

Amillennialism: Part II – The Interpretation of Old Testament Prophecy

by

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There is a basic difference in the method of biblical interpretation employed by premillennialists and amillennialists. Premillennialists, particularly those of dispensationalist persuasion, are committed to what is commonly called the “literal” interpretation of Old Testament prophecy. John F. Walvoord, a prominent spokesman for the dispensational premillennial viewpoint, defines the hermeneutical method of this school of interpretation:

The premillennial position is that the Bible should be interpreted in its ordinary grammatical and historical meaning in all areas of theology unless contextual or theological reasons make it clear that this was not intended by the writer.^[1]

In his discussion of this principle Walvoord admits that sometimes an Old Testament passage contains indications that certain parts of it are not to be interpreted literally but figuratively — for example, the “rod of his mouth” with which Christ is said to smite the earth in Isaiah 11:4.^[2]

Amillennialists, on the other hand, believe that though many Old Testament prophecies are indeed to be interpreted literally, many others are to be interpreted in a non-literal way.^[3] In the abstract, an amillennialist might agree with the definition of the premillennial hermeneutical method given by Walvoord. The difference between an amillennial and a premillennial interpreter comes out when each tries to indicate which prophecies must be interpreted literally and which prophecies are to be interpreted in a non-literal sense. On this question there would be wide divergence of opinion.

There is no space in this short chapter to go into these differences of interpretation in depth. It will be helpful, however, for us to take a brief look at two Old Testament passages which are commonly understood by premillennialists as picturing a future earthly millennial reign. When we do so we shall see that the premillennial interpretation of these two representative passages is by no means the only possible one.

Let us look first of all at Isaiah 11:6-9 as rendered by the New Scofield Bible:

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down

with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together. And the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the nursing child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.[4]

In the New Scofield Bible of 1967 the heading above Isaiah 11, which covers verses 1-10, reads, "Davidic kingdom to be restored by Christ: its character and extent." A footnote to verse 1 reads, "This chapter is a prophetic picture of the glory of the future kingdom, which will be set up when David's Son returns in glory." It is obvious, therefore, that the New Scofield Bible interprets this passage as describing the future millennial age.

John F. Walvoord, a representative contemporary premillennialist, shares this interpretation of the chapter:

Isaiah 11 paints the graphic picture of the reign of Christ on earth, a scene which cannot be confused with the present age, the intermediate state, or the eternal state if interpreted in any normal literal sense. As presented it describes the millennial earth. . . . The description [found in this chapter] . . . describes animals such as wolves, lambs, leopards, kids, calves, young lions, all of which are creatures of earth and not of heaven, and further pictures them in a time of tranquility such as only can apply to the millennial earth.' [5]

It can easily be understood that if a person believes in a future earthly millennium, he will see that millennium described in these verses. Such an interpretation is, however, by no means the only possible one. We know that the Bible predicts that at the end of time there will be a new earth (see, for example, Is. 65:17; 66:22; Rev. 21:1). Why may we not therefore understand the details found in these verses as descriptions of life on the new earth? [6] This is particularly likely in view of the sweeping panoramic vision conveyed by verse 9: "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea." Why should these words have to be thought of as applying only to a thousand-year period preceding the new earth? Do they not picture the final perfection of God's creation?

The other Old Testament passage I should like to adduce in this connection is

Isaiah 65:17-25, also quoted from the New Scofield Bible:

(17) For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind.

(18) But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy.

(19) And I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people; and the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying.

(20) There shall be no more in it an infant of days, nor an old man that bath not filled his days; for the child shall die an hundred years old, but the sinner, being an hundred years old, shall be accursed.

(21) And they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them.

(22) They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat; for like the days of a tree are the days of my people, and mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

(23) They shall not labor in vain, nor bring forth for trouble; for they are the seed of the blessed of the LORD, and their offspring with them.

(24) And it shall come to pass that, before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear.

(25) The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock, and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the LORD.

In the New Scofield Bible the heading above verse 17 reads, "New heavens and new earth." The heading above verses 18-25, however, reads, "Millennial conditions in the renewed earth with curse removed." It would appear that the editors of this Bible, while compelled to admit that verse 17 describes the final new earth, restrict the meaning of verses 18-25 so as to make them refer only to the millennium which is to precede the final new earth. Walvoord, in similar fashion, understands Isaiah 65:17-19 as describing the eternal state^[7] and verses 20-25 of this chapter as describing conditions during the millennium.^[8]

Once again it may be observed that if one does not believe in a future earthly millennium, he will certainly not be compelled to accept it by the reading of

these verses. If, however, one does believe in such a millennium, he may very well find it described here. But in order to do so he will have to overcome a rather serious exegetical obstacle.

One can find a description of the millennium in this passage only by deliberately overlooking what we find in verses 17-18. Verse 17 speaks unambiguously about the new heavens and the new earth (which the book of Revelation depicts as marking the final state). Verse 18 calls upon the reader to “rejoice forever” — not just for a thousand years — in the new heavens and new earth just referred to. Isaiah is not speaking here about a newness which will last no longer than a thousand years but about an everlasting newness! What follows in verse 19 is linked directly with the preceding: “And I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people; and the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying” (see Rev. 21:4). There is no indication whatever that at this point, or at either verse 18 or 20, Isaiah is suddenly shifting to a description of a millennial age preceding the creation of the new heavens and new earth!

In verse 25, in fact, we have a description of the animal world which reminds us of the picture of the final state found in Isaiah 11. At the end of this verse we hear an echo of what is found in 11:9, “They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the LORD.”^[9] Truly a beautiful description of the new earth! One will see a millennium here only if he has previously put on his millennial glasses!

Notes:

[1] John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1959), p. 128.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 130.

[3] See Martin J. Wyngaarden, *The Future of the Kingdom in Prophecy and Fulfillment* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1934) for an elaboration and demonstration of the amillennial method of interpreting prophecy. This work is particularly valuable in that it shows how the New Testament spiritualizes many Old Testament concepts: Zion, Jerusalem, the seed of Abraham, Israel, the temple, sacrifices and so on.

[4] This and the following passage (Is. 65:17-25) are quoted from the *New Scofield Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) which gives the King James Version with only a few minor revisions.

[5] Walvoord, p. 298.

[6] Walvoord's comment that the animals mentioned here are creatures of earth and not of heaven does not rule out the possibility that these words may be a prophetic description of conditions on the new earth.

[7] Walvoord, p. 325.

[8] *ibid.*, pp. 253, 318-19.

[9] Note that in 11:9 Isaiah adds the reason why "they shall not hurt nor destroy": "for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." Surely this condition will be realized only on the new earth in the life to come (see Rev. 21:27; 22:14-15). The last-quoted words cannot be a description of the millennium since during the millennium, according to premillennial teaching, there will still be disobedient nations which must be ruled with a rod of iron.

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