that concerning the recipients of the promise: none has been deleted, but many have been added, i.e., believing Gentiles!

The second answer, proposed by Amillennialists, is the "new earth", which inaugurates the eternal state. According to this view, the OT promise of a Messianic reign among God's people in the land will be literally fulfilled. It will be fulfilled, however, not on the present, unredeemed earth, but on the new earth described in Rev. 21-22.

[Storms then reviews the amillennial approach to the land promises — particularly as they are applied to Abraham in Hebrews 11-13 and Romans 4 — and concludes, as does N.T. Wright, that the land of Canaan is expanded in the NT to include the entire world. While Hebrews calls this city/country a "heavenly" one, Storms maintains,] Note well: although it is "transcendental", "eternal", and "heavenly", it is still a country. The point is that the patriarchs did not seek in the physical land of Canaan their everlasting possession. The focal point of the OT land promise was on land, to be sure, but on the heavenly land of the new earth with its central feature, the New Jerusalem.

The Abrahamic land promise, as well as prophecies such as Isa. 65:17; 66:22; 32:15; 35:2,7,10; 11:9, which speak of a restoration of the cosmos, are to be fulfilled on the new earth in the new creation, not on a millennial earth in the old one.